

# ALALITCOM

*Selected Works from Alabama Writers' Conclave  
2007 Literary Competition*

# ALALITCOM

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# INTRODUCTION

Alabama Writers' Conclave is proud to present the second annual issue of ALALITCOM on the web: [www.alalit.com](http://www.alalit.com) . All money winners in the 2007 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. Although some writers had already placed their winning pieces elsewhere , 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 Lynn Baker for the use of her photo on the cover of this journal – each story and poem presented here shimmers with its own light. Enjoy!

Irene Latham  
Editor

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# AN INVOCATION

*for artist Dixie Dugan*

**Jane Sasser**

I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Daybreak bloomed blue as chicory,  
deep as abandoned wells,  
and whispered in salty gusts  
along the dunes.

She woke to the call:  
Gullah women singing hymns  
of praise, sailboats bobbing  
along the waves, magnolia petals  
in afternoon light. She took up  
her brush. Pigtailed girls  
leaned into life, glasses waited  
for wine, old barns  
dissolved into red dirt.  
She probed the tender  
eye of things, light-reflection  
of unvoiced dreams, the space  
at the edge of change.  
Already she knew there is never  
enough time, each breath  
is a bright beginning,  
and life sings  
in backwater eddies  
and ordinary moments.  
Her hands score stories  
we feel as hallelujahs,  
echo as prayers:  
amen, amen, amen.

---

*Jane Sasser's work has appeared in various journals including The Atlanta Review, The North American Review, and others. A high school teacher of literature and creative writing, she lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.*

# WAITING IN THE NOOSE

**Stacy Jones**

The taste of salt welled up in his throat. It wasn't the sort of salt he remembered as a boy, sprinkled on cantaloupes or honeydew in the ripe of summer. It was a vile taste, the sort that comes before a body wretches to vomit. All around him the aroma of fresh cut cypress and oak rose up. He flared his nostrils so he could smell it better, as though by doing so he might wish himself away from this place. He knew too soon the noose would tighten around his neck and it would be over. What then? He didn't want to think about it. He had never seen a man hanged, but his cousin had once told a story about a man whose eyes popped out of his skull, bulging at the crowd as if to mock them the moment the rope was raised up and his body went limp.

Maybe he wouldn't die. Could that be? He hadn't meant to kill the man who had slept with the only sister he had known from birth, but he had. The knife smoothed across his stubbly throat as easy as if it might have been slicing butter. Killing a man in his sleep had been easy. He never woke. Feeling the noose around his own neck was hard. He wanted to go to sleep and never wake.

He heard the banter of men below, but he could not make out all they were saying as he stood there on the scaffold waiting. He knew standing there for hours in public view was as much a part of the punishment as the final deed. He listened to the crowd and waited for the noose to rise.

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**Stacy Jones** earned a master's degree in poetry at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where she taught as an instructor of English for five years. She is currently pursuing a master of fine arts degree in fiction at the University of Memphis, working on a novel as her thesis. She hopes she completes her novel before the noose rises or the scaffold drops.

# THE MAN'S ANGELS

**Van Newell**

Eyes still ahead on the road, he reaches under his decaying varsity football jacket on the passenger seat just to make sure that it was still there, nervous, scared of going to hell. Imagines his guardian angels are laughing at this. He know, he knows. Who drives over in a Kia to kill someone? Who named Peter Lovingood kills anything?

Hasn't handled a gun since spring break when he was sixteen and that was a shotgun and that was a turkey. The Rio, burnt orange, gotten out of a repo auction through a friend, comes to a stoplight. The jacket is lifted up, the glock is still there, model eleven the guy said, a half-hour to process your name from the FBI database after that you're good to go. Extra full-metal jacket lays next to it. Just need one shot to kill him I'm so out of practice didn't even bother taking it to the range just had to do it now gonna take four shots might shoot him in each extremity first let him go with some pain for the pain of ripping Tara's stuff down there I can't even call it by the doctor term his deformed sperm swimming upstream into her trying in vain to incubate another bastard psychopath. He lays his head down on the steering wheel. Who's the psychopath now?

Waits at the light and looks at the directions to the house that he printed off from the library's computer after going next door and getting what he needed at the Megan's Law computer at the station. He has not told Matt or Steph and certainly not Tara. No chance for them to get even a hint of a charge of



conspiracy.

He imagines the man, now released out of that halfway house, refilling sodas, scooping up fries and sliding them into the paper pouches at his job, going home at night to live with his mother, jerking off in the same bed as when he was fifteen. As he drives, Peter holds the sheet of paper against the vinyl steering wheel with a thumb and scans it and it says the man is only five feet two. Peter looks up and stands on the brakes. A boy, no shirt, no shoes, is eyes-in-the-headlights, holding his push scooter. The car jolts back from the bad brakes and worn shocks. Reality sets back into the boy and he pushes off with one leg towards a driveway, and stops and wings the scooter around to face him. "Sorry," he mouths to the boy through the car door window.

And Peter remembers why he has this gun, so this boy won't ever be bothered, molested, they mean the same in the dictionary and they mean the same for him and he speeds up, the car's four cylinders have a hundred and twenty and change in mileage it does the best it can to accommodate him.

And four blocks of kudzu-choked fences and a drug store and he was there parked on the right side of the street seven five three Bricker street the address he can't breathe. He does not want to think, does not want the chance of his mind, soul, spirit, choose your poison, being able to talk himself out of doing it. Peter takes the gun and the jacket out of the car and hides the glock under his jacket. He walks quickly up towards the house and in the frontyard notices an icon of a saint unrecognizable and unknown to him and he looks at it as he walks by but by then he is at the door and he has knocked before he even

realizes it himself and it is going too fast for him it played so slowly in his head.

Another man opens the door, shaving cream still on his face, beams, a man who likes to meet new people.

“Hello,” the smile says.

“Is he here,” he asks.

The smile drops into a swallow. “What do you want?”

He is a priest and Peter looks only at his collar when he asks where he is. He takes his jacket and throws it on the carpet to reveal what is underneath.

“You don’t need to do this,” the priest breathes, trying to calm himself down.

“Sit on the ground Indian-style, hands underneath your legs. Don’t move.”

The priest complies. “I have a family,” he says. “Don’t hurt them.”

“Don’t lie, your kind don’t have wives.”

But it is a small house and the first bedroom he comes to has a baby’s crib and to the right a woman, Gallic nose, dark hair pulled back, holds an infant, obviously adopted, in a rocking chair. She is surprised to see him then she sees the gun and her eyes grow larger even larger than the boy’s did.

“What’s your name?”

“Melissa don’t hurt my baby.”

“I won’t hurt you or your baby. I’m protecting them.”

“You’re not protecting me by pointing that gun at me,” she says.

“Come out to the front.”

He walks backwards out of the bedroom to let her come into the living

room and she sees her husband and she sits next to him. He looks at them and they look back, like children staring up at their kindergarten teacher.

“Where is he,” Peter asks.

“You don’t have to do this, you don’t need to do this,” he replies.

Peter squats down and aims the gun away from them. “Let me tell you why I have to do this.” He points a finger at the baby. “It’s for your child’s sake.”

“Our child is fine,” she says. “Please put down the gun. Please please.”

“I’m trying to protect all children from him. From that guy who raped Tara.”

They say nothing in return and he stands up and tells them not to move and starts to look around the rest of the house opening the door to the bathroom slowly and another bedroom even slower. He is in there asleep taking a nap over the covers.

Flicks on the light. “Get up,” he yells.

An eye is opened, immediately the man rolls over and off the far side of the bed. The man eyes the window but knows it is not open.

Peter points the gun at him. And the man only breathes. Peter looks him up and down, the man is indeed short but seems to have aged since the Megan’s law photo perhaps prematurely. Curiosity.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty four.”

“Look old for thirty four.”

“Prison’ll do that.”

“Son. Please stop.”

Keeps the gun set on him, he turns ever so slightly and sees the priest, trying to work his magic, the disarming, understanding smile, the I have heard it all, believe me you will not surprise me.

“Can’t do that, father,” he says.

“Call me Peter,” the priest says.

“That’s my name,” he says. He sets his eyes back on the man. “That’s something Peter, me and you, you know. It’s like the angel and the devil on each shoulder, ying and yang and all that stuff.”

The priest says, “Why do you want to kill him, Peter?”

“Why? Why not? He raped my friend’s girl.”

“So shouldn’t your friend be doing this and not you?”

“He doesn’t know anything about this. I didn’t want him to know, I’ll be the one who’s willing to go to prison for killing him.”

“So you’re saying that you deserve to go to prison for killing Robert here?”

“No, yes, you’re trying to confuse me. You’re trying to stop me from doing this can’t let you do that Peter.”

He aims at a thigh, according to his plan, and shoots. He misses with the first shot and connects with the second and blood leaks out of the jeans and Robert falls down, agony. He bites his tongue from the pain and blood trickles onto the carpet.

“Stop, Peter, stop,” and the priest slides from behind Peter through the door post and stands in front of him but toward the side of the wall. “This won’t make you feel better.”

Peter knows that woman has probably called the cops by now from her cellphone and probably driving in some minivan fast as she can to the police station the same one where he got the man's address. He has to act quickly, he walks over to the side of the bed where the man lays. Peter thinks.

"What's your real name priest?"

"I saw your name on your jacket," the priest confessed. "I'll tell you my name if you answer my question afterwards?"

"Deal."

"My name is Linus."

"Like from the comics."

"Well that and he was the second pope. That statue out there is of him."

"You must tell that to all your house guests."

Linus takes a deep breath. "Peter look at me for just one second."

He obliges.

"I know, I think I know, why you're here. Why you're here instead of her father. Why you have to do this."

"I wasn't molested as a kid, if that's where you're going. This isn't some Freudian cathartic release."

