

ALALITCOM

*Selected Works from Alabama Writers' Conclave
2006 Literary Competition*

ALALITCOM

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INTRODUCTION

Alabama Writers' Conclave is proud to present for the first time ever **ALALITCOM** on the web: www.alalit.com . All money winners in the 2006 AWC Writing Competition were invited to have their work included in this publication, and it is my pleasure to share their work with the world. Some writers had already placed their winning pieces elsewhere and chose not to be included, but you will find the majority of money-winning pieces here. Thanks to all the contributing writers for their cooperation and support in putting this collection together, and congratulations to all the winners. Thanks also to Deb Gallaway for the use of her photo on the cover of this journal – each story and poem presented here is a raindrop teeming with life and promise, ripe for the taking. Enjoy!

Irene Latham
Editor

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I AM

David Fuller

I am sand and blue crab; tide and bleached
driftwood.

I am water's face, wrinkles sparkling from
countless suns.

I am scuttling magnolia leaf across a
concrete patio.

I am silent as cactus bloom. I am the
emptiness inside a limestone cave, the
blind fish that's never felt summer heat.

I am shape changer, wish maker, thief,
puppet, dying poet.

I am these words, this page, and the image
now fading from your mind.

*A lifelong resident of the Alabama's Eastern Shore, **David Fuller** began writing poetry six years ago, after a thirty year career in real estate. His poems have won numerous awards, and have appeared in many publications including The Atlanta Review, Bravo, Dockside, and Blue Moon Café II. David's first book of poetry entitled ORDINARY MOMENTS (2002) is now in its fourth printing. A second volume, aptly called ORDINARY MOMENTS II, is due out this summer. The poems within these two books are about how simple events, like walking the dog or playing with a grandchild, are seeds for extraordinary insight to life, love and death.*

QUICK STUDY

Rebecca F. Chaney

Sophocles materialized in my bedroom last night. An old man, once handsome, stood before me with mouth agape, peering as though nearsighted. At last, he raised one eyebrow and lowered his chin. Then, in careful English, he said in a rusty voice, “Appears you are more sprite than sorceress strong.”

“Dude, I’m no witch,” I said.

He pursed his lips. “The mortal who last summoned me from my repose did boast more seemly vesture, nymph.”

I glanced down at my nightgown, tugged upward on one nylon strap, then pulled my long blonde hair over my shoulders.

He cleared his throat. “I am complaining not, esteemed enchantress mine. Did not the venerated Aeschylus admire how I did illustrate the tortured female psyche of Antigone? Is it perchance *Electra* you peruse while lying on your bridal couch?”

I shook my head. “I’m just studying Aristotle’s *Poetics* for my English midterm. By the way,” I added, nodding toward my lover asleep on the pillow next to mine. “We’re just shacking up.”

Sophocles blinked once, then twice.

“Sharing the rent,” I said. He raised his eyebrows. I added, “Not my husband.”

A gleam appeared in Sophocles’ eyes as he gazed to my left. “Immoral act, oh wicked one! Are you at all concerned the gods will take offense?”

“Right now, I’m tripping over this exam.”

He pointed at the volume. “Who *is* this Aristotle? Poet? Priest?”

“You don’t know Aristotle? Why, he’s one of your peeps. Your homey,” I said. His nostrils flared so I explained. “Very famous Greek philosopher. Scientist. Statesman.”

He frowned and moved to examine my reading lamp. “My basic education better not be proven incomplete by you. Perchance my death preceded Aristotle’s birth?”

The relevant dates escaped me. “Chill, bobcat. You’re probably right.” Then, as I

watched him extend his fingers toward the lightbulb, I warned, “Whoa man, that’s hot!”

He smiled. “Let me enlighten you ere you, my little Siren friend, begin defining hot.” He caressed the bare bulb. “Your realistic observation *must* be based on less experience than mine.”

Realizing the worst, I said, “Duuuuuuude, I’m *so* sorry.”

“By Zeus! The difficulty lies in going back to Hades after respite long,” he said.

I nodded at him in sympathy. “I heard that.” After a pause, I asked, “Hey, what bad boy conjured you up before?”

“The man—akin to me, an actor, playwright, poet, friend—told me to call him Will.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “What did *he* want? Plot for a play?”

“Unlearned child,” Sophocles said. “The celebrated friend I knew as Will did daily hatch more tales than he had time to write in just one age.”

“Hey, no way would I dis the man.”

A furrow appeared in his forehead. “The Fates gave Will a metered voice in harmony with chorus sweet. He tutored me in English language—modern tongue I *think* you speak to me. Perhaps my little Lorelei can also teach me something new?” Sophocles licked his chapped lips but his eyes were not on me.

“First, maybe you could tell me your secret,” I said. “How come we’re still studying *Electra* and *Antigone* twenty-four hundred years after you went to hell?”

“My friend, have you not read my other plays and all my poetry? It seems to *me* your teachers fail because they lack good taste.”

“Look Jack, you turned up here for a reason. Tell me why we can’t forget you.”

For a moment I saw how he held Athens captive all those years. Charisma, they called it. He smiled. “The simple secret is: Eternal fame and dateless prose are forged in character development. So make your heroes true to life and only circumstances odd.”

My mouth fell open. “Thanks, dog.”

Sophocles’ face reddened. His voice shook as he said, “How dare you call me dog and disregard my shining character, ungrateful wench?”

“Hey, bro, haven’t you heard dogs are man’s best friend? I called you dog to mean you’re my newest pal.” I smiled my most placating smile.

After a prolonged sniff, he said, “Of course, I am elated, helping scholars such as you.”

He then seemed to lose interest in me and studied my room instead. Frowning, he added, “Surprising not you suffer mental poverty in domicile so dull and gray. If granted me more time in your fair company, I would your scen’ry paint in shades of red and gold and blue.”

The promise rang hollow. His eyes kept returning to my boyfriend’s chest, not mine. Gathering my courage, I asked. “Yo, Sophocles, were you gay?”

He touched one finger to the side of his nose. “My ever cheerful face was often seen around at Athens’ merry parties. Surely you, my charming girl, are likewise animated?” He indicated my nightgown. “I believe yon Spartan chlamys would be much at home inside the temple set apart to Aphrodite’s love.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But I was asking about your sexual preference.”

“Methinks you waited much too long to ask how I prefer it) rather, how I *did* prefer it,” he said. “Glad I am to know some things have little changed in two millennia.”

“Not so fast. I’ve heard a lot of rumors about how you Greeks *regarded* your homeboys.”

“Of this I am entirely unaware. Perhaps it is the lily-livered, lewd Etruscans you have heard about, fair Daphne,” he said. But as I watched, his shifting eyes strayed toward my sleeping Adonis once more. Sophocles smiled ever-so-slightly as my companion stretched in his sleep.

“Hey Cool Breeze, do you always speak in iambic pentameter?” I asked.

A sly grin parted his curling beard before he replied, “I think unmetered verse is very queer so I still speak in righteous rhythm, bitch.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Get outta here,” I said.

So he did.

As I searched the shadows for Sophocles, my roommate groaned. “Keep it down,” he said. “Who on earth were you talking to?”

“Myself. Almighty Aphrodite, give me strength! Go back to sleep, Euripides.”

*Since retiring early from the practice of pharmacy, **Rebecca F. Chaney, M.S., R.Ph.** has traveled, researched her genealogy, and collected everything from animation art to coin banks. With three semesters of creative writing under her belt, Becky now also collects good similes,*

metaphors, and hooks. She admits to being a "writing conference junkie." One of her recent instructors told her she needed to stay home and write! She has completed one murder mystery (alas, still unpublished!) and is working on another. Becky is a member of the Alabama Writers Conclave and the Sowashee Writers Group. She lives in Meridian, Mississippi, with a spoiled Maltese she calls Sister and continues to add to a list of hobbies-in-waiting.

HOSPICE: RETORT TO DYLAN

Allison Joseph

Do not go gentle...
-Dylan Thomas

I read your poem, Dylan—it's a lie.
I want to gently go, to fade away.
Old age should rage, but I just want to die,

to breathe without machines, to see the sky
and not these hospice walls, their dullest gray.
I read your poem, Dylan—it's a lie—

at least it is for me. I won't deny
that I don't want to live, to ache this way.
Old age should rage, but I just want to die,

leave every bill, all cares. I will not try
to keep my body here, caught on display.
I read your poem, Dylan—it's a lie,

romantic words to set my soul awry.
Don't want to linger here, don't want to stay—
old age should rage, but I just want to die,

embrace the afterlife my goodness buys,
whatever waits for me beyond this day.
I read your poem, Dylan. It's a lie—

what did you know of death, its calm surprise?
There's dignity in withering, decay.
I've read your poem, Dylan, your bright lies.
Old age should rage, but I just want to die.

Allison Joseph is poet and writer who lives in Carbondale, Illinois, where's she on the creative writing faculty at Southern Illinois University. Her books of poems include IN EVERY SEAM, WORLDLY PLEASURES, IMITATION OF LIFE, and WHAT KEEPS US HERE.

PERMISSION

Reilly Maginn

She gave me permission. Permission to quit. It was time. It was hopeless. We'd tried everything. All the electrical shocks. All the drugs. We'd maintained circulation to her brain and vital organs with open cardiac massage at the operating table. But her heart just wouldn't restart. She gave me permission to quit massaging her heart and let her go.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Forty years ago I was the chief surgical resident on a surgery unit in a prestigious university hospital. As first assistant, on a chest case that morning, I prepped, draped and positioned on the OR table, a 42 year old woman patient for a major lung resection. She had a large left lung tumor. The operation was a heroic and desperate attempt to remove the lung and the tumor before it took her life. I had developed a rapport with this young woman when I did her admission history and physical exam. I immediately liked her and I think she in turn liked me. We bonded, as it were. We had become friends. This is unusual as residents don't generally develop personal relationships with patients. But we connected for some unknown reason.

The operation began without incident and things were going well. The senior surgeon had just begun the lung dissection when she suddenly suffered a cardiac arrest. Her heart just stopped beating. No apparent reason. It just stopped. We'd done only minimal dissection and disturbed little of her anatomy. Her heart just stopped beating. The result, of course, was that her blood pressure fell to zero and there was no blood flow to her vital organs. In itself, cardiac arrest during a chest operation is no reason to panic. During a lung operation, if cardiac arrest occurs, the heart is squeezed manually to maintain blood flow and pressure until the cause of the cardiac arrest is determined and corrected.

So I began rhythmically squeezing her heart with my right hand to keep her alive until we could right whatever was wrong. The anesthesiologist immediately switched off the anesthetic gases and administered pure oxygen via the tube in her trachea.

But, why had her heart stopped beating? We hadn't a clue. It just stopped. We went through the standard checklist. Lab tests, blood gases, etc. All within normal limits. Still, we could find no cause for this suddenly catastrophic cardiac arrest. We were baffled. Her heart remained flaccid and unresponsive to the cardiac stimulant drugs that were immediately administered intravenously by the anesthesiologist. We tried shocking her heart with the defibrillator paddles placed directly on the heart. Once. Twice. No go. The heart remained limp and unresponsive, as I continued cardiac massage, pumping blood through the now ineffectual organ to the rest of her body and vital organs. We even injected cardio tonic drugs directly into the heart itself: again, with no effect. Repeated shocks with the defibrillator paddles were ineffectual. I continued to massage her flaccid heart while all these maneuvers were going on.

And then she opened her eyes. With no anesthesia and breathing pure oxygen, she awoke on the operating table. She looked directly into my eyes as my hand was massaging her heart. Our faces couldn't have been more than two feet apart.

I lamely tried to explain.

"You've had a cardiac arrest. I'm massaging your heart to temporarily maintain pressure and flow till we can correct things and get your heart started. Do you understand me? Blink once if you understand."

She blinked once.

"Are you having pain? Blink once for yes and twice for no."

She blinked twice. Good. No pain.

We continued investigating the cause of the cardiac arrest. We used every means we could think of and every available drug that might get her heart started again. Nothing worked. We shocked and re-shocked her unresponsive heart. We repeated the cardiac stimulants both intravenously and directly into the cardiac chambers. Nearly two hours had gone by.

She continued to watch me as we desperately tried to restart her heart. We called the cardiologist into the operating room for his consultation, suggestions and opinions. He could offer nothing. She continued to stare into my eyes as I continued to pump her inert, unresponsive heart, as I maintained circulation to her brain and heart. She could hear us talking and discussing the worsening situation. She sensed our frustration and inability to rectify her

cardiac arrest. She began to realize how hopeless the crisis had become. I'm sure she was aware.

We'd been at the operating table for more than three hours. My right hand and forearm had begun to cramp and I'd switched to the left hand and then again back to the right to maintain the rhythmic pumping action. Several others at the table insisted they spell me at the task but I couldn't break the eye contact with her. I wouldn't quit. I couldn't quit.

She too, was getting tired. She couldn't speak and she was now less attentive to our frustration and the mounting futility of our efforts. Her eyes began to wander and her eyelids began to droop. I continued to massage her heart.

"We're doing everything we can. We've tried everything. Your heart refuses to start. We're not giving up, though, but things do not look good."

I sounded ineffectual. And I was. And we both knew it. Still, I felt she should be aware of the desperate nature of her condition and be appraised of our efforts and our refusal to give up. But she could sense my anguish and the now pervasive hopelessness of all at the table.

The senior surgeon, who is the final arbiter, said,

"It's time to quit. We've done everything. We can do no more. Stop the massage."

The anesthesiologist nodded in affirmation.

She understood. She looked deeply into my eyes, blinked once for yes, and then wearily closed her eyes. Peacefully. She gave me permission. Permission to quit. And she closed her eyes for the last time.

"No. No. We can't quit. We can't. I won't. No. NO!"

They had to forcefully pull me away from the operating table. Tears were streaming down my face. I turned and left the operating room, still in my bloody gown and gloves.

I remember little of the next hour or so. They found me in the chapel an hour later, still in my soiled gown and gloves. I could barely speak and was numb with grief. The tears had ceased.

Surgeons can't let themselves get too close to their patients, emotionally. Good surgical judgment calls for objective assessments of the patient's problems and impartial

decisions. Emotions only confuse and obscure what's best for the individual patient. Emotions only deleteriously influence surgical decisions and treatment. But sometimes..... Sometimes, emotional involvement is unavoidable.