"I know you weren't molested," says the priest. "I think I know you were the one who molested."

And Peter shoots the priest in the shoulder. An angry heart, swollen with pain, even Peter's, cannot kill the priest for telling the truth. He cannot even kill him, or Robert, anymore than he could kill himself for that would let him off too

easily, he, like Cain, has a punishment more than he can bear. He runs out of the room, the house, towards the Kia. He gets in and sits down but does not start the car. His hands are empty, he does not know what happened to the glock. He waits, he thinks, he imagines the angels laughing at him from up above. What kind of an idiot uses a Kia for a getaway car?

He gets out of the car. Does he hear sirens wail? The gun is laying in the frontyard. He sits down by it and shoots himself in each leg and in his right arm. It does no good, it does not make him feel better, failed reparations. He tosses the gun into some bushes and lays down and waits for the texas bubblegum machines to arrive. He starts blinking, he thinks it is from the loss of blood, but he is not bleeding as bad as he thinks he is.

Three hands grab him by his collar and he is dragged back into the house from behind. He leans back and sees Robert and Linus pulling him onto the carpet.

Linus winces and then says, "Penance can't exist unless there's grace."

They pull him, wide-eyed and crying into the hallway and pull him into the attic. Linus calls his wife. They do not answer the door when the police arrive. The three of them hide themselves in the attic behind a turn of the century dressing screen. The police find the gun on the grass and assume the man in question has fled on foot and give chase.

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***Van Newell*** writes from his home in Birmingham, Alabama.

# MELANCHOLIA

**Allison Joseph**

Much better than ordinary misery  
or clinical depression, melancholy  
comes robed in rose silk,  
glissando piano fingerings

accompanying her arrival,  
her visit the one you wait for  
long after bliss and bitterness  
have left, before resignation,

withdrawal. She shimmers,  
talks of cocktails and torch songs,  
hovers above you like a shroud,  
a cloak she shares with you only—

her now passenger, her equal.  
She's blues before the real blues come,  
erudite and sophisticated, queen  
of the soft focus lens, paper lantern.

She's a chameleon, a chanteuse,  
and you can't stop looking at wells  
of sorrow she calls eyes, blue shadows  
beneath. With her here, your songs

are that much deeper, arias too beautiful  
to be listless, sadness colored indigo  
and chartreuse, vermilion and verdigris.  
When she leaves, you loathe the flavorless

drone who replaces her, a temp worker  
on 9 to 5 payroll, no more shimmerings  
in indigo night, no more hazy visage  
staring back at you, mouthing your name.

---

**Allison Joseph** lives, writes and teaches in Carbondale, Illinois, where she's on the faculty at Southern Illinois University. Her books of poems include *In Every Seam*, *Soul Train*, and *Worldly Pleasures*. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Rock River Times*, *Gertrude: A Journal of Voice and Vision* and *The Litchfield Review*.

# **BIG TEAM, THE LITTLE TURTLE**

**Ramey Channell**

Dinah and her best friend, Tessie, ran across the field and down to the little creek. It was a beautiful March day, almost springtime. The sun was shining and the March wind blew, billowing the little girls' dresses and tousling their hair.

On the muddy creek-bank, the two friends picked up small stones to toss into the rippling water. The stones plopped into the creek with a thrilling SPLASH, and two robins flew up from the bushes near the water's edge.

"Oh, look! Look!" Tessie exclaimed, crouching near the water and pointing toward some large rocks just under the surface. "Turtles!" she yelled. "Baby turtles! Hundreds of them! Thousands of them!"

Dinah leaned over the water and smiled. The smell of the creek rose up to her, a smell of plant-life, mud, and creek water. In the water she saw a multitude of tiny dime-sized turtles, swimming all around the big rocks.

"They're so little," she said. "I've never seen such little-bitty turtles."

"They've just hatched," Tessie announced. "MILLIONS of them!"

Tessie hopped onto a large flat rock and plunged her hand into the water. "I'll catch some of them. I've always wanted a pet turtle!"

Dinah watched in awe as her friend scooped up handfuls of the tiny round creatures.

"I need something to put them in," Tessie complained. Then she quickly



began cramming the struggling turtles into the pockets of her fur-lined red jacket.

"Look at them," she screamed. "These are Red Bellied Turtles! I'm going to catch them ALL!"

"I want one, too," Dinah softly murmured, touching her friend's hand, wet and full of frantic little Red Bellies.

"NO!" screamed Tessie, jerking her hand away. "You don't know how to take care of them. I'm keeping them ALL!"

And she speedily scooped up every single little turtle she could spy, stuffed them into her coat pockets, and tore out running at top speed, away from the creek and across the field toward home.

Dinah glanced at the creek's edge, which now contained not one single solitary swimming turtle, then ran after her fleeing friend.

"Wait for me!" she called, running as fast as she could.

"NO!" Tessie hollered as she sped across the windy field toward a low weed-covered hill. "I've got to get home! I've got to find something to put these TURTLES in. You don't know ANYTHING about taking care of them," she yelled over her shoulder as she reached the top of the weedy little hill.

That's when Tessie stumbled over a clump of dirt and grass right at the top of the hill. She was moving at such an incredible speed that both feet flew out from under her, and she somersaulted through the air, head-over-heels and heels-over-head.

Dinah watched as her frantic friend completed a perfect airborne forward roll, baby turtles flying in all directions as they fell from her coat pockets. It was

an astonishing sight.

Finally, Tessie hit the ground with a loud WHUMPH!

"OH! OH!" she groaned, grabbing up escaped turtles left and right.

Scrambling around the dusty little hill, she retrieved every turtle and crammed them back into her pockets as fast as she could.

"Let me have one," Dinah pleaded. "I'll take care of it."

Tessie was poised to take off running again, but she hesitated and glanced at her friend.

"Oh, O.K.," she complained. "Here, you can have ONE. But it'll probably die. You don't know ANYTHING about taking care of turtles."

And she held out one teeny, tiny turtle between her thumb and forefinger, inspecting it as if she wanted to make sure it wasn't one she wanted to keep.

"There," she said.

Dinah held the tiny turtle in the palm of her hand. It was exactly the size and shape of a dime.

"Oooh," Dinah sighed, looking up to thank her friend. "Oh, thank you."

But Tessie was almost out of sight, tearing across the field at break-neck speed.

Dinah held the little creature up close to her face, gazed into his round little eyes and whispered, "Hello, little-bitty turtle." And she walked slowly home as the afternoon sun sank toward the horizon.

Walking home with her tiny new friend, Dinah was so happy that tears filled her eyes. First she showed it to her mother, who was busy cooking supper.

"The old fish bowl is under the sink," her mother told her. "You can make a turtle home with water and rocks."

And that's what Dinah did. She placed the little turtle in the shallow water, and watched him as he swam around exploring his new home.

Then Dinah's daddy came home from work and walked through the house, slapping his hat against his pants-leg like he always did.

"Look, Daddy," Dinah said to him. "Tessie gave me a baby turtle. She said it's a Red Belly." And she told her daddy the whole story.

When she told the part about Tessie wanting to keep all the turtles for herself, her daddy shook his head and said "Well, I'll say!"

When she told the part about Tessie tumbling through the air with all the baby turtles flying around her, he slapped his leg and threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, the poor little thing," he said, looking closely at the tiny turtle. "Do you think he's got enough room?"

Dinah looked at the turtle, and looked at the small glass bowl.

"Maybe he needs a bigger place," she said.

The next day, Dinah and her mother went to the library and checked out a book all about turtles. In the pet food department of the grocery store, they bought a small box of Turtle Food. Then they went home and found a big rectangular cake pan, and Dinah got busy making a bigger turtle home.

With a shallow bowl of water surrounded by small flat rocks at one end, some sand and one big rock at the other end, it was the perfect home for . . .

"What are you going to name him?" Dinah's daddy asked.

Dinah watched the little-bitty turtle as he climbed clumsily up one of the rocks and ker-plunked into the bowl of water.

"I'll name him Big Team," she answered.

Dinah's daddy laughed. "Well, that's a good name for a little turtle," he said.

As time passed, Big Team grew a little. Dinah spent time with him every day after school, talking to him softly and playing with him carefully. She placed him on the floor of her bedroom, put her hand down, palm up close to him, and called, "Let's go, Big Team, let's go."

Soon Big Team learned to recognize Dinah's friendly voice, and he'd run across the linoleum floor and climb into her hand. His little feet and toenails tickled her palm.

When she showed her mother what Big Team had learned, her mother said, "You've got to show your daddy that!"

When she showed her daddy what Big Team had learned to do, he exclaimed "Well, I'll say!" Then he slapped his leg and laughed!

Dinah saw her friend , Tessie, every day at school, and they talked about turtles.

"Turtles are BORING!" Tessie said. "I took all mine back to the creek."

"I taught mine to come when I call him," Dinah told her friend.

Tessie's eyes got big and her mouth dropped open. "You can't teach a

TURTLE to do anything! They're just boring!"

So Dinah invited Tessie to come home with her and see what Big Team could do. Tessie was amazed.

"That's the most wonderful turtle in the world!" Tessie squealed. "You really know a lot about turtles! I could NEVER teach a turtle how to come when I call!"

Dinah was always careful to place Big Team back in his turtle-home after she played with him. She fed him and changed his water and kept his home clean.

Big Team grew a little more. He gradually became about the size of a quarter.

Then one day, Dinah looked into the big rectangular pan. There was the shallow bowl of water, there were the little rocks, there was the sand and the big rock. But there was no big Team.

Her heart pounded and she called to her mother, "Mama! Big Team is gone!"

Together, they searched Dinah's bedroom. Big Team was not under the table. He was not under the bed. He was not under the dresser. He was not in the closet. He was not in the toy box.

Big Team was not anywhere.

They searched the whole house, but could not find the little, not-quite-so-little turtle.

Days passed and Dinah worried about her little friend. Tessie came over, and the two girls called, "Let's go, Big Team, let's go," over and over throughout the house.

But no Big Team.

Dinah's daddy bought her a red yo-yo, and hugged her every day when he came home from work.

Dinah's mother asked her to help out with the housework. So she swept the floor and made the beds and washed the dishes.

One day while Dinah was washing dishes, something caught her eye. She stopped washing dishes, stood very still, and gazed in horror at some terrible ugly thing moving slowly across the floor toward her. It looked like the ugliest monster bug she had ever seen

The monster bug kept coming closer to her. It was brown and fuzzy and hairy, with long things that looked like spiny horns all over it.

"Mama!" Dinah screamed. "There's a horrible bug on the floor, and it's crawling toward me!"

Dinah's mother didn't sound worried. "Just get the fly swatter and swat it," she called.

"NO!" Dinah squealed. "I'm afraid to move! It's horrible and scary. Come here quick and . . ."

Just as Dinah's mother entered the kitchen and grabbed the fly swatter off the hook beside the door, the frightened little girl bent over and looked closely at the ugly thing on the floor.

"Ugh! What is that?" her mother shuddered. "I've never seen anything like it." And with the fly swatter raised cautiously above her head, she stepped toward the ghastly monster.

Dinah leapt ahead of her mother.

"Wait! Wait! Don't swat it!" she yelled.

"That's something awful!" her mother answered. "I'll swat it and . . ."

"No, Mama," Dinah cried, and she scooped up the ugly, hairy thing just as her mother smacked the fly swatter against the kitchen linoleum with a loud WHACK!

"It's Big Team!" she cried.

"No, Dinah! It's not!" her mother insisted. "It's something awful!"

Dinah carried the awful thing to the kitchen sink and ran water over it.

"It is Big Team. I know it is," she said.

Slowly the stream of water from the faucet washed away all the fuzz and dirt and hair and spiny horns from the awful, terrible thing. And there, gazing happily up at Dinah, was the not-so-tiny Big Team!

Dinah began to cry.

Dinah's mother began to cry, too.

"Oh, Big Team!" Dinah sobbed. "Where have you been?"

"How did he pick up so much dirt?" her mother wailed.

"Wait till I tell Daddy!" Dinah exclaimed. "He'll never believe it!"

She ran to her bedroom and plunked the clean little turtle into his shallow bowl of water. Then she quickly dropped some Turtle Food in front of him, and

he gobbled it up.

"Oh, Big Team, I'm so glad you're home!"

Dinah's mother walked into the room, holding a bigger, older, deeper pan.

"I think he climbed up onto his big rock and over the side of the pan," she told Dinah. "You better make a bigger turtle home."

And that's what Dinah did.

When her daddy came home from work, Dinah told him the whole story. When she told the part about the fuzz and dirt and spiny horns, he said, "Well, the poor little thing."

And when she told the part about the fly swatter, he shook his head and said, "Well, I'll say."

And when she told the part about washing her little friend under the blast of water from the faucet, her daddy threw back his head and laughed.

Then he said, "Show me that trick he does."

Dinah placed Big Team on the floor, put her hand on the linoleum, palm up, and called, "Let's go, Big Team, let's go."

And the quarter-sized turtle scampered across the floor and climbed into her hand. His little feet and toenails tickled her palm, and she smiled.

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**Ramey Channell** writes from her home in Leeds, Alabama.



# A DAY WITH THE MISSISSIPPI

**Phyllis H. Peck**

As I drive along, following the river home, I escape the busy highway and choose instead the old, less-traveled road that traces the ragged edge of the rambling waterline.

The intense blue of the winter sky repeats itself in the flowing water, a blue made bluer still in contrast against fresh snow accenting the shore.

Colonies of ducks paddle and chatter in water glassy still and content against the shore, ignoring invitations to join the channel water racing toward the sea.

In trees clumped along the water's edge, eagles sit with regal pose or soar and glide, watching, always watching, to see what swims just beneath the surface of the water.

Houses in small river towns look out across the broad channel and see houses across the river looking back, as if each town were seeing a reflection of itself in a distant mirror.

I can't forget how cruel this river can become, killing flood sweeping southward without a caring, backward glance.

But for today, I choose to smile with this river running sweet, and put aside unpleasant memories until another day.

---

*Phyllis H. Peck taught college writing and literature courses for 24 years, was an ad hoc lecturer at the University of Iowa, and conducted seminars on executive writing throughout the Midwest. Her poetry and professional articles have been published since 1965. She is a member of The Pensters and The National League of American Pen Women. Retired, she and her husband live in Fairhope, Alabama.*

# COMPATRIOTS

## Rusty Bynum

Heat shimmered out of the cracks in the brown earth, burned the tips of leaves on the bougainvillea vine, fried the air to sandpaper. A tarantula maneuvered slowly to rest in the little patches of shade cast by the bougainvillea's meager store of leaves. Once situated, the creature sat in total immobility, preserving strength as well as precious internal moisture. Every hair on her long legs and fat body parts telegraphed the events of her environment. With exquisite precision, the tarantula followed a dog that chased a chicken at the end of the street, caught the scent of flour tortillas tossed on a stove three houses down, noted a one degree rise in the temperature, yearned for the shade of the lone cloud that teased the earth beneath it.

Secure in the camouflage of her dark body under the wilted leaves, the tarantula caught the scent of humans — young ones, sweaty and ill fed — as the shocks of their footsteps sent electric pulses through her barely grounded legs. She tensed, ready for one of them to come near.

The loud ones pounded past first, their yelling voices spitting sound into parched air. Silence followed them. The tarantula's feelers twitched as one hairy foreleg raised unbidden, reaching toward the dusty road.

The girl's walk was cautiously slow, heavy with fatigue . . . and something else — a darkness that seeped out of her in waves even heavier than the heat. Patches in her cotton dress punctuated the sweaty cling of fabric against a thin, childish frame. She sighed a whispered moan.

The sound galvanized the tarantula into movement, head down and legs plying the bougainvillea vine like harp strings. As the girl stretched her hand toward the rusty doorknob, the tarantula sidled onto the nearest vine. The great spider stood on her back legs, her head up, eyes focused on the soft little hand, her front pairs of legs clawing the air between her mandibles and the girl's tender skin.

It was a grasping dance of desperation, and it mesmerized the girl. She stood motionless, watching the tarantula's antics. For the moment, she knew, there would be no contact. The tarantula couldn't leap to the girl's hand with only one pair of legs anchored, and the desiccated bougainvillea was too thin to offer purchase for a second pair of legs to act as catapult. Taking mercy on the creature's plight, the girl moved her hand slowly, until it hung in the scorching air just beneath the tarantula's front pair of legs.

They had much in common, the girl and the tarantula. In the searing pause between movement and contact, their eyes met and held. Two sets of dark eyes stared from two brown faces.

The tarantula moved first, dropping her legs so softly onto the childish hand that the girl scarcely felt them. The tarantula eased her weight upon the girl, moving gingerly up the small wrist.

The girl brought her face close to the creature on her arm, imagining her own metamorphosis — the long braid that hung down her back spreading to cover her body in fine black fur, her prominent ribs and hip bones lost in soft round layers of fat, her leaden limbs enlivened with a spider's supple grace. Her

sigh, more longing than wish, rustled every receptor on the tarantula's sensitive body, causing the spider's front pairs of legs to thrust upward toward the child's close face.

*"Hola, chiquita,"* the girl whispered. Hello, little one.

The tarantula held its high defensive stance, quivered, relaxed, settled all eight legs once more on the girl's thin brown arm.

Using her other hand and never taking her eyes off the huge spider that rode on her arm, the girl shoved the door open. With her hitchhiker held aloft, she slipped into the darkness of the weathered adobe house. She used her uninhabited hand to push aside a dingy curtain that covered the room's only window. A sudden shaft of light illuminated dust motes swirling around the tarantula before they drifted into the dim reaches of the room. On the opposite wall hung the kitchen's single decoration: a picture of a smiling Virgin Mary holding one hand over her heart and the other up in blessing.

*"EspÈrame,"* the girl said. Wait for me. She lowered her hand to the scarred kitchen table until the tarantula crawled down to rest on the battered planks.

There was only one letter in the mailbox. It bore a return address in the United States, and the girl's own name as recipient. The girl's step was lighter on the bare wood floor as she reentered the house.

"Do you want to hear it?" she said to the tarantula. "It's from my *abuela*." She settled herself into the chair and leaned toward the tarantula. " 'Dear Chavela,' " she read aloud, " 'Sometimes I wonder if New Orleans' rain will ever

stop...’ ”

Only after the letter from her grandmother had been read and reread did the girl rise from her chair at the kitchen table and get two drinks of water: one for herself and one for her faithful little pet. Before returning to the table, she drank and then poured herself another glass of water. She picked up a small round vial that sat by the sink.

“We should hold our noses, *amiga*,” she said to the tarantula. “*Medicinas*.”

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***Rusty Bynum*** writes from his home in Huntsville, Alabama.

# CORANACH

*"I leaned my back against an oak, thinking it was a trusty tree,"*  
Waly, Waly, 17<sup>th</sup> century ballad

## Shann Palmer

There is an ease to taking root,  
letting vines work up limbs,  
a jack-in-the-pulpit surprise  
as lovers sleep in redolent peat.

Gilead's balm grew in the garden  
at Jericho. Sheba went home sated,  
but alone. I want salve for this injustice,  
reproach lies in my mouth like nettle.

The wideness of mercy holds tight  
and soothes injuries. Tender,  
like new growth in ancient forests  
it covers everything left behind.