She gave me permission. I'm think she did. I'm sure she did.

I must know she did. For me.

God help me, I hope she truly did.

***Dr. Reilly Maginn** is a retired surgeon, a surgical outreach physician who has spent the last fifteen years on the islands in the South Pacific. With hundreds of stories to tell he has published a multitude of short stories in the Birmingham Arts Journal, Jubilee Breeze, Daphne City Magazine, Gulf Coast Newspapers, Alabama Writer's Conclave's Alalitcom Anthologies, Birds and Blooms, This, That and the Other, Fairhope City Magazine, Tennessee Mountain Writers Anthology and Cruising World. Reilly hopes to live long enough to finish writing and revising his novel TSUNAMI.*

TESTED

Laura Loomis

No, it's fine, needles don't bother me. You don't even have to pretend it won't hurt a bit.

My husband Roy, he hates needles. It's one of the few things he's completely irrational about. When he needs vaccinations to travel, you practically have to strap him down. He wouldn't get a flu shot last winter, and he wound up getting really sick, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, the works.

Ow. No, that was my fault, I've been kind of shaky. I keep forgetting to eat. I'll hold still this time. How long does it take to get the results?

It's really been bothering me, these last few days. Roy getting that flu, I mean.

What sort of risky behaviors have I engaged in? I had sex with my husband.

Just, you know, sex.

Yes.

No, we never did that.

What were his risky behaviors? Roy told me he used condoms every time, for everything. Whatever "everything" means.

No, I didn't ask him oral or anal or whatever. His exact words were that he'd been "doing things" with other men. Roy is normally very precise with language. A linguist, actually. He's one of those people who knows the difference between *lie* and *lay*.

I didn't ask Roy if he's been tested. He doesn't even know I'm here. That would be like an accusation, like telling him I still don't trust him.

I don't believe I just said that. Of course I don't trust him. I'm going to spend the rest of my marriage trying not to panic every time one of us gets a cough. If there is a rest of my marriage. Staying with Roy now is risky behavior.

We're talking about something that could end my life, and I don't know if I can believe anything he tells me. He says he's stopped, he says he used protection, but how do I know?

This is a man I would have trusted with anything. Did you ever see the first Superman movie, with Christopher Reeve? The part where he turns the earth backwards, turns back time to bring Lois Lane back from the dead? That's the way Roy loved me.

And something in him was stronger than that love, something he couldn't stop.

Fourteen years and you think you know what you're doing, and now suddenly I don't know which way the earth is spinning. It's stopped and there's no gravity and everything's falling onto the ceiling and you just want to hang on. Am I making any sense?

I thought we had a good marriage. We have a son. I can't think about this. Can't think about what would happen to him without us.

Oh god, does Andy need to get tested too?

Fourteen years. We've been married fourteen years. Andy's eight. I don't even know how long Roy's been...doing things.

I'm sorry, I'm not usually like this. Could you hand me those tissues? Thanks.

Even when I thought it was another woman, I'm thinking, midlife crisis, I'm not giving up on this marriage without a fight. But when he told me, I swear, it was like watching the man I knew disappear in front of my eyes.

The thing is, he really does love me. I love him. That hasn't disappeared. I almost wish it would, because right now I'm living on that numb feeling, like being on Vicodin or something, and sooner or later that's going to wear off and I'll see what's left.

No, I'm all right. I'm ready. Tell me.

Negative.

Negative.

Thank you. God. I'm all right. Thank you. No, I'm all right.

Laura Loomis is a social worker in the San Francisco area, where she is currently looking for a publisher for her finished novel. TESTED is part of a mosaic novel in progress, where each story stands alone but together they form a complete narrative. Laura's fiction has appeared in Flashquake, Spanish Moss, Out of Line, and Margin. The latter story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

HUMILIATION AT MURPHY'S DOME

Larry Wilson

From the crest of Murphy's Dome
toward a little town
gyrates highway sixty four
plunging twisting down.

A thousand winding snaking curves
before the valley's floor
a motorcycle rider's heaven
you could ask for nothing more.

Between my legs five hundred pounds
of the finest German steels
made to handle any road
that fell beneath its wheels.

Dressed in coal black leathers
black boots upon my feet
my helmet glinted in the sun
as I crouched upon the seat.

The engine gave a might roar
and I started on my run
twisting on the throttle
I shot like a bullet from a gun.

One by one the turns did fall

to the master's riding skill
any fears pushed far away
as I rocketed down the hill.

Then in a switch back to the right
my knee almost on the ground
where no one could go faster
they slipped silently around.

One their puny little bicycles
they pedaled down sixty four
wearing silly spandex clothes
colored yellow green and more.

My ego gave a mighty twinge
I vowed to even up the score
but on a switch back to the left
they stretched their lead some more.

Racing down from Murphy's dome
they slowly pulled away
and never will I forget
that humiliating day.

Everywhere in bicycle bars
I'm sure the story's told
about my humiliation
on that devilish road.

Let them swill their carrot juice

until they've had their fill
if I ever return to Murphy's Dome
I'll only race up hill.

Larry Wilson is currently retired and live on the bluffs overlooking Montgomery in Wetumpka, Alabama . Larry is a member or the Alabama Writers' Conclave and member and past president of Montgomery Creative Writers. He writes primarily short fiction and, when sufficiently depressed, poetry. Also, Larry currently has a half-finished draft of a novel gathering dust. Larry's other bad habits include riding motorcycles, flying, and travel.

ONLY ONE BUG

Daniel Leonard

The name's Ben Turry. I'm a bug hunter. I'm mainly known for catching a bug I call Corky. The day I found Corky I had walked from the back of our house to a small brook. I had slipped off my shoes, head down, wading in the water. You've got to keep your head down to catch anything. I like looking for some creature I haven't seen before, creepy crawly things other people run from. They're fun, even if mom and grandma don't think so. They don't like bugs. My grandma and grandpa visit a lot while dad is gone on trips driving a truck. That makes up my family except for my little brother Alex. Alex can be a headache at times. He follows me whenever he gets a chance, making noise, which soon sends every bug around running away.

When I first saw Corky I thought he looked odd. And I know bugs, too. I've seen about all of them around where I live. I usually bring them in the house for visits. That's something that's never made mom or grandma happy, mostly because I've lost a few. Mom once made a rule that no bugs be brought in the house.

"Only *one* bug," I told her. "Surely I'm allowed *one* bug."

Mom finally agreed to the one bug deal.

Sometimes my only one bug was a dirt dauber, once or twice a water bug. You name it, and I've found it.

The only thing about as bad as Alex for my trying to go bug hunting is Yeller, our collie dog. He used to gnaw on stuff but no longer has good teeth. He'll eat a bug, though. Well, at least he'll take one in his mouth and spit it out.

Catching bugs is fun, and just when I thought I'd about seen them all...I ran up on Corky.

Corky crawled out of a tiny rock cave on the day I found him. It was a hole in the rocks by the edge of the brook. He crawled over a rock, hopped on the water and floated like a cork. That's why I named him Corky. I decided to go ahead and snatch him. With orange over his body he looked like a bug with a life-vest on. He had big dark eyes and a big claw-like pincer on his right side.

"Do you want to be friends, Corky?" I asked later that night.

He backed up a little. I put my finger down in front of him. He then raised his pincer arm and I moved my finger closer to him. Alex had found out about him by then.

"He's going to pinch you with that thing," Alex shouted.

Corky slowly moved that pincer forward. He tapped the top of my finger.

"Ha," I laughed. "He just gave me a high-five. It's a type of handshake, like in sports," I explained to Alex.

Alex thought Corky might have seen a high-five on a game on TV. That was funny. I told Alex I didn't think bugs watch a whole lot of TV.

"Neat, then," Alex said. "It just wants to be friends."

"Now remember, Alex," I said. "We don't tell mom or grandma about him."

"Right," Alex said.

I figured our deal would give me about fifteen minutes to get Corky in the house and hide him before Alex let everyone know all about it. I put him in a match box.

"You should see Ben's bug," Alex said, just as everyone was at the supper table, having soup.

Grandma leaned back, her eyes twice normal size, looking right at me. "Oh, he's got one of those disgusting bugs in this house again," she said.

Mom gave me a look. "Haven't we discussed this?" she asked.

"It's only one bug," I said. "Remember, you said I could keep *one* bug. You said that was to keep me from bringing ten inside. Well I don't have ten; I only have *one*." I reached in my jacket pocket and opened my matchbox.

"He's going to let that crazy thing get loose," grandma said.

I opened the matchbox. "No I'm not," I said. Confused, I stared down at an empty matchbox. "He's already loose."

The table of people, except for me and Alex, now began jumping up in a wild scramble, taking their bowls of soup with them.

Grandpa looked the least worried, but he was slowly spooning through his soup. "Was anybody's soup a little extra crunchy?" grandpa asked.

Mom covered her mouth with one hand and jerked her head forward like she was going to be blowing groceries. That's what we call it when some kid throws up in the lunch room at school.

"Oh, false alarm," grandpa said, and then burped.

"That crazy bug is already crawling around here someplace," grandma said. She was looking about the floor. She pulled a chair over to her in case she had to jump on it. "I hate bugs," she said. "Did I mention that I hate bugs?" she asked, looking at me.

Alex did not seem surprised that Corky was gone, and that did not escape my attention.

"How could he have gotten out?" I asked, watching my Alex closely.

"I don't know where that stupid bug is," mom said, "but you better find out Mr. Benjamin Nathaniel Turry."

She had used my full name *and* she had called me mister. Both, I had learned, were important and meant I could be in some big trouble.

I started looking all about the house for Corky. The next minute I heard mom on the phone, asking to speak to the bug man. The bug man is not a good thing if you are a bug. I'd seen them on TV. The bugs would go flying through the air and land in the room somewhere, flat on their backs with legs straight up in the air. In a short while, someone with a long hose, space suit and a tank on his back would be coming, pretending, to bugs that here comes a cookie, saying *lookie here..* It was all a dirty business as far as I was concerned. Now *roaches* I could understand. But I never brought a roach in the house. I hate to admit it, but I put a few in dad's truck cab one time, but that was just to get dad back home before Christmas. It worked too!

The next morning, and getting ready to go to school, I kept thinking about the bug man coming. I walked back to my bedroom again and then I checked the bathroom. Then, by the hand sink, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Corky!" I said. Corky was floating in the water jar with grandma's false teeth. The lid was off and sitting beside the jar. Corky paddled about in the jar of water like he was on a float in a swimming pool. I couldn't even imagine how Corky got in with grandma's false teeth.

But right now the main thing was that there was a search going on throughout the house, and Corky was wanted dead or alive. Actually he was mostly wanted more dead than alive. I grabbed the jar, putting the lid on, and stuck it under my jacket just as mom came in the

bathroom. After inspecting all around the bathroom, mom headed down the hall toward my room, flyswatter in hand. I stepped out of the bathroom and saw grandma. She had Alex's baseball bat. She was holding it out in front of her, mumbling.

"The school bus!" Alex yelled.

I ran out the door and got on the bus. The bus pulled off just as I realized I'd left with Corky *and* grandma's false teeth.

Alex sat down next to me on the bus. "I don't suppose you'd know how Corky ended up in grandma's false teeth jar?" I asked Alex. I pulled the jar out from under my jacket. Corky was still floating but looked a little dizzy.

"So that's where he went!" Alex said. "He must have dropped in the jar when I was showing him what he looked like in the mirror. I was playing with him in front of the mirror. He did a high five to himself in the mirror. I dropped him and thought he fell on the floor and that I'd lost him. I was going to tell you all about it."

I reached down and got my bug out of the water.

"You got my bug out without permission," I said. "*You* should carry grandma's false teeth around," I said.

"Okay." Alex said, taking the jar.

It seemed a little too easy. "You're not going to be scaring people are you?" I asked.

"Of course not," Alex said.

I put my bug back in my box. Once I got to Mr. Connors' science class I showed him my bug. I asked him if he could tell me what kind of bug it was. Mr. Connors likes to figure things like that out, so in a few minutes he had a magnifying glass. Next, he was flipping through a book with pictures of bugs. Then, he checked an even bigger book. Other kids in the class gathered around.

"I don't believe it," Mr. Connors finally said, his eye looking about ten times normal size through the magnifying glass.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't know what kind it is," Mr. Connors finally said. "I've never seen a bug like this before. I don't even think there's a name for this bug. It may be the only one like it known."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“It means this is a very rare bug indeed; one not even known to exist.”

Mr. Connors made some calls. He talked with other experts on bugs and even sent some folks a picture of Corky. They all came to the same conclusion; Corky was an only one bug of his kind known on the entire planet. Mr. Connors said the scientists would have to come up with a name for the bug. They decided to name it a Bensect, naming it after an insect, and me, Ben. Of course, to me, I knew he would just always be *Corky*.

Well, I was pretty proud. Everyone was excited. Mr. Connors said some scientists wanted to take an even closer look at Corky.

When I got home from school everybody at home was still looking for Corky. I told them that Corky was famous now. Grandma said that my bug was as famous as her *big behind*. She was also upset because she had been searching all day for her false teeth. I went to Alex, who was sitting on the porch with grandpa.

“Didn’t you put grandma’s teeth back?” I whispered to Alex.

“I had to try something,” Alex said. He was looking in the direction of Yeller, who was gnawing on a bone in the yard. That was unusual for Yeller because of his bad teeth. Then Yeller looked up and gave a big wide smile. It was a smile with a full wide set of human teeth. No doubt it was grandma’s teeth he’d been gnawing on the bone with. Alex had gotten some of that powerful dental cream and solved Yeller’s dental problems.

Grandpa saw Yeller smiling and fell out of his rocking chair. He then got up and ran into the house.

“You nut!” I said to Alex. I got the teeth out of Yeller’s mouth, put them in the jar and then put the jar back in the bathroom. I heard grandpa saying that he was going to have his medicine changed, that it was way too strong.

Mr. Connors sure was telling the truth about people being interested in studying Corky. In a few days people were coming from all over; scientists, people from zoos and from big colleges. They looked around the yard, the fields and the brook. They all wanted to see if they could find another bug like Corky.

“This sure is something,” Grandpa said as he sat on the porch, watching all the people looking around the place. More cars pulled up with more people getting out and searching with little boxes in case they find something.

“I do not believe this!” grandpa said. “All these people are coming here to see a bug. It’s more people than I’ve had to visit in my whole life!” He thought for a second. “Well, of course they’re not even visiting me. They’re visiting... a bug.”

“That should tell you something,” grandma said.

Everybody wanted to know where I found Corky. I didn’t exactly tell them I pretty much let them believe everywhere *but* there. I guess I just thought Corky’s old home should be a private thing.

When another bug like Corky couldn’t be found the people said Corky was even more special. A scientist with a long white coat asked me if he could take Corky off for further study.

“It’s important for science,” he said. He told my mom he was willing to offer five hundred dollars to buy Corky.

“Five hundred dollars!” mom shouted. “Where’s that bug?” she asked.

She told me that the next day someone would be coming to take Corky away.

“You were special to me *before* I found out you were the only one of your kind,” I said to Corky. He rose up that big pincer and gave me a high-five.

“What should we do?” asked Alex. “Do we give him up or keep him?”

I took Corky in my room, and he and I sat on the bed.

“What do *you* want to do?” I asked Corky.

He slowly turned until he was facing in the direction of where I found him near the brook. I knew what I should do.

The next morning I walked out to the brook with Corky. I walked over to the tiny cave where I had found him. I looked down at the rock in front of the hole, amazed at what I saw. There on the rock in front of the hole were two bugs. They looked just like Corky, only bigger.

“That’s your mom and dad!” I said to Corky. I sat Corky down in front of the larger bugs. They moved closer to him. *Maybe they think of Corky as one of a kind, too*, I thought.

Corky turned toward me and raised his pincer arm. I put my finger down and we did one last high-five.

“Goodbye, little friend,” I said.

Corky crawled over to his mom and dad, and raised his pincer arm. Slowly, so did the other two bugs. Corky gave them both a high-five, like he’d learned to do with me.

I stood there and watched Corky and his parents go toward their little home by the brook.
“Corky,” I said. “To me you are, and always will be, an *only one bug*.”

Daniel Leonard has won numerous writing awards in various categories, but he especially enjoys writing for children. Sometimes called “The Goat Man,” named after a character he likes to write about, he works for The Tennessee Department of Education and lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee with his wife, Linda.

THE RUNNER

Annell Gordon

Snatching up her bicycle by its rusty handlebar, the red-faced girl sped off toward the parking lot on the backside of the hospital grounds. The tires hummed over the blistering black asphalt – louder as the girl pedaled faster. Her scabby knees pumped furiously. The day was a scorcher, but that was not the sole reason for her flushed face.

“Stupid boys! They better shut up! I hate them!” She had fled from the jeering circle of boys and jumped on the bike. Sweat trickled through her stringy hair and beaded just under her sunburned nose. She rode around the empty parking lot, thoughts of revenge circling through her brain.

“Girl! Hey, white girl! Yo daddy Dr. Ames – he got de key. You go get Arthurine yo daddy’s key. You let me outta dis place. Hurry, girl! I got to get outta here!”

The girl paid no mind to the shouts coming from the window high overhead – the one on the third floor with the metal grate. She heard the same request every day all along her daily bicycle route. The girl lived in a small white house inside the main gate of the state mental institution for colored folks. The child’s daddy and mama worked at the hospital for the state of Alabama. Many of the patients called her daddy Dr. Ames. As a lab tech, he did wear a long white coat. As she rode throughout the hospital grounds, patients would often ask her to bring the key that would set them free.

Arthurine was by far the most worrisome. Her pleas were nonstop. During hot summer nights in 1958, the girl’s parents opened their windows, hoping to catch a cool breeze. They then had to listen to pitiful ululations of the insane -- cries for Mama, appeals to the Lord Jesus, and lots of just plain old mumbo jumbo. The racket stilled a bit toward midnight as patients wore themselves out. Arthurine, however, never let up. “Lemme out! Oh, please, Lawd Jesus, lemme outta heah! I needs to be outta dis place where I is!”

Tires whirring louder, angry thoughts spinning faster, the girl screeched to a stop, cocked her freckled face to the high window and shouted, “Shut up, woman! I ain’t got no key, and my

daddy sho' ain't no doctor. I can't help you. I can't help none o' y'all so you better leave me alone!" The girl then pushed off and pedaled home, sick with shame over her hateful words.

She had started the day feeling free – finally out of school for the summer. Her parents had already left for work – a short two block walk. She and her sister had decided to race to the hospital commissary for a breakfast of cold Coca-cola and a bag of salty peanuts. Although the little sister was much fleeter of foot and was way ahead, the girl felt that she, too, was flying in the cool morning breeze, running free and easy, no cares, no school, racing easily. She didn't notice the knot of boys squatted in the dirt playing marbles. They noticed her.

"Whoo-eee, look at her. Run, girl! You flyin' on that skinny twisty leg."

"We better get outta her way. She's probly gone break the sound barrier."

"Hey, gimpy girl – what you tryin' to do? Outrun a snail?"

She kept running, not from a sense of freedom, not now. Now, she ran from shame. For a moment, she had forgotten her lousy leg. She had felt that for once she could race like the wind, even catch up with her little sister. The younger girl kept running, used to the taunts hurled by other children at her older sister. The younger girl didn't notice her big sister when she turned to go back home to her trusty bicycle. Only on the rusty old bike could the girl really fly free.

After speeding away from the parking lot, she returned home and threw down the bike. Then she stalked off to confront her tormentors who were still shooting marbles. As the girl stamped along the dusty lane, she glared across the nearby vegetable fields – row upon row of turnip greens, red potatoes, sprouting corn, and peas, planted by the patients as occupational therapy. They had also built the barbed wire fence enclosing fields that stretched as far as she could see. The girl was just about to give those mean boys a piece of her mind when she looked up to see a scrawny, jet black woman, wiry hair bristling in all directions, threadbare cotton dress riding up stringy thighs, running directly toward her. The woman's bright black eyes were focused, not on the girl or the boys kneeling in the sandy lane, but ahead, way ahead, clear across the undulating vegetable fields.

Bony elbows and knees, pumping like pistons, the woman was flying – racing in the breeze, covering ground. A group of three red-faced, fat-bellied, white men lumbered after her – white uniforms indicating that they were orderlies from the wards. Sweating and gasping for air,

they screamed, “Athurine – stop! Come back, girl! You ain’t supposed to be out! Stop, girl! You gone be in so much trouble! Stop, Arthurine!”

Arthurine wasn’t listening. She was too busy racing across well-manicured hospital grounds. She was too busy busting right through the middle of the circle drawn in the sand, leaping over three stunned-into-silence-marble-shooting boys, mashing with her bare scrawny foot the hand of the boy who had called the girl gimpy and kicking dust into the eyes of the other two. Arthurine was too busy sprinting past “Dr. Ames’s” girl who stood with shining eyes and an ever-widening grin. She was too busy flying down the worn path toward the vegetable fields. Arthurine was too busy leaping like a deer slam over the fence without ever breaking her rhythm and racing lickety-split along the dusty furrows across acres and acres of vegetables as far as the now happy girl could see.

Annell C. Gordon is a middle school English and mathematics teacher. She lives with her husband near Grove Hill, Alabama, in a renovated 1840’s family farmhouse.

CARSON MCCULLERS IN THE TENTH GRADE, 1932

E. R. Carlin

Nobody can be nervous before they are sixteen,
she advised years later, but her heart was nervous
already. This was the year she first heard

‘deformity’ from doctors, her hands shrinking
like jellyfish in chilled sand. Her calluses softened
writing about the piano she would never master.

Each scratch in Mozart cramped her stomach.
His Electra was too real, neurotic not comedy.
She preferred Brahms, his music deep-tanned

as a blacksmith’s arm, not the grind of coffee mills,
its smell of wet soil and piss and moon.
Brahms was holes in old shoes, travelogue.

Still, she must have spent hours before school
staring straight into a Georgia sunrise
as farmers plowed dust in Deep South depression

and wondered if her eyes were chiaroscuro,
patchworks of other lives, sojourning through
the darkening fields past the valley of shadows,

which was why the eyes of her characters never
stayed the same, but were transformed, from gray
to blue, blue to gray. Macy and Cousin Lymon,

Desire and Self, embraced in a carnival affair,
so Carson, like poor Amelia, let her eyes cross
like snakes into the reflected gray-sea of each other.

E.R. Carlin grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, and was educated at Youngstown State University, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and Pacific Lutheran University. E.R.’s poems have appeared in a number of journals, including Beloit Poetry Journal, Cimarron Review, Hiram

Poetry Review, Hunger, Rattle, Wisconsin Review *and the recent anthology ROQUE DALTON REDUX* (Cedar Hill Books). *E.R.* has poems forthcoming in Confluence, Good Foot, Lake Affect Magazine, *and* The Minnesota Review.

FOOLS

Kristina Kubiszyn Allen

Demia Reynolds sat in front of her window, admiring the view. She had spent three evenings going from office to office on the 26th floor, seeing which one had the best view of the city below. When she finally got into old Mr. Pinkerton's office, she knew she found it. She also knew some of the other partners in the firm were skeptical of her tactics to get the managing partner to move Mr. Pinkerton to a smaller office, but as Demia slipped off her black leather heels and watched the city lights, she didn't care what those old fools thought.

Demia folded her arms behind her head and almost didn't notice the janitor—Dan, Don, Ronald maybe—walk in.

“Excuse me, Ms. Reynolds, but I'm about to lock up. Are you going to be here much longer?” he asked.

Demia thought about relaxing in her new silk sheets at home. It would feel nice to spread out with the entire bed to herself—without having to worry about James anymore. Now that he was gone, she wouldn't have to spend the entire night talking to him about foolish things. “Just give me one minute,” she said.

Demia had to take care of one more matter. She called her sister Georgia. “Georgey, look, I'm still tied up here. Since it's so late, why doesn't Leslie just stay over again tonight, and I'll get her tomorrow after work? She'd probably rather spend time with her cousins than her silly mother anyway. Thanks bunches.”

Demia was indeed thankful--thankful her sister was a fool too. Even with three kids of her own, she didn't mind watching Leslie for Demia during the day.

Demia took a pen and marked a slash through the forty third day of her partnership into Bentley and Slaughter on her calendar and looked at janitor what's-his-name. “Done,” Demia said.

When Demia got to the parking deck, she eyed her new silver Mercedes convertible from four cars away. It looked beautiful with the deck's overhead lights hitting against its newly-cleaned finish. Demia reached into her pants' pocket to pull out the keys. She looked forward to

hearing the beep as she unlocked the doors from afar—something that James’ old Forerunner never did. Thank God, she didn’t have to see that piece of trash anymore, Demia thought. Demia dug deeper into her pocket. “Dammit,” she said, realizing she left her keys in the office.

Demia’s watch read 9:55, and she knew she had to hurry before the entire building shut down at 10:00. She picked up her pace, as much as she could without ruining her heels. At the entrance, she pushed the buzzer to the security guards at the front desk, but no one answered. “It’s not 10:00 yet, you damn fools!” she said. She peered through the glass door, but everything just looked dark and quiet. “This is exactly why you can’t count on anyone but yourself,” she mumbled. She was just about to kick the glass when a shadow stepped out of the dark and opened the door.

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Reynolds. What are you still doing here?” the janitor asked.

Demia resisted the urge to scream at the imbecile because she certainly didn’t want to set off one of his kind, particularly when no one else was around. “It seems that I left my keys in my office. Could you let me in?”

“I was just getting ready to leave myself, but I’ll let you back upstairs.”

Demia looked at the perspiration mounting on his dark skin. “Why don’t you just give me the keys and I’ll let myself in. I can close up,” she said.

“Oh, I can’t do that Mrs. Reynolds. I’d lose my job. Anyway, the entire building is dark. All the timers have shut off the lights on all the floors. You’ll probably be glad to have me and my flashlight with you,” he said, tugging at the flashlight on his belt.

“I guess it’ll be alright,” Demia said.

As the two of them approached the elevator, the janitor said, “We need to be pretty quick. My wife doesn’t like it when I’m late. You know how it is,” he said.

“Well, I’m sure she’d understand,” Demia said.

“I don’t know. She’s funny that way. She refuses to take dinner out of the oven until I’m safe at home with her. Says we wouldn’t be a family otherwise—” The janitor laughed a little.

An annoying laugh, Demia thought.

When the elevator doors opened on the 26th floor, Demia couldn't see a thing. "Okay, follow me with your flashlight," she ordered.

The janitor followed Demia through the hall and into her office, where Demia began fumbling around for her keys.

"So, Mrs. Reynolds, I noticed you have a young daughter," the janitor said.

Demia was thankful to feel a letter opener on the top of her desk. She palmed it quickly. "How'd you know that?"

"That picture there," he said, flashing his light of the little blond girl sitting in a tree. "I dust that every night."

"Oh, that's Leslie."

"I got five of my own," he said.

Good God, Demia thought. "Why, that's a lot of children. You're wife must be quite efficient," Demia said.

"I guess," the janitor laughed again. "She's already talking about having another one once the baby is three."

Just what the world needs, Demia thought. "Yep, there's nothing better than children?" Demia smiled for a moment. "Where are the damn things?" she said.

"If you can't find them, maybe your husband could come get you?"

Demia snickered. "I don't think so."

"Or I suppose I could take you home," the janitor said.

Demia squeezed the letter opener. "They've got to be here. They've got to be."

The janitor noticed the shiny object peering out of her hand. "I know you don't know me all that well, but you don't need to be worried about me. I'm a youth minister, you know."

Demia continued looking for her keys. "Really? A youth minister by day and janitor by night, are you?"

“Just on three nights of the week. Youth ministers don’t get paid too much, so this second job helps. I hate being away from home, but we got to send the kids to college, right?” Demia remained quiet. The janitor continued, “So how about you, Mrs. Reynolds?”

“How about what?”

“Where do you go to church?”

“Oh, I don’t have time for that” she said, now looking on the floor.