Here, I find shelter from intrepid  
weather, bend enough to break  
but will not, there is yet time to keen  
for sullen heart and brittle bones.

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*Shann Palmer writes from her home in Richmond, Virginia.*

# CHEATING

Patricia J. Weaver

Twelve-year-old Marissa struggled to push the grocery cart. *If we can make it to the warehouse before it starts to snow we'll be okay*, she thought.

Loud coughing from the pile of tattered rags in the cart had her rushing to check on her little brother, Frankie.

"I'm cold, Marissa. I can't feel my toes." Frankie wheezed. The effort to speak caused another bout of coughing.

Marissa noticed his lips were quivering as she tucked the dirty rags around his small frame. She removed the dirty wool coat she wore and placed it over Frankie.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered and scanned the crowded sidewalk hoping someone would help them. People scurried by them, hoping to get home before the snow started, not once noticing the need of the two children. Frankie continued to cough as Marissa labored to move the cart over the uneven sidewalk. A man in a long black coat walked past them mumbling something about sewage rats and there should be laws to keep them off the street. Marissa had heard it all before, but it always hurt to hear people call them names. The man suddenly stopped and she almost hit him with the cart. He turned to stare at them. Frowning, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his money clip.

"Get the boy something to eat and medicine for that cough," he said and

pressed something into Frankie's hand. Marissa watched the man stride away, wondering what caused the strange light that surrounded him.

"It's a twenty dollar bill, Marissa!" Frankie waved the money. "Can we have some hot chocolate?"

Marissa turned to her brother. "Twenty dollars! Oh, Frankie, we'll be able to eat every day for a week with that much money."

"I want hot chocolate." Frankie dropped his head and pouted. "I'm cold."

Marissa was hesitant to approach the vendor on the corner. They all hated homeless people and the man who owned the hotdog cart was especially nasty.

Something feather soft and wet touched Marissa's cheek. She looked up and another large flake touched her eyelid. *Great, just what I needed.*

When Frankie started to cough again, Marissa pushed the cart into the alley close to the hotdog stand. She took the money from Frankie and said, "Stay still and be quiet. I'll get you some hot chocolate."

She gingerly walked up to the cart. "Sir, can I buy a cup of hot chocolate?"

"I don't run a charity here. This is my business and without..." The man stopped when he saw the money in her hand. "Hot chocolate! Sure I can do that, two cups coming up."

"I only need one."

"Nonsense, you both need a cup. I'll be emptying the urn before I go home anyway."



Marissa watched the man take two large Styrofoam cups, pour in steaming hot chocolate, and put lids on them.

“How did you know there were two of us?”

“I’m not sure, I just knew,” the man said and handed the cups to Marissa. “No charge today. Be careful, they’re hot. Here take some hotdogs.” The man stuck two hotdogs into the pocket of her windbreaker.

Marissa opened her mouth to protest but the man waved toward the alley, “Go on, I need to get home before this snow gets worse.”

She choked out a thank you and hurried back to the alley. “Frankie, look hot chocolate! A cup for each of us and hot dogs, too.”

Frankie didn’t move. A crackle sounded with each breath he took. Marissa set the cups on the ground and gently shook him. “Frankie, wake up!”

“I’m coooold,” he said through blue lips.

“I have to find us shelter from the snow,” Marissa said her teeth chattering. She noticed a doorway a few hundred feet up the alley. It was wide and had a little roof over it. She knew the door would be warm from the heat inside.

“Hold on to my coat,” she said, lifting Frankie.

She carried him to the opening and placed him next to the metal door. “Eat this,” she said and pressed a cold hotdog into his hand.

Marissa rushed back to the cart and picked up the cups. “Drink this but be careful, it’s hot.” She pulled the tab on the cup and handed it to her brother.

She dragged the cart close to the doorway to help block the snow and

snuggled close to Frankie. They covered up with Marissa's coat, sipped their hot drinks, and ate the hotdogs. They were nearly asleep, when the door opened.

"What are you doing out here!"

The children fell into a small foyer and heavenly heat engulfed them. Marissa put a protective arm around Frankie and looked up. An old man frowned down at them. He wore a ragged bathrobe and his face had white stubble as if he had forgotten to shave for several days. He tapped a walking stick on the floor as he studied them.

"Please mister, it's snowing, don't make us leave. My brother is sick." Marissa pleaded.

"Where are your parents?"

"Ain't got any, Dad left a couple of years ago and Mom died last month. Please, we'll leave as soon as the snow stops."

"Come with me," the old man said and walked down the small hallway. "What is the world coming to when babies have to sleep in the snow?"

Marissa picked up Frankie and followed the man. He led them into a small cozy room that had a fireplace with gas logs.

"Put him in front of the heat and get those wet clothes off him. I'll find something warm for him to wear," the man said and ambled out of the room.

"Marissa, why is that man being so nice?" Frankie asked, holding his hands close to the heat.

"I don't know but we'll enjoy it while we can," she said and pulled the moth-eaten sweater she found last week over his head.

\*\*\*\*\*

Two of heaven's angels stood in the alley bathed in bright light. One was the children's guardian angel and the other was there for the old man.

"Death is not going to be happy that we cheated him tonight."

"I know, but they needed each other."

"Yes, I think they do."

With their charges safe, they spread their wings and ascended to heaven.

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***Patricia J. Weaver*** writes from her home in Florence, Alabama.

# SEASONAL MOVES

## Jennifer Soule

This week the widow's house down the block went up for sale with a red and white sign. Last year she welcomed us to the neighborhood, but later was trucked to a nursing home. In suburban Florida the people come and go like the hurricane seasons.

In South Dakota where the seasons vary there were no rules like "Do not block the sidewalk." Where to park at your home was your own business; no need for a sign. It's a big state in miles with few people so the whole state thinks it's a neighborhood.

One time we lived in a farm neighborhood with my own library so books did not block all the hallways and reach out to trip people. Here we were trespassers at the real home of coyotes who changed coats with the seasons and knew their lost space was not a good sign.

Once we lived on the water where a sign hung up just for fun read, "Please, do not block the dock with pelican paraphernalia, people." This was just during tourist, winter seasons. We were boaters and our neighborhood swam with dolphins, and sea cows at their home.

Another time we owned a West Virginia home. Shepherdstown, the "oldest town" the sign read. We nested near the college where to block a driveway was the biggest sin. Seasons were celebrated in the neighborhood with balloons and treats for all the people.

We are ready to become different people as we nest into our Alabama home in Auburn on this lovely tree-lined block. With blooms galore in our new neighborhood maybe we can stay here a few seasons. Thanksgiving month. This could be a good sign.

Instead of the moving season people  
we can park on our block in a neighborhood  
and hang out a sign saying, "We're home."

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***Jennifer Soule*** writes from her home in Auburn, Alabama.

# THE BEAUTY WALK: HERE COME THE JUDGES

**Donna Wade Cornelius**

*Moral: Develop a talent other than whistling the theme song for “Andy Griffith”*

Comedienne Fannie Flagg tried six times to win the Miss Alabama crown. I gave up a lot sooner.

In the South, beauty pageants have created not just a cottage industry – there are actually women who specialize in making the perfect pageant swimsuit – but a subculture. The women who choose to fling themselves into the Miss Alabama system often circumnavigate the state, curling iron in hand and tap shoes in tow, in their quest to win a preliminary pageant, which then qualifies for the Big Mama: the state pageant in Birmingham.

There are your high-end pageants – Miss Point Mallard in Decatur – and your bargain-basement specials, such as Miss Karo Syrup. Often, contestants will enter more preliminaries than George Wallace entered political races. And a few lucky girls do make it all the way to Miss America, giving all would-be beauty queens the hope that it can be done, much like the guy who buys a lottery ticket thinking, “Hey! Somebody’s got to win.”

My entry into the wonderful world of beauty pageants started when I was in eighth grade. The setting for this momentous occasion was the Pickens County High School auditorium, and I was competing in the junior high beauty walk. (We didn’t call them “pageants” in those days, probably because all we did

was walk out onto the stage, walk around the stage and then walk off the stage – hopefully, looking strikingly beautiful all the while.)

In my pale blue dress with a full skirt and filmy sleeves, I felt like Cinderella – a bargain basement version with a flat chest and a pageboy hairstyle. As I strolled out onto the stage, all I could think of was my mother’s injunction to “smile. Smile! SMILE!”

Obligingly, I smiled till my jaws ached. It must have worked; I came in second – or, in pageant lingo, I was “first alternate.”

I was thrilled, and my parents were proud. But my dad said, on the way home, “I thought you were going to overdo it with that smiling thing.”

No such thing, Dad. The first rule of pageantry is: Grin like a jackass.

I regret to note that my budding career as a beauty queen went downhill from there. The next year, I made it into the top ten – but no further. And the following two years, I didn’t place at all.

When pageant time came around during my senior year, I declined to enter. I could see a trend emerging and figured if I pushed my luck again, I might topple off the stage.

I came out of retirement when I was in college. My mother talked me into entering a Miss Alabama preliminary in Pickens County, blithely brushing away one minor detail: Talent is a major part of your overall score, and I did not possess one -- at least, not one that could be demonstrated onstage. I couldn’t sing or twirl a baton. I wasn’t a ventriloquist, and I couldn’t play a musical instrument. Well, I could stumble through “Alley Cat” and “Bringing in the

Sheaves” after six years of piano lessons. But neither song, I felt, was pageant-worthy material.

In a panic, I ran down my list of talents. The list was appallingly short. I could ride horses and I could write. Neither seemed quite the thing. Then I had a brainstorm: I could dance! After all, I’d been a cheerleader in high school, and I had a glitzy costume that I’d worn for a sorority rush dance routine to Elvis Presley’s “You Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog.” I could even do the same routine. Problem solved! I now had a talent.

However, other obstacles reared their ill-groomed heads. The ladies of Pickens County decided to host a luncheon for the contestants, their mothers and the judges on the day of the pageant. This was a harrowing experience, as we girls had to remember to use the right fork, ferry a wobbling gob of congealed cranberry salad from the serving platter to our plates and to gracefully cut roast beef slabs that bore a striking resemblance to leather -- whilst being charming. Inevitably someone would ask me a question just as I had taken a bite of green beans. I carried on a sparkling conversation with one of the judges with a shred of spinach stuck decoratively between my two front teeth.

The pageant also involved an interview. I boned up on subjects I expected the judges to address: Current Events, My Chosen Career, and What I Would Do If Someone Were So Stupid as to Put Me in Charge of the World. The judges chose to ignore these sensible topics and honed in on the fact that I’d once served as a page in the State House of Representatives. “Who was the Speaker of the House then?” one dapper male judge inquired. “Oh dear me,” I stuttered. “I



don't quite recall." (As I remember, my attention during my stint in Montgomery was focused not on the old men in the legislature but on getting a date with a good-looking young aide to the Governor.) My admission of ignorance brought frowns all around.

At the actual pageant that night, I stepped confidently onto the stage, ready to rock out with Elvis. Unfortunately, I had a memory lapse about halfway through and was reduced to making up steps as I went along. The judges must have thought that I was a dim bulb indeed – couldn't make conversation and eat, wasn't up on Alabama political figures, and flailed around on the stage like a demented chicken.

The only person, I'm sure, who was surprised I didn't win was my dad. After the pageant was over, he showed me his program. He'd written his picks for prizes, using last names only. "Wade" was at the top of the list, followed by Gentry, Burkhalter, Maughn and so on. It looked like a batting lineup and made me think that I, no slouch on baseball statistics, might have been better served to go up on stage and regale the judges with the starting nine of the 1970 World Series championship team. That presentation might not have won the talent award, but I'll tell you this: I bet nobody else has ever done it.

Years later, the Miss Alabama grand pooh-bahs actually asked me to become a preliminary pageant judge. I declined. I thought of all those pre-pageant luncheons I'd have to attend, and I just couldn't bear the thought of it.

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***Donna Wade Cornelius writes from her home in Trussville, Alabama.***

# STARLIGHT SHIFT

**Suzanne Coker**

The true children of the night  
sport wounds as well as fangs,  
and the parents of the night care

for them, as for us all: clean,  
transport, patch, restrain, comfort  
what's leftover, restless, and can't  
wait until dawn. They are free

to dress casually, wear circles  
under their eyes, their sacraments  
are coffee, arc-sodium, and all night  
radio. They make their own time

zone, shadows never move for them,  
only switch on or off. They monitor  
screens, walk perimeters, swash mops  
over the soiled paths of daylight.

They roam a deserted world,  
solitary pilots on oceans of dark,  
steering by the stars and greeting  
each other with a flick of headlights.

You see them at daybreak, blinking  
and slow as they fill empty tanks,  
stretch the night from their shoulders.

You judge them as hungover, and  
they are: from the amphetamine of  
responsibility, the strangest, longest,  
wildest party of all.

*--for the guy who drives the dumpster truck  
in Montevallo on Tuesdays; also for Jerri,  
Kirk, and Doris.*

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**Suzanne Coker** is a veteran performance and page poet. Currently in training to become a radiology technician, she lives in Helena, Alabama, and one of five poets included in the anthology *Poems from the Big Table* (Churn Dash Press).

# THE INHERITANCE

**Larry Wilson**

Damn the rain. Why did it have to rain? Funerals were bad enough when sunshine and clear skies provide hope there might be some meaning to life but rain stole all hope away. My old man would have probably ordered the rain if he could have just to let loose one more jolt of anger at the world. I stood outside the tent covering the grave deliberately while a few people, mostly family, huddled under its cover. The rain ran down my cheeks covering the tears; I didn't want them to see I was crying, not after all these years.

I'd driven as fast as possible but the rain slowed the traffic to a crawl at times. I missed the funeral, missed the procession, and arrived just as they finished the grave side service. He'd given everyone orders not to tell me when he died but Benny had called me anyway. Five brothers and only one willing to call, even then not until the morning of the funeral. Being the oldest Benny probably felt it was his responsibility to let me know. It didn't mean he'd forgiven me any more than the others.

Benny walked over after the rest of the family left. He didn't offer to shake my hand, just looked at me for a few moments and said, "I've got something in my truck for you."

The walk to his pickup was cloaked in silence, the only sound the squish of our feet on the soggy grass. He opened the passenger's door, pulled out a box wrapped in brown paper and handed it to me.

"Dad asked me to give this to you. You're not mentioned in the will but you probably didn't expect to be. He said to tell you this is your inheritance."

Benny looked at me with red eyes. His shoulders, wide as a door, drooping and his hands clenched into fists nearly as big as soccer balls at his side. I balanced on the balls of my feet ready to duck if he swung but he just shook his head, turned, and walked around to the driver's side of the truck and

got in. He looked back, after starting the truck, hesitating for a moment and then drove away, the back tires spinning and throwing mud on my shoes.

Off to the left was a bench under an oak tree that offered some protection from the rain. I carried the package to it and sat down. All these years and not a word from the old man. I'd tried to communicate with him for over a year after it happened. At first I'd called, but he hung up when he heard my voice. I wrote letters; he sent them back unopened. Finally, I went to the house and when he saw who it was he locked the door and called the police.

I don't remember anything about the night it happened but I'm sure it was all my fault. In fact, I don't remember most of what went on in the year before it happened. I was a drunk then and had long black out periods. A full-fledged alcoholic bound for self destruction; but, I loved my family, especially little Carla. Blue eyed, blonde haired Carla, she was the baby of the family and the only girl.

Suddenly the sky turned even angrier and the rain became a downpour. As I pulled the paper off the box a clap of thunder boomed so close it was painful and instantly the air reeked with the acrid smell of lightning. A fitting background for the old man's vengeance, Hell's fire and brimstone that even a grave couldn't contain.

I knew what my inheritance was before I opened the box, a bottle of cheap whiskey. The kind of whiskey I always drank. The kind I was drinking that night 20 years ago. I hadn't had a drink since. Through a mind numbing rehabilitation program, countless meetings and an ocean of black coffee -- not a drink in twenty years. Twenty years, one day at a time, and never an easy day.

The thunder rose to a crescendo and the rain fell in sheets until the tree surrendered and let the rain pour through. Holding the bottle by the neck, I fought my way back to the grave. The wind screamed and a furious gust almost knocked me down as it ripped the tent that was over the grave from its tie downs and sent it sailing like a scrap of paper across the cemetery until it caught on a tall granite spire. The vault cover wasn't in place yet and the rain poured in on the mahogany casket. A mist floated up as if the heat of his hate was turning some of the drops into steam.

The top twisted off the bottle almost without effort and I held it out in toast.  
“Maybe we’ll talk about it in Hell, Dad. I’m sure I’ll see you there.”

The whiskey tasted even better than I remembered.

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**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.

# OLD AGE

**Sylvia Morris**

What do you do with the dance card  
after the party's done?  
The music has faded away--  
the flowers wilted--  
your mascara's run?

What do you do with the dance dress  
and the shoes that glittered gold?  
when all that's left is the memory  
and the body grown very old?

Oh, hang it up on the wall with the flowers  
the pictures of babies and cars  
and remember the wonderful moments  
when all the world was ours.

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***Sylvia B. Morris**, is a retired pediatrician, local historian and author. She lives with her cat, Jennifer, three sons and two grandchildren nearby to keep her interested*

# POEINFOMERCIAL

**Allison Joseph**

Hello, you might know me from that anthology you bought last year but never opened, or that literary magazine you swear you'll get around to reading, once *Seinfeld* reruns are done. I'm here to talk to you about your career in poetry—it's a fast-growing field with limitless potential, and you, too, can be a part of it. Try our six-month beginner course, or seven-year workshop and hair-thinning course, or our lifetime apprenticeship plan. You too can carve metaphors out of misery, make similes out of penury, and, with the guidance of our faculty, can alliterate, elucidate, or hyphenate with the best poets in the United States. You too will create imagery that haunts and disturbs, thrills and chills, soothes and shivers your readers until they cry out for more, more, more! Line breaks, enjambments, meter, sestinas and sonnets—they can all be yours if you sign up for a lifetime of not being understood except by other poets, of having your sanity questioned, and of reading your lines out loud to listeners who wonder why you're standing in the middle of the cafeteria surrounded by copies of your latest unsold opus. Don't trust your poetic talent to those other arts that will only ruin your bank account and your sobriety—remember, words are free, paper is cheap, and no one has to know what you're doing until you're dead. Call our toll-free number today, except don't call us while we're writing, or while we're thinking about writing, or while we're talking about writing to writers we're seeking to impress. Make that call and find fame, adultery, suicide, and bleak nights of the soul—whenever you want them, whenever you write.

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*Allison Joseph lives, writes and teaches in Carbondale, Illinois, where she's on the faculty at Southern Illinois University. Her books of poems include In Every Seam, Soul Train, and Worldly Pleasures. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in Rock River Times, The Litchfield Review, and others.*

# THE MENTOR

**Annell Gordon**

Big Betty didn't take crap off anybody. Gary Carson, the hulking center for the Riverton High Panthers basketball team, had just accidentally on purpose bumped her in the hallway between classes. That's how Gary wound up shoved against the lockers, Big Betty's massive forearm mashed against his throat, gasping and flailing his arms trying to replace the breath that she had viciously knocked out with a mighty gut punch. She got those forearms from lifting weights with the football team, working her way up to the unofficial bench-pressing champion of the school. This girl with her big brown eyes, ebony skin, and ever-present grin was one of the most sensible and well-liked kids in the school. "Gary, I'm 'bout to let you go, boy. You ain't hurt, but you gonna be if you go bumpin' up against my breasteses one mo' time. I'm mo bust you bad, boy! I ain't dat kind 'o girl and you knows it!"