“Yeah, I guess you do work a lot.” The janitor shined his light on Demia. “That’s got to get kind of lonely.”

She looked up at him from the floor. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

The janitor moved the light from her face. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I just get carried away, talking to people. I’m just interested, you know? John Jeffreys says I have a gift of understanding people, but my wife says I just have a big mouth.” The janitor laughed again.

Demia looked up from her search. “John Jeffreys?” Jeffreys was one of the oldest members of the Firm’s Executive Committee—the committee with all of the real power.

“Yeah. He’s a heck of a guy. He had me and my wife over for dinner last Sunday.”

“You had dinner with John Jeffreys? John Jeffreys of this firm?”

“Oh, yeah. We go over there a good bit. His kids are in my youth group,” the janitor said.

“What church is this?” Demia asked, taking a break from her search.

“First Methodist. Just down the street from here. You know, I bet John would come get you if you wanted. He’s that kind of guy.”

Demia thought about that for a minute when she saw something shiny on the ground. “Aha! Found ‘em.” Demia stood up, proudly holding her keys in her hand. “Looks like they got stuck under one of the legs of my desk.”

As the two of them rode the elevator down to the lobby, Demia looked at the janitor and pondered the few minutes she had spent with him. Looking at him now with his flashlight and in his grey suit, she would never have suspected that Jeffreys and this man were friends or that this man was a youth minister. It made Demia think. “What’s your name?” Demia asked.

“Jarod Matthew,” the janitor said.

“Well, Jarod.” Demia stuck out her hand. “Call me Demia.”

Jarod smiled and then stopped. “You know, it’s funny, but sometimes it’s easier to see people, get to know people, with the lights off.”

Jarod’s words resonated in Demia’s head, and she felt like she was thinking clearly for the first time in a while. She looked Jarod in the eye. “I guess you’re right,” she said. And as Jarod escorted her to the front doors again, Demia felt a tingle of inspiration throughout her body. “Maybe we could have Sunday dinner together some time too,” she said.

“I’d like that... Demia,” Jarod said.

Demia felt rejuvenated by the time she got back in her Mercedes, almost like a new woman. She let out a breath and turned up her radio, feeling confident that she would find her way onto the executive committee after all—with Jarod’s help. “What a damn fool,” she said as she turned on her engine.

*After receiving a B.A. in journalism from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where she grew up, **Kristina Kubiszyn Allen** earned a J.D. from the University of Notre Dame and practiced three years as an environmental attorney in Birmingham, Alabama. She left the legal practice to obtain a M.A.Ed. in English/Language Arts and teach high school English. She presently lives in Birmingham with her husband and two daughters and enjoys writing in her spare time.*

TALES OF A PONYTAIL MOM

Kari Kampakis

Prologue

In my world, I am an afterthought. An I'll-get-to-it-if-I-have-time chore. And it shows. My morning priorities are getting kids ready and tidying the house. This deceives me into thinking I am in control. Of everything but my looks, that is.

If only I could delegate myself, maybe then I'd get done.

One day I put on lipstick and my three-year-old stared me down with suspicion. I looked in the mirror and admittedly barely recognized myself.

I splurge on cute clothes but spend my days in workout gear from Target and TJ Maxx. I'm too lazy to replace them so I wear them until the holes get so big my privates start showing. That's about six years.

Time for me falls between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. I can use it to change the world or to sleep. Most of the time I choose the latter. When I don't I kick myself come morning.

Pulling my hair back into a ponytail is now a reflex, my comfort zone. Even when I have time to style it I resort to a last-minute sprout because I'm at a loss. I spent hours a day primping in middle and high school, a show-off with tricks of the trade. But now I'm a foreigner in the complicated world of beauty. The tomboy I once pitied, unable to translate highlights from lowlights.

Motherhood has reaffirmed my faith in women. Competition welds into compassion when our children are at stake. We're crammed into the same rowboat now, ready to lend an oar or life vest should anyone gasp for help. There is no greater network, in my opinion.

I live feeling I'm on the verge of something big and that excites me. One day I will put my energy where my mouth is and unleash my God-given talents. First I must make it through toddler years without resorting to a leash.

Complain as I may about my kids, at the end of the day I know they are what it's all about. One minute they have me boiling, the next I'm melting as they sleep like cherubs. As ambitious as I once was, nothing feeds my ego like a bear hug or warm snuggle from the darlings I bore and adore. In those moments I truly feel accomplished, like the water-drenched, winning coach perched on shoulders with the crowd singing, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

One day I'll be the glamorous sex kitten I hear purring inside. But for now I will settle on being a Ponytail Mom.

Chapter 1: I Know Why the Caged Bird Screams

You get a feel for zoo animals being tied to your stable with young kids. No wonder they look so pitiful. At least we have a key – not to mention variety at lunch.

Spending each day inside the same walls with the same restless clan is like daring déjà vu. No matter how grand the casa, the painfully familiar can test any temper. By now I've memorized every idiosyncrasy of my house; things I never noticed as I begged my husband to buy it bully me when I let them. The leaky kitchen faucet, milk-stained brick Spending each day inside the same walls with the same restless clan is like daring déjà vu. No matter how grand

the casa, the painfully familiar can test any temper. By now I've memorized every idiosyncrasy of my house; things I never noticed as I begged my husband to buy it bully me when I let them. The leaky kitchen faucet, milk-stained floor and cracking hall ceiling threatening to cave whenever I open the attic gang up on me on bad days.

Yet, despite it all, I still love my house and accept it as perfectly flawed. It's our family hub and a stadium where we all root for each other. Most days I can forgive its shortcomings. Lord knows I have my own cracks and stains.

I laugh thinking back to college and how insignificant home was to me. My decor one year consisted of a mattress on the floor (I was too busy to buy a box spring), a cheap mirror duct-taped to the wall and a ratty dresser one of my dad's renters left behind. It looked like a fraternity garage sale, but I didn't care. I focused on school and all else was peripheral.

I wasn't much better out of college. By then I was full speed ahead with career and home was just a rest stop.

Now that home is part of my job description, however, I take it seriously. It doesn't have to be large and extravagant – just clean, cozy, cute. A place that feels like an escape even when it's a prison.

Freedom rings – for everyone except moms with young kids. We drag them to whine clubs to throw our own tantrums over the boredom of a repetitive life. Once we hear our frustrations echo, however, we kick ourselves for knocking our wonderful gifts. Then we kick ourselves again for not enjoying their fleeting childhoods more.

I've peaked into the future, thanks to my siblings with older kids, and I see a penlight of hope ahead. I know there's an upcoming junction where we can step out and exercise our lungs in the fresh, unbarred air.

And when we do the world will hear us roar.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a freelance writer/photographer with a background in public relations, advertising and journalism. She began her career at Alabama Power, where she was a media relations spokeswoman and the CEO's speechwriter. Kari's writing has been published by Blue Mountain Arts as well as The Huntsville Times and Kids Life magazine. Her greetings cards have been published online by Ecards. In 2000 she self-published a collection of children's poem prints that sold in more than 100 upscale boutiques throughout the Southeast. Kari and her husband Harry live in Birmingham, Alabama, with their daughters Ella and Sophia.

CHANGES

Sylvia Woods

Beeches stand like soldiers down the drive.
the barn cat stares his emerald gaze
steady as some distant planet in the sky.

The dog takes sick, and when he dies,
they bury him beneath a full moon's blaze.
Beeches stand like soldiers down the drive.

The paper tells the guys who took the bribe.
Joe leaves to fight a war his leaders made,
steady as some distant planet in the sky.

Farmers toil the earth and then they lie
on ridges where they worked their days.
Beeches stand like soldiers down the drive.

After thirty years Jim leaves Sue. She cries,
her pilgrim soul adrift, her burning rage
steady as some distant planet in the sky.

The children leave home; their parents sigh
in empty rooms that echo – ghostly caves.
Beeches stand like soldiers down the drive
steady as some distant planet in the sky.

Sylvia Woods lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where she teaches high school English. Her work has appeared in *Appalachian Heritage* and *Tennessee English Journal*. She also has work forthcoming in several anthologies.

GETTING EVEN

Connie Jordan Green

Tilly looked at the sauerkraut on her plate. She had a big helping, thanks to her older brothers, Obadiah and Jesse, who had ladled some onto each plate from the crock that sat in the corner of the back porch. She was saving the kraut for last, but not because it was her favorite dish.

She glanced at Ada's plate. Ada hadn't eaten her sauerkraut either. Tilly knew how much Ada hated sauerkraut. It wasn't that her older sister disliked the taste. But each time Ada had a serving of it on her plate, she remembered kraut-putting-up time in the summer.

Obadiah and Jesse didn't help with Ada's bad feelings.

"Remember what Daddy did when we put up this kraut last summer?" Obadiah said as they all sat around the supper table.

Daddy looked up, but he didn't say anything.

"Yeah," Jesse said, "same thing he does every summer--nearly cut off his finger."

Daddy always ended up with bandaged fingers after kraut making. Because he refused to waste a bit of food, he pushed the cabbage through their cutter until there was scarcely a piece of cabbage to hold onto, often nicking his fingers in the process.

"Wonder what would happen if Daddy's finger got cut off and fell into the kraut?" Obadiah said.

Ada looked pale.

"Obadiah, that's enough," Mama warned.

Tilly smiled. Thirteen-year-old Obadiah and fifteen-year-old Jesse liked nothing better than to aggravate her and Ada. But Mama would put a stop to it.

Jesse lifted up a forkful of kraut and examined it. "Do you suppose the finger would turn white and shrivel? Would it swell up? Maybe it'd stay red and bloody . . ."

"Jesse!" Mama said sharply.

"Shucks, I was just thinking out loud," Jesse said.

"Then think about something else," Mama said.

Ada laid down her fork and swallowed hard. Tilly didn't think the kraut looked very appetizing either. But they both knew the rule--eat everything on your plate.

"Food is too hard to come by to be wasting it," Mama or Daddy would say if Ada or Tilly dawdled over her food.

With the finger-discussion ended, Obadiah and Jesse went back to eating lustily. Finishing their food was never a problem for them.

When Tilly had eaten her sausage and potatoes and green beans, she took a bite of kraut. Ada watched her. The cabbage, pickled in vinegar and salt brine, was refreshingly tart. Tilly put thoughts of fingers out of her mind and ate the kraut.

Ada, too, took a bite. Then another, heaping the kraut on her fork to get it down fast.

"Ye-i-i-i!" Ada screamed suddenly, throwing her kraut-filled fork into the air.

Mama and Daddy jumped up and ran to Ada.

On Ada's plate, just showing through the sauerkraut, lay a red finger.

Tilly's stomach churned.

Daddy pushed aside the kraut and pulled out the finger--a finger cut from a red glove.

"Jesse and Obadiah," Daddy said in his sternest voice, "you may both go to your room."

Mama led Ada out of the kitchen. Ada was paler than ever.

Tilly looked around. Cabbage was on the ceiling, on the floor, all over the table. She put a hand to her hair. Yes, cabbage was even in her hair.

Later, when she and Ada were in bed, Tilly heard Ada sob. She patted Ada's back.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll get even with those boys."

But how? she wondered as she fell asleep. What could she do that would be as terrible as a finger in the kraut? Although Tilly was two years younger than eleven-year-old Ada, she felt protective toward Ada when Jesse and Obadiah were mean to her.

Next morning Tilly watched her brothers, hoping an idea would come. The four of them did their chores--Jesse helping Daddy with the milking, Obadiah throwing down hay to the cows and feeding the pigs, Tilly and Ada pouring the milk through a strainer and setting the crocks of fresh milk in the spring house.

Then the four of them went off to school. Ada wouldn't look at the boys while they waited for the bus. Later, Tilly told her that was just what the boys wanted. "Make them think

the trick didn't really bother you," she said. "Then maybe they won't think it's so much fun to be mean to you."

"I can't," Ada said. "Every time I look at them, I see that awful finger in my plate. Ugh! I'll never eat sauerkraut again."

But of course she would. Mama considered kraut a good substitute for the fresh cabbage they had in the summer. She wouldn't put up with her children not getting the food she thought they needed.

After school Tilly thought some more while her brothers helped Daddy with the milking and feeding. She watched Obadiah fill the woodbox in the kitchen and Jesse carry out the ashes, spreading them over the spot in the garden where the family would plant potatoes in late winter.

She and Ada did their chores too, helping Mama cook dinner and clean the kitchen afterwards. Then Tilly, Ada, Obadiah, and Jesse sat around the large table and did their lessons. The room was quiet except for the ticking of the clock on the kitchen shelf and the occasional pop of a log in the woodstove.

Once, when Tilly glanced up, Obadiah was grinning at her. He looked down, as if he were looking at a plate, grabbed his throat, and opened his mouth in a silent scream. She narrowed her eyes at him, then refused to look back up. Just what she had told Ada not to do, she remembered.

Ada hadn't forgotten Tilly's promise to come up with a way to get even. "Those boys still haven't been paid back," Ada said as they got ready for bed.

"I'll think of something," Tilly promised again.

That night she dreamed, and when she woke up next morning, she told Ada about her dreams. "I dreamed I put a snake in the boys' bed."

Ada shivered. "Don't even mention snakes to me," she said as she pulled the quilt close around her chin.

"Anyway, it's cold weather, and snakes have hibernated," Tilly said. "Besides, even if I found a snake, our brothers would bring it right downstairs and put it in our bed."

Tilly sighed as she climbed out of bed. "And they'd do the same thing with everything else I dreamed about putting in their bed--bugs, spiders, mice."

Obadiah and Jesse weren't afraid of anything that flew, crawled, walked, or swam on the face of the earth.

Tilly perked up when she remembered another of her dreams. "Hey, Ada, I almost forgot--I dreamed we sneaked upstairs and short-sheeted Obadiah and Jesse's bed. Ha, that would serve them right. They'd try to get in bed and there wouldn't be room for their feet."

She fell over on the bed in a fit of giggles.

Ada got out on the other side of the bed. "Silly-Tilly," she said. "You know that won't work. They'd just pull the folded-back sheets off the bed, throw them in the floor, and sleep on the bare mattress. Those boys don't care about neat beds."