That incident was my introduction to teaching. After raising three kids and renovating my husband's aunt's 1840 farmhouse located near Grove Hill in Clarke County, Alabama, I went back to Livingston University and earned degrees in both English and mathematics. Since I had finished up at the end of the fall quarter in 1984, all teaching jobs in the area had been filled. However, the superintendent of education from a neighboring county offered me a semester of work at a school located at the "droppin' off place" on the banks of the Alabama River – all black, grades K through 12. I was substituting for a popular teacher, Danny Renfroe, who was taking a semester off to settle his



nerves. Now, after having taught for over twenty years, I understand why Danny needed that little hiatus.

Teaching was to me a calling. My own children had received adequate educations in the Clarke County educational system; in my book, adequate just wasn't enough! I wanted them to be pushed to go beyond what the state of Alabama called a course of study. Most of their teachers had been smart and capable, but the ones who actually challenged my children were few and far between. A few of their instructors, I am sad to say, were downright lazy, others not very bright, and several incompetent in the organization and discipline departments. Too frequently, my three offspring received very high grades for what I saw as mediocre work. I felt that if I were ever assigned a classroom of my own, I would provide lots of discipline and structure along with imaginative and challenging lessons. Boy, did I have a lot to learn!

That first day at Riverton High was the beginning of my real education. After witnessing the altercation between Big Betty and Gary, I struggled my way past jostling students to my classroom. My first period class was a group of seniors who adored Mr. Renfro. The school had no room in its schedule for two separate classes; therefore, he had been teaching half the class Algebra I and the rest geometry. The class entered raucously completely ignoring me and what I hoped was my warm and welcoming smile. "Get out my way, nigger! Dis seat mines! Ain't you got no sense?" or "Come on, baby! You be sittin' by yo daddy!" or "Move, fool! Yo mama done raised herself a ugly child!" How was I supposed to deal with that rough talk without alienating these children who

appeared to be adults? I certainly did not want to start off on the wrong foot.

“Okay, people let’s try to chill out now. Everybody find a seat, please. Don’t you all want to get started as soon as possible? Thank you, thank you. Okay, young man, won’t you please be seated? Good! How are we this morning? Hello, Riverton High Panthers! I’m Mrs. Gordon.” Oh, how I fought to be cool so that they would like me. I had scrubbed the room until it shone, cleaned out Danny’s desk and arranged the top with fresh flowers, cute little pencil holders, red in and out baskets, a large red marble apple, and a multicolored desk calendar. I had taken great pains to compose appealing bulletin boards – one with an almost life-sized poster of Michael Jackson with what I thought was a really cool caption: Math is a Thriller! The boards were washed, ready to be covered with the day’s math problems. I was ready – so I thought!

All of my hard work and thought came crashing down on top of my idiotic head. “Hey, white woman! What you thinkin’ you doin’ here?” That question was fired at me by a senior boy – Randy Howell, a nasty smirk distorting his handsome features.

Danny had told me about Randy. He was Mr. Renfroe’s pet -- bright and athletic, the leader of the class. His question was echoed and amended all over the room. I probably blushed from frustration and embarrassment. I know that I stammered and hemmed and hawed, in anguish, searching for just the right response – one that would prove to these kids that they could like me, too. One that would assure them that I was just as cool as Mr. Renfroe. My answer, “Well,

I'm here to have fun. I'm here to teach you math in a new fun and exciting way! I know that you all cannot wait to get started!" They never moved a muscle, just sat there looking at me, waiting for all that fun and entertainment to start. What did I do? I began a lesson on solving multi-step equations. As soon as they realized that I was not going to tap dance or play the electric guitar in accompaniment to my algebraic transformations, as a body, they physically turned away from me and began to talk and laugh at the top of their lungs. None of my protests, my "Excuse me, class, but if you will, please look this way and listen" remarks, "Please stop talking," nothing I did caught their attention until the bell rang for their dismissal.

Randy walked by me on the way out, still smirking, and remarked, "Thanks, Lady, for the math lesson! It was real fun!"

The rest of the day was a blur and pretty much a repeat of what occurred with the seniors. I do remember the eighth grade class and Percy. I was rationalizing my failure with the seniors as the eighth graders made their noisy way into the classroom. I was a new teacher. Seniors were older and would require more work on my part. These eighth graders should be a piece of cake! Since they were younger, I thought that they might respond to a little assertive discipline. "Okay, students, you will now sit down in your assigned seats and open your books to page 125."

"What's a signed seat? Yo' seat been signed? Ain't nobody gone sign my seat! What dat woman be talkin' 'bout? Hmmmph, she 'bout crazy!" Percy Westbrook, a good-looking boy with clear intelligent eyes, grinned with his

mouthful of perfectly straight white teeth, all the while continuing his commentary on my mental state. “Hey, Miss ... Miss ... Miss Teacher, what you be sayin’? Mr. Renfroe don’t like for us to be writin’ on our desks. What you want us to be signin’ our names on the desks for? You all right in yo’ head, woman?”

I had not taken control of the seniors so I thought I had better act in a more decisive manner with this group. “What is your name, young man? Come up here at once. I am taking you to the principal this instant!”

“Hey y’all, she gone take me to the principal! What he gone do? Come on, Miss Teacher, I be showin’ you the way to the principal’s office.” With those remarks and with the eighth grade class laughing and shouting encouragement, Percy, did indeed lead the way to Mr. King’s office, sneering back at me all the way down the hall. My heart sank.

It sank even lower when Mr. King caught sight of Percy and his magnificent grin. “Hello, Percy. What can I do for you, son?”

“Miss Teacher, here, say I got to go to the office ‘cause I say I ain’t gone write all over Mr. Renfroe’s desks. Mr. Renfroe don’t want none of us writin’ on his furniture, Mr. King.”

Without even consulting me, Mr. King chucked Percy under his chin and said, “Now, Percy, go on back to class and do what you s’posed to be doin,’ boy.” That was that.

Percy strutted and grinned all the way back to the classroom, constantly checking back over his shoulder to watch me follow, shell-shocked and crestfallen. What Mr. King had done let me know that I was now completely on

my own.

The eighth grade math class period was one long exhortation on my part for them to please be seated and quiet. “Don’t y’all want to work this really neat worksheet on long division? Look, you guys, it’s a puzzle that you can solve? Hey, please don’t hang out the window. You, please stop shooting paper clips with that rubber band. Bring it right here to me. Well, okay, I suppose you can just keep it in your pocket.” Finally, the dismissal bell rang, and the rowdy herd dispersed noisily to the next class.

The tenth graders entered next. I had no more control over them than I did over the seniors or the eighth graders. In fact, when they left, I no longer had cute pencil holders on my desk, the red marble apple was smashed, and the fresh flowers had been tipped over and were lying in a sodden heap on the floor. And I had tried so hard with this class, teasing different ones to show them that I was a nice person, joking and telling funny stories to hold their interest during the math lesson. Of course, with each story, the class went off on its own tangential conversations while I wasted valuable instructional time calling them back to the task at hand.

As that first week dragged on, my enthusiasm for teaching took a nose dive. I not only could not control seniors, sophomores, or eighth graders, but also I failed at teaching the freshmen and the juniors. Michael Jackson sported a mustache as well as other unmentionable body parts, the lovely desk calendar had been dismantled and used for paper airplanes, and everything in my desk had been stolen. No matter how hard I tried, the kids ridiculed me and seemed

to hate me. I was no teacher.

After the last class of the day on Friday, I sat down amidst the ruins of the classroom, placed my head on my arms, and wept. That was how Big Betty found me when she came back to retrieve her forgotten book bag. “Whatsa matter wid you, Mrs. Gordon? What you be cryin’ fo’?”

“Betty, I’m no good at teaching. I’ve wasted a perfectly good college education learning to do something that I can’t do! Y’all make fun of me. You steal my stuff! You won’t do what I tell you to! I haven’t taught one lesson all week! I’m quitting!”

Big Betty crossed her arms at her waist, leaned back, and stared at me. Finally, in a deep rumbling voice, she said, “Aw, Mrs. Gordon, you ain’t so bad. You just plays too much! Mr. Renfroe didn’t do no playin.’ He just taught! You come on back over here Monday. I’ll see what I can do to hep you out some.” With that, Big Betty left for home.

What did she say? “You just plays too much!” What did she mean by that? I was an imbecile. I had been fighting so hard to be cool, to be liked, that I had forgotten that these students were children. I needed to be the adult. They needed for me to be the adult. They needed for me to establish limitations. They could not trust me to take care of their needs, to protect them, to guide them. They did not need a thirty-four-year old friend. They needed a teacher, someone to bring order and structure to their often chaotic lives. I had always been a strict mother with my own children. My daughter had once told her friends that the reason she was so organized was that she was raised by Hitler,

meaning me. She turned out great! Why wouldn't that same approach work with these kids?

Monday morning would be D-Day! I would take back my classroom at Riverton High armed with only a piece of chalk and a take-no-prisoners attitude. I would not care whether they liked me or not. I determined what concepts I would teach during each of my classes and resolved that nothing would stand in my way – not Randy Howell and certainly not an eighth grade pipsqueak named Percy Westbrook. That second week at RHS was a rough one – my orderly classroom was hard won. After a few parent-conferences with mamas who vowed that they did not “raise no fool,” and who were not afraid to support a teacher with a “whuppin’” if that’s what it took, I gradually gained control over the students. With a no-nonsense attitude and well-planned instructional activities, the students came to realize that this woman meant to teach mathematics and “nothing nor nobody” was going to stand in her way. They learned to enter the room in a civilized manner and to at least act as if they were paying attention during the lessons. I discovered that once I gained their respect, I also gradually won their affection. Best of all, I learned that I could love them, too, -- especially Randy and Percy!