Tilly stopped giggling and sat up. "Ada-potato," she said to get even for the Silly-Tilly name, "I dreamed we smeared toothpaste on their pillows. But Mama would make us scrub the linens until all the toothpaste was gone. And Obadiah and Jesse would love that!"

None of the ideas she'd dreamed about were going to work.

While the family ate breakfast, she thought about the problem of getting even with her brothers. Ada looked at her expectantly. Jesse and Obadiah looked from Tilly to Ada then back to Tilly again. They grinned.

When Mama and Daddy weren't looking, Tilly stuck her tongue out at them. She left plenty of oatmeal on it, but Jesse and Obadiah just grinned more and nudged each other.

Ha, she thought. I should have put salt in the sugar bowl before Obadiah and Jesse had their oatmeal. But Daddy probably would have spooned it into his coffee. Then she'd really be in trouble.

"Well," Ada said as they finished their kitchen chores. "Any more ideas?"

Obadiah poked his head in at the doorway. "Ideas for what?" he asked. Then he laughed and went out the back door.

"Oh-h-h," Ada said. "He makes me so mad."

While they waited for the bus, Tilly thought some more. Maybe she'd put a hole in the gathering sack next time Obadiah and Jesse went to the corn crib for a load to take to the mill. But Daddy wouldn't put up with tricks that affected the stock.

It seemed that every mean trick that came into her head meant trouble for her instead of for her brothers.

Riding on the bus, she had a brilliant idea. She whispered to Ada. "Tonight let's climb the tree outside Jesse and Obadiah's window. We'll make weird noises and scare them to death."

"That wouldn't be a trick on them," Ada said. "We'd be scared to death. Out after dark, ugh! Besides, we'd probably fall out of the tree and break our arms. Sometimes your ideas are just plain dumb."

"Dumb!" Tilly said indignantly. "Okay, you can just get even all by yourself."

Jesse leaned over the bus seat. "Are my little sisters having an argument?"

"Mind your own business," Tilly said.

But Jesse just laughed.

It seemed to Tilly every time she turned around either Jesse or Obadiah was right there. They sure were curious.

Then Tilly had an idea--the most brilliant idea of her life. She knew the perfect way to get even with Jesse and Obadiah.

"We can't talk about it any more now," she stage-whispered to Ada. "Meet me at the barn after school."

Ada frowned and opened her mouth, but Tilly shook her head and motioned toward the seat where Obadiah and Jesse sat. Ada shrugged.

After school, Jesse and Obadiah went straight to the barn.

"Never mind," Tilly said to Ada as they watched their brothers. "We'll meet later."

After they changed out of their school clothes, she walked to the hen house with Ada. Jesse and Obadiah left the barn and walked toward the hen house, too.

Tilly looked at Ada and shrugged. "We'll talk while we do the dishes," she said.

Ada looked puzzled.

After supper, Obadiah said, "I've got a lot of lessons to do tonight. Reckon I'll clear off the corner of the table and get started."

Ada frowned at him.

"Can't you go study somewhere else?" Tilly said.

"You know I always study at this table," Obadiah said. "What's the matter, little sisters? 'Fraid I'll overhear you talking?" He laughed.

Later, after the dishes were done and they'd all finished their homework, Tilly and Ada walked down the hallway to their bedroom. "I've got lots of ideas," Tilly said to Ada. "I'll tell you about them tomorrow morning."

Jesse popped out from under the stairs. "Ideas for what?" he said. "Ha, ha." Then he ran up the stairs to the room he and Obadiah shared in the attic.

Next day either Jesse or Obadiah was nearby every time Tilly and Ada got together. The following day, Saturday, was just as bad. Jesse was hanging out at the hen house when Tilly went with Ada to collect eggs. Obadiah filled the woodbox or sat at the table every time Tilly and Ada did kitchen chores.

On Saturday evening, while Ada put on her nightgown, she said, "It's been almost a week now, Tilly, and we still haven't gotten even with those boys."

"That's what you think," Tilly said.

"Huh?" Ada said.

"Haven't you noticed?" Tilly asked.

"Noticed what? All I notice is every time I turn around, there's one of my brothers."

"Well, that's just it."

"What's just it? Tilly, quit talking in riddles."

"Didn't you notice today? Jesse and Obadiah were so busy staying near us they didn't get their chores done till late in the day. They didn't have time to shoot basketballs or to go squirrel hunting."

"So?" Then, "Oh!"

"Yeah, oh! Maybe they'll go on for weeks and weeks trying to overhear our plans." Tilly laughed.

Ada smiled. She smoothed back the sheets and quilt on Tilly's side of the bed and plumped up the pillow. "Sometimes, Tilly, I think you're downright smart," she said.

Tilly climbed between the smooth sheets. "Sometimes, Ada, I think you're right."

Connie Jordan Green's Alabama connections are through marriage and education. Her husband grew up in Fort Payne, and the couple graduated from Auburn. They now live on a farm in East Tennessee. Connie writes poetry, a newspaper column, and novels and stories for

young people all from the attic of her home. One novel was an ALA Best Books for Young Adults, another a Notable 1992 Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies. Her poetry has appeared in more than 30 journals and publications.

THE VAN

Sonja Herbert

It was love at first sight. I glanced up, saw the van and knew I had found what I was looking for. It sat atop a small platform in the car lot of Farmington Motors, gleaming in the relentless desert sunshine, in white with maroon stripes. It was large, maybe a bit too large, but I didn't care.

Grandma Towne turned into the lot. I pointed to the van on its little platform.

"That's it. That's the car I want," I said.

Grandma parked in front of the showroom, and Daniel burst from the Buick, followed by eight-year-old Marit, six-year-old Liesel and little Meagan.

My ex-husband's mother and I walked the children into the showroom. A salesman came up to us, a big smile on his face. He was young, with bright, eager eyes. His nametag announced his name as Jerry.

"I need a new car," I said.

"Do you have a trade-in?"

"I don't. The block cracked, and I gave it to my ex for towing it. He can use the parts. It wouldn't have been worth much, anyway."

"I have several nice cars that might be just right for your family," Jerry said.

"Mom wants to have that van over there," Daniel said. He pointed.

"That one is expensive," Jerry said. "Let me show you some other great deals."

He took a ledger from his desk and flipped through it. "Here is one," he declared. "It's a very nice mini van." He took a set of keys from a board, and checked the label.

"Could you get the keys for that van, too?" I asked.

"Okay. We can look it over."

"I wanna see the new car," Marit declared.

"With a TV in it," decided Liesel.

"Okay. Let's go," The salesman said and smiled at my girls.

I made a beeline to the platform. The car of my dreams stood above the rest, glinting in the New Mexico sunshine. It looked brand new. How different it was from the old Chrysler diesel I had driven since my divorce.

The salesman hurried after me. “How about I show you this mini van first?” he asked. “It’s only three years old and it’s quite roomy.

I kept admiring the van. “Could you take this one down for me?” I asked. “I’d like to look at it closer.”

“Okay.” Jerry climbed on the platform.

I herded my children to the side, and took hold of Meagan’s hand.

Grandma Towne smiled. “That’s a lovely vehicle,” she said. “You’ll have lots of room and the kids will behave a lot better on the long drives.”

Jerry backed it down the ramp and opened the hood.

The engine gleamed in the sun, sparkling clean. I pulled out the dipstick. Daniel watched, his brown eyes wide. The oil was on level, and I was surprised to see it was yellow, not black, as I had expected. Somebody had been taking good care of this engine.

I replaced the dipstick and turned to look inside. The odometer showed 36,000 miles, hardly used.

The dashboard had a radio with a CD player. A wooden table with four holes for drink containers nestled between the front seats, and automatic door and window locks on the driver’s side would keep my kids safe.

The carpet and the seats were a soft, velvety purplish maroon. How lovely it was!

Jerry had unlocked the side doors, and all four of my children clambered into the back. I climbed in after them.

Meagan squealed, “A TV, a TV,” and pointed to the space between the front seats. The girls crowded around her. Under the wooden table in the front, a TV/VCR combination glinted at my daughters. Nice. Just what I needed to keep them happy on our long rides.

Daniel, in the meantime, clambered around behind the girls, checking out the large back seat.

“It turns into a sofa,” Jerry said, watching him.

“Cool,” Daniel said. But he wasn’t looking at the sofa seat. In front of the sofa a small table stood on a strong metal column. Like the one in the front, it had four holes for drinks.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I turned to Jerry. “What if the children fall against that? It also takes up a lot of room.”

“No problem,” Jerry said. He seemed to have warmed up to the idea that I wanted this particular van and none other. “It’s easy to take down. Look.”

He squeezed past the girls, who were still admiring the TV, and popped off the table top, slipped the metal column from its hole and flipped a piece of carpet into the hole. He stashed the table and the column under the sofa seat. The floor looked as if it had never held a table.

“How nice,” I said. “How old is the van?”

“Just a year. It’s had only one owner, and they just had a baby and wanted something a little more suitable for a family.” Jerry grinned. “This one is a tailgate party van, you know. Let me show you.”

He took me to the rear, and opened the doors. In the back, a cooler fit snugly into a holder, made from the same lovely blond wood. Two more drink holders were recessed into the doors.

I smiled. I had known it the moment I saw it, this was the right vehicle for me and my family.

After the divorce, I had accepted a teaching position on the Navajo reservation, and the closest city was 150 miles away. Luckily, it was also where my dear mother-in-law lived. The children and I went to see her every other weekend. This van, with the cooler for snacks, the drink holders, and the TV/VCR, would make that trip so much easier.

I strapped my kids in, and we took the van for a ride. It drove smooth and low, with a contented, purring sound.

Jerry helped the kids turn on the TV, and a delighted squeal from the back announced it had picked up a station.

We returned to the car lot.

“There’s no use in showing you any other vehicles?” Jerry asked.

I laughed. “No, there isn’t. This is the one I want.”

“Well. Then let’s see what we can do to finance it,” he said and our small horde returned to the showroom.

I spent more than an hour in Jerry’s office, filling out finance forms and listening to Jerry making phone calls.

I glanced out the cubicle window. Daniel stood in front of a racy little two-seater, stroking its gleaming paint. Liesel hid behind a large plant and Meagan played with a red and blue brochure. Grandma and Marit sat at the table, talking.

Jerry dropped the receiver. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “But your application has been denied. Why don’t you look at some of the other cars we have available? A mini van would be so much cheaper.”

“No, thank you,” I said. My heart felt cold. I rose. “Just because I am a woman doesn’t mean I can’t have that van. I have always paid my bills, have no debts. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“If it were my decision, I’d let you have it. But it isn’t. I’m working with two lenders, and neither one wants to lend you that much money. As the sole provider for four children, with the income of a beginning school teacher, you just don’t have the kind of money to afford this van.”

“If my ex would have come in and wanted to buy it, there wouldn’t have been any problem. I don’t want to look at your other cars.” I took a deep breath. “But thank you anyway for your efforts. I guess it isn’t your fault.”

I collected my kids, shook the salesman’s hand, and herded them back to Grandma Towne’s Buick.

“Do you want to keep looking?” Grandma said as she pulled the Pontiac out of the lot.

“No. I really wanted that van. Let’s go home.”

“I’m hungry,” Marit said from the back.

Liesel screamed, “Don’t hit me,” and Daniel snickered.

They really were too crowded in that small car. We needed a van.

A fellow teacher picked me up on Sunday to take me back to the reservation. As we entered our apartment, the phone rang.

Daniel picked it up. It was his dad. I heard Daniel say, “We almost bought a cool van today.”

I carried the sleeping Meagan into her room and put her to bed. My friend brought in the rest of the luggage while Marit and Liesel talked to their dad.

When Liesel was finished, she held the phone out to me. “Dad wants to talk to you,” she said.

“I heard about your car search. Just as well you didn’t get that van,” he said. “You’re a lot better off getting a sedan, or maybe a mini van. You’ll pay it off faster, and it won’t guzzle gas, like a big van.”

I didn’t say anything. What did he know about hauling four children around, with no other adult in the car? If he recommended a small one, I’d buy a big one for sure.

In the days that followed, I searched the newspapers for vans for sale. I called several car dealers and asked about their vans, but nothing felt good enough for me to make the long trip to check it out.

I couldn’t get that white and maroon van out of my mind. Slowly an idea formed.

I called Farmington Motors the next weekend, and asked Jerry how ‘my’ van was doing.

“We have a couple that wants to buy it,” he said. “I know you really wanted it. I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

On an impulse I said, “Why don’t you take my phone number. Just in case that couple doesn’t take it. I think I know a way to get the financing I need.”

“Okay,” Jerry said, and took down my number.

I thought that was the end of it, but nevertheless, I went ahead with my plans. Saturday morning, while my children were safe with their friends in the teacher’s compound, I checked my savings, borrowed my friend’s car, and made the three-hour drive to Blanding.

I had called ahead and the loan officer at Zion’s Bank, where I had banked ever since my divorce, was expecting me.

“Because I’m divorced and don’t have much of a credit history, the car dealership refuses to lend me the money,” I said. “I have always had an excellent record with your bank and wonder if you would be willing to lend me the money. I have \$2,000 for a down payment.”

He checked my records, made some phone calls and had me fill out some papers.

Finally he smiled and said, “Have them contact me, and I will have a check made out to the car dealership of your choice.” He gave me his card.

I felt light. Suddenly the sun shone brighter and I knew my ‘love at first sight’ hadn’t been a mistake. That van would be mine.

I thanked the loan officer. “I’m not sure how soon they’ll contact you,” I said. “But whatever car I’ll be getting, I’ll have it financed through you.”

Monday, after school was over, I had a message on my answering machine. Jerry had called. The couple considering the van decided to get a different car after all, and he wanted me to know.

I called him right away. Jerry promised to hold the van for me until Saturday, after I told him that I had secured financing from Zion’s Bank.

And so it was that my children and I once again showed up with Grandma at Farmington Motors. This time, however, we drove home in a large, roomy, white and maroon van with a TV inside.

Sonja Herbert has written several award-winning stories and essays and a novel about her mother’s life during the Holocaust. Her memoir about her childhood in a traveling carnival is almost finished. Contact her at www.Germanwriter.com.