Big Betty came to me on my last day at RHS. As she hugged me, she spoke softly, “See, I told you. You all right, Mrs. G. You sho’ don’t play too much now. You teaches! Keep doin’ it, white lady! You all right.”

I turned to Big Betty, tears in my eyes, “Thank you, Betty. You are so wise, and I will never forget you.” I will always remember Betty – her happy face,

her strength, and her words of wisdom.

*(The events in this piece actually occurred; however, many of the names of both people and places were changed.)*

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# THE FACE OF FEAR

## Sara Prince

No one ever suspected that nine-year-old Ruthie Warren was a victim of the rape that occurred one September night in small-town Cleary, Ohio. They knew only of Margaret Palmer, who had come from a neighboring town with her husband, Joe, to obtain a grocery order at Raymond Warren's general store.

Delayed because of car trouble, the Palmers arrived after dark and found the store closed. Margaret pleaded weariness and stayed in the car while Joe walked the short distance to Mr. Warren's home to ask him to open the store. He was scarcely out of sight when the car door burst open and a man's large, black hand grabbed Margaret by the neck, pulled her to the ground, dragged her to a grassy area, and raped her.

The victim's description of her assailant convinced Raymond Warren, and later the county sheriff, that her attacker had been Aaron Minor, a muscular, coal-black Negro with a jagged scar running from his right eye to his lips, attesting to prior violence. The suspect left Cleary that night and was never seen nor heard from again.

News of the incident was not publicized, for it happened in the 1930s when the victim of such an offense was more shamed than pitied -- a time when, in the rare event that the case came to trial, the female victim was portrayed as a loose woman, therefore provoking the attack. Cleary's residents, thinking to protect both Mrs. Palmer's reputation and the town's, passed the news in hushed

tones and whispers.

At some late hour that September night, Ruthie Warren woke to the sound of voices from the room beneath her. Frightened, she tip-toed down the stairs and, pausing at the door to listen, heard the sheriff refer to “this woman who was raped.” He went on to describe Aaron Minor’s fate “if they ever found him.” When Ruthie opened the door to peek in, her parents spotted her and abruptly stopped talking lest she overhear forbidden adult words. They scolded her for getting out of bed and sent her back upstairs. In the days that followed, Ruthie learned from one of the “big girls” the crude and unscholarly details of “rape.” Her young mind processed only the horror of it, and she retreated within from shock and fear.

In time, her parents noticed changes in her behavior: her delaying tactics at bedtime; her tensed body when required to enter an unoccupied room alone; her evening ritual of racing through the house lowering and tucking in the blinds against the frame of every window, so that not the tiniest sliver of light could be seen from outside.

For a while, her parents dismissed this seemingly ridiculous ritual as a childhood phase, but when Ruthie began yelling to them at all hours of the night and begging to sleep with them, they decided to confront her. She told them a man was watching her at the window -- any window in the house where she might be -- and, yes, even though the blinds were tightly drawn and the house was pitch dark. When Ruthie persisted in her aberrant behavior, her parents told her she was being silly and ordered her to stop disturbing their sleep.

With hope gone of finding a safe haven with her parents, Ruthie had no choice but to adapt, in whatever way she could, to the conditions forced upon her. She *believed* what her parents had said -- that no man was tall enough to stand on the ground and look through her upstairs window; that it was senseless to be scared of a face she'd never even seen (never mind that she was afraid to look).

On nights when the fear was bad, Ruthie lay rigid, her arms pinned against her sides, her legs stiffly extended, not daring to move a finger or toe; she kept her breathing shallow so there would be no movement of her chest; her eyes were fixed underneath closed eyelids lest the slightest movement of an eyeball be detected and cause some terrifying response by the man outside her window. Some nights she lay frozen in that position for hours, when exhaustion mercifully rescued her and she fell asleep; sometimes she lay there all night, waiting for the daylight to drive her visitor away.

Months sometimes passed when Ruthie was free of the face; those times she would sigh deeply and revel in the unfounded belief that *now he's gone!* But eventually the man would reappear, putting her again under his spell, and she would lie throughout the night in the paralytic state of mind and body that she consciously induced.

Years passed. "Ruthie" grew into "Ruth" and excitedly left for college a hundred miles away. She had told herself often that she had only to leave Cleary -- the town she had grown to hate for all the scary things that had happened there -- to be rid of her fears for good.

But leaving home, she soon discovered, was not a factor in the problem. Soon the man returned to rob her of sleep and destroy concentration on her studies. When her grades spiraled downward, she despaired of making it through a four-year college program and begged her parents to settle for a shorter course, in court reporting, offered only in faraway Chicago. Surprisingly, they agreed.

Life was better in Chicago, the face appearing only rarely. Ruth excelled in training for her chosen field, and, upon graduation, accepted a court reporting appointment in a Chicago criminal court. Her boss, Judge Davis, was pleasant and kind, and appreciative of the expertise she brought to the job. They worked together in complete harmony. She found criminal court interesting and exciting, many of the cases including emotion-filled accounts of assault and rape, even murder.

Ruth had never been happier. Not only was she perfectly suited to her work, she had met and married a young attorney, Victor Graham, who shared her dream of raising a family of at least two or three children. Ruth had not yet shared with Victor the part of her life that she preferred to think of as “a fear of the dark.” She didn’t mean to deceive him, but . . . *a twenty-five-year-old woman afraid of the dark? He’ll think I’m crazy. Besides, she rationalized, with Victor in bed beside me, the man wouldn’t dare show up.*

But the man did show up – more and more frequently, as she mentally and emotionally carried her work from the courtroom to the bedroom. Somehow she managed to hold things together without divulging her secret the first two

years of her marriage, but when the second of two pregnancies involuntarily aborted, Victor insisted that she see a doctor. Ruth reminded her husband that she was in the middle of a high-profile rape case involving a well-known Negro athlete, and that she could not be distracted by doctors' visits until the trial was over.

The case was grueling, the testimony intense and emotional. Ruth's sleep had been interrupted regularly by her visitor, and she had become a virtual automaton. One day, in the second week of court, she began frantically slapping down wild shortcuts and unfamiliar briefs in an effort to get the proceedings on the record. Finding it more and more difficult to catch the rhythm of the prosecutor's voice, struggling to separate the words in what to her had become a monotone, Ruth's eyes and mind opted out, leaving her motionless at her steno machine. The voice that brought her sharply back to awareness was that of her judge, instructing her to read back the prosecutor's last question. Fumbling with her notes, Ruth found nothing but a blurred, inky letter "r," the key upon which her finger had rested, running down the length of the paper fold. She raised her eyes to meet those of her judge and timidly asked if she might see him in his chambers.

"Mrs. Graham," the judge shouted, with sarcasm unfamiliar to Ruth in their relationship, "I apologize for interrupting your sleep. You realize that you may have jeopardized the government's case?"

Ruth dropped her head into her arms and tried in vain to choke back the tears. The realization that she had destroyed the judge's confidence in her was

crushing. Between sobs and gasps, she laid her problems before him, including the fear that she was going insane, and waited for him to fire her.

But the judge, although firm, was not without compassion. He agreed to put her on a leave of absence, which would become a permanent dismissal unless her condition improved. Ruth, in turn, was to see a psychiatrist friend of his – that very day; he would make the arrangements for her to go directly from the courthouse.

When Ruth heard the word “psychiatrist,” she closed her eyes and choked on her sobs. Her secret would be out at last . . . all of her friends, and more important, her husband, would know now that she was going crazy. She had no choice but to agree.

With her counseling sessions underway, Ruth’s nightmarish visits became even more frequent – now, predictably, a nightly event. Her husband became actively involved in helping her work through her illness, bringing a level of patience to the effort that humbled Ruth. Night after night as she lay in a near-hypnotic state, she would somehow muster the courage to slide her hand inch by inch, so as not to alert *the face*, across the sheet to her husband’s body, waking him and tearfully begging him to go through the house with her to check for an intruder. Her mind had become so confused, she now thought the face outside the window might also be inside the house.

Victor would take her first to the adjoining bathroom, where he would open the door to the linen closet and the medicine cabinet, draw back the curtain that hid the bathtub, and look at her for permission to move on. Downstairs, they

methodically inspected the closets, the space behind furniture, the kitchen appliances – opening the washer, dryer, dishwasher and oven doors so she could look inside; finally, Victor would open all the cabinet doors, no matter how small the space, and wait for Ruth to nod, apologetically, signaling her okay. Victor would take her hand and lead her back upstairs to bed where she would plead with him not to fall asleep before she did, so he could watch for the man at the window.

It was near the end of the fifth week of counseling that Ruth awoke one morning, shortly after her husband had left for the office, recalling the terrifying dream that had awakened her, and crying hysterically. As soon as she could regain her composure, she called her psychiatrist, Doctor Miller, who instructed her to come to the office immediately. Ruth was stretched out in a recliner across from his desk when she began reliving the dream:

*“I was at the back of the house – the house I grew up in – and I was hanging a basketful of wet clothes on a line at the edge of the yard. I was right in line with my bedroom, except it was above me, but I remember seeing it in the dream. The day was bright and warm, the sun shining, and I was enjoying pinning up the clothes. Then gradually a patch of shade seemed to pass over my right shoulder and cover the area in back of me. I felt a dark figure creeping toward me . . . and I . . . I don’t remember turning my head, but I knew there was a man there, and he had on a black suit . . . and his coat was hanging open and his chest was bare, and he kept coming toward me and I*

*couldn't run, I couldn't move . . . and . . . I . . . I was so scared . . .and. . . oh,  
Doctor Miller, I was so scared . . .*

Her sobs overtook her, and the doctor waited some time before he spoke. “Could you identify the man, Ruth? Do you know who he was?”