HABITAT

Leah Prewitt

There he was,
Bigger than a city bird
Has any business being.
It was noon; he'd snatched
A quick lunch from the air
And perched on the top of a telephone pole,
The mockingbird under his feet.
It looked an impossible place
For such a picnic.

The last peals of the church bells
Sounded out, the strikes
Dull in the December air.
I stood atop the city garage,
Making him so close
I could hear the feathers cracking
In his hooked beak,
Watch their graceful last landings
As he dropped them one by one
On the sidewalk and street below.

The hawk's head moved constantly,
Now checking the air,
Now bent to his meal,
Strangely unruffled by the sounds
And movements of people and cars.

Here was my hawk,
Calmly making his way,
Taking his daily bread
From the city,
As if he rose in the morning,
Pulled a gray-brown suit
Over his fatly feathered legs
And went to work,
Patrolling the spires
Towering over ancient Presbyterian graves
Laid out in neat rows
In the churchyard below.

Leah Prewitt has been writing poetry since her days at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky, her hometown. That's much longer ago than she likes to think about. After graduation with a B.A. (with Honors) in English, Leah went to Vanderbilt Law School in Nashville, where she was awarded her J.D. Leah practiced law in several southeastern cities before returning to Auburn, Alabama, where she is currently working on two novels, one based on a case she handled in her old life, tentatively titled MARKET ANALYSIS. Leah's poems have been published in Now and Then, Cumberland Poetry Review, and the anthology All Around Us: Poems from the Valley. She was a winner in the 1995 Robert Penn Warren Poetry Prize competition.

POOR THING

Susan Murphy

I did not set out to throw up on national television. I opened the door to my apartment that Friday afternoon, all ready to relax with a box of mac and cheese and maybe a *Lifetime* movie, when a dozen people jumped out from behind my corduroy couch. I didn't even get a chance to put my purse down before they all descended on me, laughing and crying, everybody talking at once. Then this guy wearing a tuxedo came running out of my kitchenette followed by another guy shouldering a TV camera.

“Congratulations, Dina Howser, you've been chosen to be a contestant on *Millennium Makeover!*”

Well, the whole place went up for grabs. I was afraid that the neighbors might start banging on the walls, but most of them were already there. Mrs. Nardell from 2B, that little gardener guy from the first floor, even Ms. Kroft my old piano teacher who lived in the building next door. My sisters were there, too, all five of them, with their business casual husbands in tow. And Mom and Dad, God bless them, were standing against the fireplace, wiping happy tears from their eyes.

Everyone was so doggone excited that I hated to bring up the fact that I never asked to be made over.

Now, I'll admit I'm no raving beauty, but no one ever suggested that I just chuck it all and join the circus, either. On the whole, I'd say I was average looking, brownish hair, size ten slacks...okay, lately it's been a twelve, but still, in any other family I'd be considered perfectly normal.

The problem is that my sisters are all above normal, certified beauty queens, star studded regulars on the pageant circuit since the age of four. Between the five of them they probably held

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every title in the tri-county area, Little Miss This, Little Miss That. Our upstairs bedroom was completely covered with ribbons and trophies and rhinestone tiaras.

Somehow, I never fit the pageant mold. The wigs made my head itch and I broke out in tears every time someone looked at me. My mom kept trying, though. Every few weeks, she'd drive me across town, slick back my wiry curls, and plunk a microphone in my tiny little fist. But it never worked out. After one particularly embarrassing mishap (I tried to tell her that my stomach felt queasy), she finally gave up and let me sit on the celebrity sidelines with a book, which is where I stayed, happy as a clam, for the next twenty-five years.

My sisters were prom queens. I was on the decorating committee. That's just the way it went.

And life was good. I got an academic scholarship, played in the school orchestra, and when my baby sister Trina finally snagged her pre-med husband, I moved out of our upstairs dormitory shrine into a one bedroom apartment with my cat Mary Lou. I landed a decent job, a loyal circle of friends, and season tickets to the symphony where I could sit back and fantasize about playing first chair clarinet.

The point is, I did not ask to be made over. Someone asked for me. Turns out my oldest sister Callista (Little Miss Pumpkin Pie, et al) sent in a video she had taken of me last Christmas as I leaned against her kitchen counter filling my face with her fabulous holiday brunch. Not my most glamorous moment, but I guess that was the point. In order to be chosen for *Millennium Makeover*, you had to make the judges shake their heads and say, "Poor, poor thing." Who knew? A stretched out snowman sweater, a little bad lighting, and I was finally on my way to stardom.

The *Millennium Makeover* people have been nice, I'll say that. The plastic surgeon spent two full hours drawing little diagrams all over my body, showing me where I could stand a little improvement. I'm not sure anyone would look appealing standing under those fluorescent lights
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in their B team underwear, but when the doctor got finished, I was circled and cross-hatched like one of John Madden's *Monday Night Football* plays – "They should drop back through the navel area, fan out over the breasts (what there is of them) and go wide along the sideline fat under the

arms.” All that, and the surgeon hadn’t even gotten to my face. At the end of the day, Dr. Lift and Separate handed me a clipboard and I agreed to improvements thirteen and twenty-seven. I wasn’t going to do anything at all (I’m not much for needles and undue swelling), but the poor man had worked so hard that I hated to disappoint him.

The nutritionist was another story. I already knew that green leafy vegetables were better for me than cheese fries. I’d known that since fourth grade science class when Mrs. Trundle had us keep a week-long food pyramid chart of everything we ate. Long about Wednesday, I noticed that my pyramid was looking a little top heavy, so I plugged in a few imaginary servings of lima beans and carrots just to even things up. Mrs. Trundle knew that I was lying, especially since I showed up that Friday brown-bagging a meatloaf sandwich and a package of corn chips, but she didn’t have the time...or maybe the heart... to call my parents and double check.

The *Millennium Makeover* Fruits and Vegetables Nazi, however, had all the time in the world. When that first Wednesday rolled around, she snatched up my doctored up chart and started delivering my food to me personally, meticulously weighed portions of broiled fish and broccoli and mealy brown rice. I didn’t blame her, though. The *Millennium Makeover*

producers

couldn’t very well have me walk through the curtain three months later chunked up a pound and a half. Who’d tune in to see that?

That day in my apartment, when the guy in the tuxedo told me I’d have to be away from home for three months, I pictured holing up in some swanky hotel with a stack of paperback novels. I didn’t figure on the personal trainer who showed up every morning at five to hound me into TV-ready shape. His name was Raul (of course it was) and apparently, the network paid him

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big bucks to hover over me and count. “One, two, three...no, it is not time to rest. We’re going for ten, Miss Dina.” Somehow, we were always going farther than I planned. Even on days when I got up thinking, yeah, I can do this, Raul would come up with some new technique to make me pray for a merciful death. The only thing that kept me going was the thought of slipping into the whirlpool afterwards. That part was pure heaven until the day Raul looked

down at me floating among the bubbles and said, “You look like a plump, plump raisin.” Then, it was back to the mats.

At the end of my three month hiatus, I was whisked off to a chi-chi salon to be coiffed and coutured before a limo took me to the *Millennium Makeover* TV studio. There, in the dim backstage light, I was handed off to a woman named Barbara (some assistant’s assistant) and led to my fluorescent mark behind Curtain Number Two. I was twenty-five pounds lighter, one bra size perkier, and my overbite was a thing of the past. I felt great, I really did, especially knowing that my family and friends were all in the audience waiting for the great unveiling. I didn’t even flinch when they showed my “before” video on the studio monitor. That poor, poor thing had left the building.

In amongst the confusion of key grips and lighting technicians, I was introduced to two other poor, poor things – Lyda Boursin from Louisiana and Renatta Monk from Pocatello, Idaho. They had been duly coiffed and coutured as well and were standing on their marks behind Curtains One and Three.

Judging from the before video, Dr. Lift and Separate must have loved Lyda. She had gone in for improvements all over the physical map. She looked great, too, tall and confident with a special sheen to her newly highlighted hair.

Renatta’s face still looked a little stiff, but I knew that as soon as her chin implant settled in, she’d be a knock out. The wardrobe people had her in a red strapless gown, sequins from head

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to toe. They had put me in purple, which was never my favorite color, but I figured, hey, it’s their show.

The music started, the lights came up and –ta da – there we were in all our glory. I reached out to squeeze Lyda’s hand, but she was too busy pointing her toes and squaring her shoulders and smiling directly into the camera. I looked over and saw that Renatta was working it too, tossing her hair and making those three point model turns they’d been teaching us. And that’s when it hit me. This was no “Girl, you look good” reunion. We were contestants,

competitors. All that work, all those stitches and icepacks and boneless skinless chicken and someone was still going to lose. On national television. Poor, poor, *poor* thing.

I looked down at my pedicured toes sticking out of their rhinestone strappy sandals. You could still see the scar on my instep where my sister ran over it with her bike. And then, my stomach began to feel queasy...

Okay, so I didn't win. And yes, the *Millennium Makeover* people had to go to a quick commercial so they could Shop Vac the carpet, but like I said, I didn't plan it that way.

As far as I'm concerned, the experience wasn't a total loss. I got the boob job and the clear line braces and my consolation package included a lifetime supply of yogurt which I discovered is pretty tasty if you toss in a few nuts and chocolate chips.

Callista's still a little angry, but she did invite me to her house this weekend for her fabulous Fourth of July barbecue. She's been fretting over this shindig for weeks, cooking and cleaning and searching for just the right Capri pants. Thomas John, her tight pants husband, told me all about it when we were working out on the treadmills at the gym last night. He seems to spend an awful lot of time there these days, running and lifting, sitting in the steam room, watching the big black overhead clock.

Poor, poor thing.

Susan Murphy has been a columnist for the *Over the Mountain Journal in Birmingham* for 16 years. Her book, *MAD DOG MOM*, won the 1998 *Small Press Award for Humor*. Her work has also appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *The Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, *The Birmingham News*, and *Roux Magazine*.

PANEL 53W, LINE 004

Wendy W. Cleveland

When we graduated from high school
you wanted to be a hero
but you hit a land mine
and broke into a thousand pieces,
American stars studding a rice paddy
half a world away.

Yours was my first funeral
the class of '66 crushed into pews
wondering why,
then outside twenty-one shots
echoed in a line of pines
like dynamite sticks woven to bamboo.
In the light breeze of a July morning
we listened to bagpipes fading Taps
and watched the Lt. lay a folded flag
in your mother's lap,
grief's consolation prize.

Thirty-four years later
I finally walk the wall
with a silent crowd of strangers,
stare through my reflection
until I find your name.
The *Jr.* catches in my throat
as I remember chemistry class
when you sat behind me

scratching your name on my back
to escape the boredom of atomic mass.

It is July and the sun burns my back
but stone cools the white lily I lay
next to flags and photos and dented dog tags.
Feeling your fingers spelling my back,
I press a child's crayon along indentations of letters
until you are resurrected in muted cerulean.

Wendy W. Cleveland has an MST-English from the University of New Hampshire. In 2004 she retired after thirty years of high school teaching in Ithaca, NY, and moved to Auburn, Alabama, where she is now an academic aide for the Auburn University Athletic Department and a member of the Auburn Writers' Association. Her poems have appeared in Yankee Magazine, The Ithaca Women's Anthology, Maelstrom, Midwest Poetry Review, and Fauquier Poetry Journal (Editor's Choice Award).

THE BRIDGE TENDER, EXTRAORDINAIRE

Reilly Maginn

The intercoastal waterway along the east Florida coast is replete with drawbridges; many requiring openings for taller sailboats. The captain of the boat requests an opening as he approaches a bridge down while automobile traffic is using the roadway. . And the bridge tender is busy trying to give automobile and sailboat traffic equal access to the roadway and waterway respectively.

Our sailboat approached a drawbridge and we requested, with the VHF radio on Ch. 13, an opening of the bridge. It was four PM and road traffic was beginning to build. We idled in front of the closed bridge for a few minutes. The bridge tender finally replied, after an inordinate delay, to our opening request with a surly “keep you shirt on.” We continued to wait; motor idling for what seemed an eternity. More time passed. A repeated request drew only silence. Finally my wife grabbed the VHF radio and called for the bridge tender.

“Go ahead, whadda ya want?”

“Listen here, you rude fellow. We’re waiting patiently for an opening and all we get is rude commentary from you. Who is your supervisor and how can we talk to him?” She was mad.

In a moment, an exasperated male voice replied in slow measured cadence,

“Madam, I have no superiors and in fact, I have darned few equals. The bridge will open soon.”

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“Madam, I have no superiors and in fact, I have darned few equals. The bridge will open soon.”

Dr. Reilly Maginn is a retired surgeon, a surgical outreach physician who has spent the last fifteen years on the islands in the South Pacific. With hundreds of stories to tell he has published a multitude of short stories in Birmingham Arts Journal, Jubilee Breeze, Daphne City Magazine, Gulf Coast Newspapers, ALALITCOM, Birds and Blooms, This, That and the Other,

Fairhope City magazine, Tennessee Mountain Writers Anthology *and* Cruising World. *He hopes to live long enough to finish writing and revising his novel, TSUNAMI.*

SUN AND MOON (FRENCH SONNET)

Jerri Hardesty

The world, upon its axis, slowly turns,
Rolling backwards 'round where sunshine burns.

It shows its blue-green face and tips its cap
To sun and moon, respectively, and learns
Their secrets in the interstitial gap.

The mountain tops and oceans lean to hear
The juicy gossip from the whispering wind,
That on some special day, some special year,
The band of grey between the two will thin

And bring the sun and moon together close,
Like lovers from each other's touch too long,
To quench their lovesick fever in one dose.

Eclipse is such a rare and lovely sight
When sun and moon in dark and light unite.

Jerri Hardesty lives in the woods of Alabama with her husband, Kirk, and too many animals. Through her company, New Dawn Unlimited, Inc., they focus on poetry publishing, production, performance, promotion, preservation, and education. They publish the quarterly, "Alternative Harmonies" Literary and Arts Magazine, the "NDU Presents..." chapbook and anthology series,

and the "NDU Poet's Access" chapbook series, as well as organizing live poetry events in Alabama, and also providing poetry websites, such as www.NewDawnUnlimited.com, www.PoetrySlam.net, and the local calendar page, www.AlabamaPoetry.com.

A HARD FALL

Matthew Johnson

Rain.

Incessant pitter patter, heavy and fat.

The sheer volume of the precipitant sounded behind all of the quickened plips and plops like wet thunder on the roof. Countless drops collided with every square inch of land countywide. What had started many days ago as a slow stuttering shower had turned into an onslaught of water; the individual drops had become streams like points become a line.

It seemed now that the rain was washing color from the world. Saturation was so complete that hard ground had turned to wet dough and the trees were bowing with sagging canopies - an abhorrent sloughing off of a worldly grime, and it had caught people by surprise.

Puddles born from the barn roof's runoff grew like watery lesions at his feet. Terry Joyce, fifty-four years old, observed the day in mostly grays and whites from his spot in the wide doorway, as if watching a bad television reception overtake what once had been. The scene worked on him hypnotically, with minutes at a time lost in little cosmic creases unobserved. He wore an old pair of jeans and a new pair of galoshes with caution-yellow stripes around the sole. The hood of his knee-length raincoat covered his head. He tossed another cigarette butt into one of the puddles. It took float in its little pool, bobbing about furiously under the beating streams of water. He watched all of his discarded smoked-up ends jostle around together. Almost out of smokes, he was almost out of patience with the rain. Unconsciously, his lip curled betraying his growing intolerance.

In the same outfit, Terry stood here yesterday and the day before waiting for the rain to let up. This deluge of unprecedented persistence had begun to weigh on his inner need for some sunshine and quiet. His thin disheveled hair was silvery, unwashed and flattened to his scalp, and there seemed to be no getting rid of a sticky film that covered most of him. Slapping a handkerchief on the back of his neck, he pulled it across trying to take all the film off in one swipe, even if it meant taking his skin with it.

The barn was dark still with both ends wide open. Just out of the rain, he leaned against the jam of the barn's broad opening, wide enough for seven horses to stand abreast. But there were no more horses, hadn't been for some time. His dog lay curled up dead in a plastic bag inside a burlap sack at his feet.

Terry nudged the bag a little with his foot as if to get its attention.

"Bitch" he said quietly. "Bessa, you damn dog. Now who'll take care of me? That didn't occur to you, did it?"

He looked out into the rain again and across the field. Rain didn't usually deter him from getting outside, but this was no usual circumstance. There was no room in the freezer for Bessa; she had to be buried reasonably soon. Come night time, it would be three days since she died.

For generations the Joyce family owned dogs, good dogs with intelligent countenance and displays of loyalty. On Christmas Day there were always cards signed 'from' one of the dogs or another, usually attached to a small gift, the practical ones, an electric razor or package of socks. The dogs were handsomely named too: Vaughn, Lonesome-Rome, Hughes, Rosa. Names of character, Terry's dad once said, names that in the end would command attention on a gravestone.

Terry found dogs part of very important habits, like his morning walk on the roads that stretched out and surrounded the farm. The dogs would always be just in front of him turning back occasionally to be sure of his presence.

There had even been photo albums made. Later, when his wife left, he discovered that the albums had gone with her. It still confused him why she took them. (Who would believe that they should belong to her?) Terry figured his wife knew she was wrong for it. But such was what they had built of their relationship over the last fifteen years of marriage.

He lit another cigarette, pulling the hood of the raincoat off his head. More of the grime tightened the pores above his eyes. Now he was sweating. He took to it with the handkerchief and felt a little better. To hell with it, he figured in a sudden burst of purpose, this time sucking on the cigarette as if it might be his last, and then exhaling through tight lips. Thick white streams of smoke went out into the rain.

"I'll get her into the ground and come back and have some soup," he murmured. He should tell the girls about Bessa and they can mark the grave when they come to visit next week.

Another cigarette butt dropped. Terry put the coat's hood on again, grabbed the burlap sack by its knot and pulled it up into his arms. He stepped out into the wet bombardment and hunched over as if it mattered, heading for the back of the field. Away from the wetness and the sound of heavy splattering on his plastic raincoat, he bent into himself further, something like a snail that retreats inward in moments when it cannot exist in the wider world.

He walked awkwardly in the mud the entire length of the field until he came to the hedge that marked its end. A little tool shed stood in the midst of the hedge separating his field from a small clearing that since his grandfather's time had been used to bury the family pets. With Bessa kept in one arm, Terry took a shovel from the small building, (a converted outhouse), and pushed through the hedge into the cemetery.

Everything seemed more difficult because of the rain and the treacherously soft ground that swallowed one's shoes. In higher than usual steps, he made his way through the mud to a predetermined spot. Water coming off his coat's hood, dripping into his eyes and turning his vision sort of syrupy, blurred his surroundings. He questioned his place for a moment and then decided he was correct. Just out from beneath an ever-wildly growing rose bush, Terry set Bessa into the mud.

He did not begin to dig immediately. A strange fatigue seized Terry and momentarily took him elsewhere in his mind. The rain flowed over him. He allowed the shovel to take a little of his weight. Flashes of his family shuffled back and forth in his mind, none of them staying very long. He envisioned then a box of these mental photographs being closed and slid beneath a bed - put away, maybe to forget. Standing there, Terry felt an end to something so long running and that Bessa somehow had been the worst by being the last to leave him.

...

For another afternoon after he put Bessa in the ground, it rained with the persistence of the previous days. Terry had come to believe there was an avenging quality to the storm. He had decided to stop cursing nature to see if it might help. From the window of his office in the attic of the house, he directed his frustration instead toward a newfound problem.

In his hand he held a small red survey flag attached to the end of a thin metal rod. He looked out toward the cemetery where generations of memories and headstones gave the small patch of land purpose and meaning. Twirling the small flag between his fingers, he still suffered

confusion over why Mrs. Flatt would sell her land, and why on God's green earth his family's cemetery would be going with it. A recent survey, the first in over a hundred years, had discovered that the Flatts' property extended almost entirely into the cemetery used by the Joyce family. What unknown and forgotten deal had been garnered between old neighbors in the past to create this horrible discrepancy of the moment? It seemed that any day now the roof would be removed like a lid and all the walls of the house might fall away, leaving him scrambling for the box of memories his mind had placed away.

Mr. Weeks from the county zoning board had sounded sympathetic but discouraged over the phone concerning the outcome of the survey. "There is, unfortunately, no clause on the books allowing you to rightfully claim the land. Though I do see it your way, Terry."

For several afternoons he sat at his desk and despaired over the future of the property that joined his. The land would be parceled for a development of new homes. The developer, a Mr. Bradley, didn't even need a variance to begin; the plans were suited to each and every code. During his discussion with Mr. Weeks, Terry discovered that in the community, the battle was merely over what the houses should look like: the front porches should be wider, and the roof lines should vary from house to house.

Mrs. Flatt was already using the revenue from the sale of the land to fund her care in an assisted living community out of state. Terry had not even been aware she had moved. This sense of unknowing and rapid change at his doorstep sent him searching through a fog for memories from the recent months. (What exactly had he been doing? What sort of torpor had he fallen into?)

The man struggled even to find a memory where he had left the farm. He did remember his wife leaving the farm, moving out actually, and then afterward that he had slept for some days.

Terry stepped out from behind his desk thinking of Mr. Bradley in his truck moving haughtily over the bought property. Standing at the window of his office, he then remembered one of the long naps he took: He had laid twisted in bed, awake, and heard the sound of the two-thirty train in the distance. Cold and apathetic there, Terry was stock-still like a steel rail. He remembered holding this image in his mind (serving many times in his life as the undisturbed, unthreatening path for the progress of others). Clouds of warm breath collected in the nest of

covers around his head, a little world he was keeping to. Extending no further than the edges of his face, this world was inhabited by nothing more than his thoughts that filled the tiny space - danger waited somewhere else, but relentless, unmerciful objectivity also waited and seized him with fear. The nasal howl of the train came and went again and he felt the time go with the train and more time take its place. Why move? Defrosted dreams were at play. For all that was out there, it was a good day to die. For all that he knew, he wanted to, for all the wrong reasons.

Days of this type of thinking sabotaged his motions, and disorder replaced routine. Then the storm came.

He remembered a fight over the phone with his oldest daughter, and his youngest one saying she might be able to visit in a few weeks.

Then Bessa died.

Still at the window, he looked at the edge of the field where the cemetery began. He recalled his wife going to great trouble to grow roses around the perimeter, her coming in with dirty knees and complaining how nothing seemed to last more than a year out there. Somewhere along the way, Terry and his wife had just left each other alone to age, each a pea in their separate pods with passion dead on the vine. They survived this way for so long because they carefully and thoroughly lied to one another. So, the end came assuredly when they began to speak truthfully of their matters.

He moved his hand to the back of his neck massaging the tension in it. Acne scars potted and roughened the surface. It made him feel old: the memory of skin. It stays with you, the rough seas of youth; in his case, a history that marked him. At fifty-four standing alone in the house, he felt his insides bloom with the similar self-pity he knew from adolescence planted then and now by loss and rejection.

Outside, a dry wind replaced the rain and the clouds began to move off. Terry watched them go slowly along the same line where the furthest ridge ran, moving east. Not yet out of his own fog, he turned from the window angry.

...

When he stepped up into his truck, Terry was thinking of the argument he had with his oldest daughter on the phone. She had been brutally arrogant, saying something about how his

preoccupation with things gave mom the right to discover life without him. What should he expect? He began to remember more, weeks back, months back, specific years, as he drove.

He turned onto Highway 19 and looked at the address again on the ripped corner of envelope: Bradley Contracting Inc., 1430 Himmley Lane. Terry had a flood of moments, good moments, with his mother and father and grandparents on the farm with the horses and the dogs, all of the memories clambering for attention, and in his clarity it was hard to choose one moment over the others.

He passed the meat processing plant along the highway, smelling the salt and seeing the steam rise from the stacks. He realized none of the memories came in any order.

When he turned onto Industrial Boulevard, he recalled himself and his wife coming suspiciously from out of the barn and meeting the wild gaze of their two young daughters, each with a German Shepherd at their side and as tall as the girls.

He waited at the light to turn left onto Himmley Lane and remembered as a child watching his grandfather laugh heartedly at Sassy and Vaughn keeping horses in line out at field and his father having to call them off with great agitation. His wife had loved that life when they met, he also recalled.

Terry's box of mental photographs was now flung wide open. So wide that he probably couldn't describe Mr. Bradley's appearance when he approached the developer at his truck in the parking lot of Bradley Inc. (Perhaps the man was on his way to Mrs. Flatt's property again). When Terry finally stood cold and rigid above the prostrated body, he saw only his girls dressed up in Sunday outfits except for muddy boots, standing and crying as he placed Lonesome-Rome in her grave. And after coming home and finding an ever-wildly growing rose bush and digging there the largest of holes in the entire cemetery, he saw his daughter (now grown) treading toward him across the field and wondered if he looked dirtier than a man would who had just buried a dog.

He would have to say it was Bessa, of course.

Matthew Johnson is a native of Birmingham, Alabama. He currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia, and teaches history to eighth graders. Writing is something that he's come back to time and

again for many years because inside he has to. Matthew dreads its inconsistency but truly loves its spontaneity.

A WOLF'S TALE

Joan Dawson

“Wolf! Wolf!” the little boy cried,
But no one believed him; they knew that he lied.
“He huffed and he puffed and he blew the house down!
I’m telling the Truth! It fell to the ground.
His teeth were enormous and so were his eyes.”
But nobody listened.....just more of his lies.

The wolf dressed in sheep’s clothing,
and he charmed Riding Hood.
She was going to Grandma’s
little house in the wood.
Hood didn’t know that the house had blown down
or that Grandma had taken three pigs into town.

Wait! A sheep has no hair on its chinny, chin, chin.....
Big teeth, pointed ears — truth slowly sank in.
Red Riding Hood gave a bloodcurdling yell
that was heard by three hunters and Peter as well.

They marched in formation – the hunters and Pete,
along with a cat, duck, and bird. It was sweet.
They captured the wolf and paraded through town.
“I’ll huff and I’ll puff if you don’t put me down!”
But they paid no attention and carried him high.
The three pigs and Grandma waved as he passed by.

The story is ending - anon and forsooth,

The boy who cried wolf was telling the truth!

(How many wolf tales do you recognize in this poem?)

Joan Dawson wrote letters and diary entries as a child and teenager. Later, as a fourth grade teacher in Leeds, Alabama, Joan introduced her students to writing workshop, and they shared and celebrated stories and poems. Now retired, Joan currently works as the co-director of an elementary science project at UAB. Her everyday writing consists of grant proposals, reports, and email messages. She continues to write poetry, because she is encouraged by the Leeds Arts Council poetry group. Joan is a pianist and a chorus/choir member. She and her poet husband, Frank, live in a little cabin on the Cahaba River.

SALVATION

Larry Wilson

“I’m dying.” Jackson Callanan, Jack to his friends, said softly to himself as he drove away from the hospital and out of the city to the north. “I always thought it would happen in a more romantic way; something with flames and noise and nobleness.” But then, he wondered, could there ever be anything romantic about dying?

“Liver cancer,” the doctor had said. “You’ve got thirty days, more or less. There is nothing we can do. The pain will be intense but we can control it with medication. Hospice would make the final days easier.” Jack wasn’t really surprised. So many of them had died from it, those who’d flown and handled agent orange in Viet Nam.

Five miles after the city’s stone and glass gave way to the green of farm land he turned off the highway onto a dirt road that led to a small airport. It wasn’t much, just a few hangers lining a grass runway with an orange windsock swaying in the breeze. He’d hoped for quiet today and seeing that all the hangar doors were closed he smiled. Only traffic noise from the road broke the stillness. There might be a better place in the world to get used to the idea of dying but he didn’t know where it could be.

Opening the door to his hangar he looked at the little plane whose brilliant silver and red paint seemed to glow in the morning light. It had first flown over fifty years before but he’d lovingly restored it piece by piece to better than new condition. Better than new, what a wonderful expression, too bad people couldn’t be restored he thought.

“I’d like to live my life over again, even the bad parts,” he said to the plane. “I guess no one is ever really ready to go are they? And who will you take up with when I’m gone? You know you’re nothing but a whore, you’ll fly for anybody who puts gas in your tank wouldn’t you? You won’t even miss me.”

Jack hadn’t flown the old plane in more than a year but he always kept it ready to fly and he still visited it almost every day. He sat alone with the plane, sometimes reading, often just thinking, and occasionally talking to it. Over the years it had evolved from a machine into a friend and confidant. Today he needed to be with a friend.

From a corner he retrieved a green plastic chair and carried it to the center by the plane's wooden propeller and sat down. The blue sky was broken only by a single white cloud off to the west and freshly mowed grass filled the air with a smell as comfortable as old slippers.

Thirty days to go and the pain was already excruciating. There's no reason to play this hand out, he thought, I'm going to end it quickly and painlessly. "How about a week from today?" He said to the plane, "that ought to give me enough time to get everything settled. Hell, I've never been big on goodbyes. I'm glad I've got you to talk to; you're my best friend."

Across the runway the windsock sagged straight down as the north breeze stopped completely. Traffic noise from the highway ceased and an eerie quiet settled over the airport. A white Mercedes Benz with dark tinted windows pulled up and parked in front of his hangar followed immediately by an old Chevy pickup. The Mercedes looked newer than any car he'd ever seen with paint so shiny it looked wet. The truck looked new too but it was 25 years old; Jack knew because he'd owned one just like it long ago.

A small black man wearing a white suit got out of the Mercedes. His pink shirt was unbuttoned nearly to his waist, several gold chains adorned his chest, and sandals with thin straps barely covered his bare feet. He approached the plane with little mincing steps, gently touched the edge of the propeller, and moving his hand loosely on his wrist said, "this sure is a fine looking plane Jackson, it suits a good looking man like you." Walking over to the other plastic chairs he brought two back and put one on each side of Jack. Pulling a handkerchief the same color as his shirt out of his jacket pocket he wiped the dust off one before sitting down.

"J," he called, "J, come join us and sit for a spell."

Jack sat in confusion as a woman slid out of the pickup. She was older than the man but strikingly beautiful. Jeans worn thin by years of wear wrapped her like pale blue paint and a T shirt, thin as gossamer, draped her chest. A peace symbol on a leather cord hung between her breasts. Walking to the other chair she sat down without a word. Her complexion was the color of coffee with cream, lighter than the man's, and she stood taller by several inches. A full lower lip gave her a pouting expression and one front tooth twisted ever so slightly. Tiny flaws that made her more sensual by denying perfection. Her eyes were so dark they seemed without color and Jack was gazing into them when the man spoke.

“Jackson baby, we came by to talk to you about this cancer thing.” His voice was high pitched and he had a slight lisp.

Jack turned, angry at the intrusion but felt his anger fade as he saw the look on the man’s face. It was a look of kindness, concern, and love – total love.

“This suicide thing, we don’t think it’s a good idea. We thought maybe we could talk you out of it.”

Jack stared at him in silence. There was something about this strange little man that was familiar.

Then the woman spoke, her voice low and soothing, the most sensual voice he’d ever heard. “Jack, everyone has only so much time on earth and you shouldn’t waste a minute of it. Especially someone like you.”

It was the way she said it, “especially someone like you,” with the emphasis on “you.” Feeling a sudden flush of warmth he turned back and looked at her carefully. Like the man, he was sure he had never seen her before yet she was familiar. The thin T shirt hugged her body and the peace symbol had the polished luminescence of old silver; its leather thong, worn thin and smooth, matched the color of her skin.

“It was a stupid war. You know that, you were there.” She said when she saw him looking at the medallion.

“I did what I had to do,” Jack said, suddenly tired and sad. “Who are you two? What do you want?”

“We’re here because of you Jackson, a good man who has no God,” the man said. “Someone who decided not to believe and still lived his life with kindness. You did what you had to do, just as you said, but without evil intent. You also did good things because you thought it was the right thing to do. I wish all my believers lived as well. Who am I? I’m Jesus.” With that he held his hands out palms first; they were terribly scared. Jack looked down and through the thin sandal straps the scars on his feet were wide and angry looking.

“These scars have become a calling card for me,” he continued, “somehow people believe when they see the scars.”

“You? You want me to believe you’re the Christian Jesus? Come on.” Jack smiled suddenly enjoying the conversation. “I’ve got a crazy friend who swears she walked with you

for 30 days and you looked just like your pictures, a white guy with long brown hair and blue eyes.”

Jesus laughed, more a high pitched giggle than a laugh. “Yes, Alice wanted me to look like that. I usually appear as people want me to but since you don’t believe I just used the body I had originally. Alice is a nice lady, a little dense but nice. Now you’re a bright guy and know better than to think a white boy was born in Judea even from a virgin birth.”

“Well I’ll be damned,” Jack said. “If you’re Jesus I want to tell you that some of your story doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I know. Stories get twisted through the years as people tell them over and over. But it’s me, the real Jesus, sitting right here talking to you.”

Jack turned to the woman who was sitting quietly on his other side. “And who are you?”

“Surely you know who I am. The J is for Jezebel. I’m Satan, the other one you don’t believe in.”

“Satan a woman? Wonderful,” Jack laughed, “you’re always pictured as a man with horns and a tail. I might have believed if they’d told me Satan was a beautiful woman.”

“They told you, you didn’t listen. I was the most beautiful of God’s angels before I fell from grace. How could I have been a man?”

“Good Lord,” Jack said and then chuckled, “Maybe I’d better stop saying that. Here you are in my hangar. Jesus, a gay, black guy and Satan, a beautiful woman wearing a peace symbol. Jesus, no wonder you were able to resist temptation for those forty days out in the desert with Satan. And that story in John, about the disciple you loved, at the party. Was that really true?”

Jesus winced, “Oh, I will never live that down. I don’t know why they had to put that in the bible. But it is true, John was my main man and one good looking dude. To the Father sexual orientation means nothing. I think he made me gay as a joke, he really does have a strange sense of humor at times.

However, enough of that, lets get down to business. Once in a while, J and I appear to people that interest us and test them. It’s much like Job; we tested his faith but we’re here to test your lack of faith. We want you to believe and live out your last 30 days, no more, no less, with one of us.

If you accept me as your savior I will be with you for those 30 days. I'll be by your side to help you tolerate the pain without medication and if you remain firm in your faith you will go to be with the Father and live in paradise forever."

"You're offering me paradise for eternity in return for 30 days of faith? Why? I've spent my whole life not believing in you."

"Because I love you," Jesus replied, "and I want to give a really good man, who doesn't believe, a second chance. Take my hand and let me show you what paradise is like."

Jack took his scared hand and was transported into a state of total happiness. There was no pain or sorrow, just peace and total understanding. Never had he felt such joy. Then Jesus let go of his hand and the vision was gone.

Jack turned to J and said, "What can you possibly offer to compete with this?"

"I will give you health and strength for your last 30 days. You can live out your life in any way you want. Give me your hand."

Jack took her hand and the pain was gone. His body felt young again, strong and healthy. His eyes cleared and he could see with astounding clarity. He knew he was able to make love again, able to fly again. All the great things he had experienced in life could be relived.

"And what happens after 30 days?"

"Nothing," she answered, "after 30 days there is nothing for you ever again. You see that's what hell is, not fire and brimstone, just nothing. I'll show you." Her hand tightened and he experienced it. Total blackness, a world devoid of sensations neither hot nor cold, just pure nothingness. Her hand relaxed its grip and she moved her face close to his. "And then, there is me, I'll be with you for those 30 days." Jack closed his eyes as she kissed him gently and he sensed what 30 days with Satan would be like. The warmth of her skin, the smell and the taste of the ultimate woman. Then, her lips left his and the pain and weakness returned.

Jack opened his eyes and they were standing outside the hangar. "You just have to believe," Jesus said, "and you can come with me and have eternal life."

"Or," J said, "you can come with me and live, really live, for thirty days." She smiled and they both walked away. The devil in faded blue jeans and Jesus in a white suit.

Jack followed and stood between the car and the pickup. The Mercedes was on the left and Jesus got in and started the engine. You could barely hear it running as he opened the passenger's door for Jack and leaned over the pink leather seats.

"I love cars," Jesus said, "especially these Mercedes. The German people really tested my love with that holocaust business but they do make great cars. Hop in, let's get started on eternity."

J's truck started with the snarl of dual exhausts and Jack looked over at her. The intermingling of a few gray strands in her black hair and the lines around her eyes added distinction to her face and she radiated sensuality and power. She ran her tongue over her lips making them glisten in the sun and slid over just far enough for him to sit down and said, "Why don't you drive?"

Jack looked at Jesus and then at J. Everlasting life pitted against the essence of life. All he had to do was believe. Turning, he walked slowly back to the hangar and felt the north breeze pick up again. When he looked back they were gone.

I wonder if delusions are normal he thought, I'd better check with the doctor. If I start believing these hallucinations I might lose the ability to end this life on my terms.

Exhaustion swept over him like a wave as he carried the three chairs, one at a time, over and stacked them in the corner. Then, after taking a last fond look at the plane, he closed the hangar door.

Larry Wilson is currently retired and live on the bluffs overlooking Montgomery in Wetumpka, Alabama . Larry is a member or the Alabama Writers' Conclave and member and past president of Montgomery Creative Writers. He writes primarily short fiction and, when sufficiently depressed, poetry. Also, Larry currently has a half-finished draft of a novel gathering dust. Larry's other bad habits include riding motorcycles, flying, and travel.

ALABAMA WRITERS' CONCLAVE

2006 WINNERS LIST

SHORT FICTION (1000 words)

1	Kory Wells	<i>Single Measure</i>	Murfreesboro, TN
2	Rebecca F. Chaney	<i>Quick Study</i>	Meridian, MS
3	Laura Loomis	<i>Tested</i>	Pittsburg, CA
4	Annell Gordon	<i>The Runner</i>	Grove Hill, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

Jean Cavrell	<i>Dialogue</i>	Sleepy Hollow, NY
Suzanne Fleet	<i>Seventeen Minutes</i>	Nashville, TN
Gordon Gerick	<i>The Judge</i>	Gulf Shores, AL
Stacy Jones	<i>Ball of Fire</i>	Memphis, TN

FICTION (2500 words)

1	Kristina Kubiszyn Allen	<i>Fools</i>	Birmingham, AL
2	Susan Murphy	<i>Poor Thing</i>	Birmingham, AL
3	Larry Wilson	<i>Salvation</i>	Wetumpka, AL
4	Matthew C. Johnson	<i>A Hard Fall</i>	Clarkston, GA

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

Deborah Ann Cidboy	<i>The Flame</i>	Jefferson, GA
Shawn Jacobsen	<i>Going Home</i>	Auburn, AL
Stacy Jones	<i>Ain't That a Shame</i>	Memphis, TN
Marian L. Lewis	<i>Skeleton Pool</i>	Owens Cross Rds., AL

NONFICTION

1	Lisa Ohlen Harris	<i>History in her Hair</i>	Arlington, TX
2	Reilly Maginn	<i>Permission</i>	Daphne, AL
3	Judy Lee Green	<i>The Virgin Whore</i>	Murfreesboro, TN
4	Sonja Herbert	<i>The Van</i>	Hillsboro, OR

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

Rebecca K. Brooks	<i>The Third Window</i>	Oak Ridge, TN
Jessica DeHart	<i>Heaven</i>	Atlanta, GA
Susan Murphy	<i>Time is More than Money</i>	Birmingham, AL

Stephen M. Outten *Swimming in Mainstream* Union City, TN

FREE VERSE POETRY

- 1 David B. Fuller, Jr. *I Am* Spanish Fort, AL
- 2 Wendy W. Cleveland *Panel 53W, Line 004* Auburn, AL
- 3 E. R. Carlin *Carson McCullers in the Tenth Grade, 1932*
Cazenovia, NY
- 4 Leah J. Prewitt *Habitat* Auburn, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Suzanne Coker | <i>Translation</i> | Helena, AL |
| Tracy Koretsky | <i>Yahrzeit</i> | Berkeley, CA |
| Teresa K. Thorne | <i>The South</i> | Springville, AL |
| Kory Wells | <i>Acquired Taste</i> | Murfreesboro, TN |

TRADITIONAL POETRY

- 1 Allison Joseph *Hospice: Retort to Dylan* Carbondale, IL
- 2 Jerri Hardesty *Sun and Moon* Brierfield, AL
- 3 Lynn Veach Sadler *When Irish Eyes Aren't Smiling: A
Villanelle for Bernardo O'Higgins* Sanford, NC
- 4 Sylvia Woods *Changes* Oak Ridge, TN

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

- | | | |
|--------------------|---|-----------------|
| Ryan G. Van Cleave | <i>His Literature Student: A Sonnet</i> | Clemson, SC |
| Carol C. Jackson | <i>Equinox High</i> | Piney Flats, TN |
| Daniel Leonard | <i>Blue Snake</i> | Oak Ridge, TN |

JUVENILE FICTION

- 1 Daniel Leonard *Only One Bug* Oak Ridge, TN
- 2 Sherry Kughn *The Gift of the Kaleidoscope* Anniston, AL
- 3 Nancy Tupper Ling *The Boy by the Sea* Walpole, MA
- 4 Connie Jordan Green *Getting Even* Lenoir City, TN

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Ramey Channell | <i>Big Team</i> | Leeds, AL |
| Glenda Harbison | <i>In 1863</i> | Cullman, AL |

Randi Lynn Mrvos *Brooke and the Ladies of Bath* Lexington, KY

HUMOR

- 1 Larry Wilson *Humiliation at Murphy's Dome* Wetumpka, AL
- 2 Reilly Maginn *Bridge Tender* Daphne, AL
- 3 Kari Kampakis *Tales of a Ponytail Mom* Birmingham, AL
- 4 Joan Dawson *A Wolf's Tale* Birmingham, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (in alphabetical order):

Jordan Fogal *Fading Fast* Houston, TX
Laura Loomis *The Hermes Springer Show* Pittsburg, CA
Larry Williamson *Good Genes* Tallassee, AL
G. Robert Zambs *Mrs. Santa Claus Saves Christmas* Fairhope, AL