Ruth nodded and searched for her voice among the sobs. “It was . . . it was Aar . . . Aaron Minor.”

“Aaron Minor? And who is Aaron Minor, Ruth, somebody you know?”

It was at that point that Ruth’s problem began to unravel. Her introduction of Aaron Minor to the doctor began with the night of the rape, and there it ended. Slowly, she became aware that a weight was being lifted from her shoulders, her head was beginning to clear. She couldn’t explain it -- didn’t even want to bother trying – but, miraculously, her world was piecing itself together again.

Doctor Miller watched a smile slowly form on her lips, her eyes soften, and knew that, for the first time since he’d met her, he was looking at a rational woman.

“But how did this happen, Doctor?” Ruth asked, after they’d talked a long time. “What does Aaron Minor have to do with it? He didn’t rape **me**. I didn’t even know what rape meant way back then.”

“And therein lies part of the answer, Ruth,” the doctor replied. “Because of your parents’ behavior, you knew only that something horribly frightening had happened. Compounding your fears, this man who was scary-looking to you in the first place, did this terrible thing to this woman and then he disappeared and was never found. Is that right?”



Ruth nodded.

“If Aaron Minor had been apprehended, put away, that is, your mind could have closed the event and gone on; but rape was something you knew only as “fear” and the fear was personified in this man who was ‘still out there somewhere,’ and until you could resolve that issue, you were under his control.

Ruth walked out of the doctor’s office that morning into the delicious spring air, and sat alone on a nearby park bench reflecting upon the twenty-one years of her bondage. It had begun during the innocence of childhood and had nearly destroyed her before age thirty. She recalled the rift it had created between her and her parents; the secret stigma she had endured, which kept relationships, even with her husband, from fully maturing; it deprived her of a normal college experience; it almost cost her her job. It robbed her, in Doctor Miller’s opinion, of two unborn babies; finally, it came dangerously close to taking her sanity.

*As surely as though she had lain under the weight of Aaron Minor and felt his unwanted penis invading her body, Judge Davis recorded in his journal on Ruth’s first day back in the courtroom, Ruthie Warren was the victim of a rapist that memorable September night in Cleary, Ohio.*

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**Sara Prince**, a native of Ohio and a long-time Alabama transplant, has written travel and feature stories for the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch, the Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser, and the St. Petersburg (Florida) Times. She is presently restructuring a novel for publication.

# FAUX PAS

**Jerri Hardesty**

We were kicked back  
by the riverside,  
waves rippling in fire light,  
when they passed around  
the moonshine.  
I've never been a drinker  
by nature,  
not a matter of morality,  
just a matter of flavor,  
but I didn't want to be thought  
ill-mannered,  
so I brought the bottle  
to my lips  
for a tiny sip,  
and just the rising spirit smell  
made me gasp and choke  
before a taste I even took.  
Well, they all looked  
and then they laughed  
and someone slapped me  
on the back  
and I passed the bottle  
to the next  
in the circle,  
chalked it up  
to experience.

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*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. [www.NewDawnUnlimited.com](http://www.NewDawnUnlimited.com)

# THE RETURN OF THE REAL GRANNY

**Darlene A. Buechel**

I knew something was wrong with Granny the day she squirted ketchup on her oatmeal. My little brother Sammy burst out laughing (five-year-olds can be such dorks) but I felt sorry for Granny.

My mother tried to get her a fresh bowl, but Granny grabbed her spoon and started shoveling the red-frosted lumps into her mouth. Yech! I almost threw up on my cat Whiskers, as she purred by my leg.

That night I rode with Mom to drop Granny off at the nursing home, while Dad stayed home with Sammy.

“Thanks, Sammy. You’re a dear,” Granny said as her bony hand patted my head like a baby, even though I’m ten.

“I’m Jenna,” I corrected softly.

“Oh, silly me,” Granny replied.

Five minutes later when Granny hugged me goodbye she called me Dolores – my mothers’ name! Mom just “shushed” me and headed to the parking lot.

As soon as we left the nursing home, I could tell mom was upset.

“Mom, what’s wrong with Granny?” I asked quietly.

“Oh, Jenna. She’s just confused.”

“She’s more than confused,” I said. “She called me six different names and put ketchup on everything!”

Even though it was dark in the car, I saw tears roll down Mom’s cheek.

“Jenna. Your Grandma has Alzheimer’s disease.” Mom said softly.

“Is it like cancer?” I asked with a shaking Jell-O voice.

“No, honey,” Mom said. “Alzheimer’s is a brain disease where you start to lose memory.”

“Is Granny gonna die?” I asked.

“She could live many more years, but I’m afraid her memory will keep getting worse,” Mom answered.

“We could always wear name tags,” I suggested. This time Mom’s tears turned to laughter.

The next week I tried to keep my mind off Granny’s illness by learning to knit along with my 4-H group. I even bought enough yarn to make everyone scarves for Christmas.

Mom still went to visit Granny, and every weekend she made Sammy or me go along. At first Sammy begged to go since the nurses gave him candy, but by Thanksgiving time, Sammy started crying when his turn came up.

“Granny’s head was taken over by aliens,” Sammy stated. “She calls me ‘Roger’ and won’t play ‘Go Fish’ anymore.”

Poor Sammy! How could a five-year-old understand that Granny would never be the same?

I fixed him a snack of graham crackers. “Granny still loves you,” I said, “but she gets confused.”

“Who’s Roger?” Sammy asked. “She’s always calling me Roger.”

“Roger was Grandpa’s name,” I replied. “He died before you were born

but I remember him. He smelled like peppermint and he gave me shiny silver dollars.”

“Well I’m not Roger and that place smells funny. I’m not going back!” Sammy pouted.

After that our parents said Sammy and I could decide when we wanted to visit Granny, but we had to go at holiday time – unless Granny came to us.

I was glad to hear Grandma was doing well enough to come to our house for Thanksgiving. Granny was an awesome cook. At Thanksgiving she would make a huge turkey with mashed potatoes, gravy, and three different pies.

This year Granny just sat in the rocking chair watching soap opera’s and yelling at mom in the kitchen.

“What’s burning? Don’t burn the meatloaf!”

When Mom told Granny that the turkey was fine and nothing was burning, Granny still didn’t believe her.

“Something’s on fire. Check the pork chops!” Granny yelled.

I sat on the couch frowning. It was hard enough to knit my stupid 4-H project without Granny yelling her head off.

“Yech! I hate casting-on,” I whined as the green yarn kept getting tighter on the needle.

Suddenly Granny popped out of her rocker and eased herself onto the couch beside me.

“Oh no. She’s gonna tell me I’m on fire,” I groaned to myself. But Granny clicked her false teeth and said, “If you cast on too tight, it’s harder to work with.

Mind if I just rip this out?"

"Thanks Granny," I smiled.

I watched closely as Granny started casting on. When she handed me back the needles, I slowly copied what she had done.

"Wow! Thanks. Now I remember," I grinned.

"Yes, Jenna. Sometimes I remember too," Granny replied.

Wow! She called me by my real name. I was so excited I ran to tell mom.

"Granny is better," I said. "She called me Jenna and she helped me knit, see?" I held up my piece of green scarf.

Mom smiled sadly as she mashed the potatoes.

"It comes and goes, Jenna."

I gave her a big hug and asked if I could help.

"Jenna, you can help by watching Granny until Dad and Sammy get back from the store."

I walked back to the living room in time to see Granny kneeling on the floor in her blue flowered dress with her nose to the carpet. Whiskers had climbed onto her back and I tried hard not to giggle as Granny's blue cat-butt wiggled in the air.

"Granny, are you okay?" I ran to her side.

"Smells like burned toast. Or maybe Brussels sprouts," she wrinkled her nose as I shooed the cat away and helped Granny to her feet.

"Let's sit on the couch. You can help me knit," I smiled.

"Knit? Dolores, you can't knit. I tried to teach you but you wanted to play

baseball instead,” Granny scolded.

“I’m Jenna, Granny,” I said sadly and was glad to hear Sammy slam the door a few minutes later.

“We got ice-cream and chips!” Sammy grinned.

“Great,” Mom kidded, “send men to the store and the cart is filled with junk food.”

Dad grabbed mom into a bear hug. “We forgot the list, but we got the cranberries, cool whip, and milk.”

Sammy made barfing noises as Mom gave Dad a big smooch on the cheek.

“Gross! Can I have ice-cream?” Sammy begged.

“No, silly. The turkey is almost ready. Go wash up,” Mom patted Sammy’s shiny red hair.

Sammy and I set the table while Granny and Whiskers tried to out-snore each other in the rocking chair. I was a little nervous about eating with Granny again, but since ketchup wouldn’t be on the table, I hoped the meal would go okay.

We woke Granny just before it was time to say ‘grace’ and carve the turkey. Granny was bright and cheerful, and Mom looked happy to have the ‘real Granny’ back for a while.

After the pumpkin pie, Sammy and I made up silly songs as we washed dishes while Dad and Mom put fresh sheets in the guestroom for Granny.

We were both watching TV when Granny shuffled over in her pink robe

and slippers to kiss us goodnight.

“Good night, Sammy and Jenna. May your dreams be as sweet as candy...”

“Without the cavities!” we chorused.

“Wow! The real Granny is back,” Sammy smiled. “We used to say that at bedtime when we stayed at her house. Remember, Jenna?”

I smiled at Sammy as Granny shuffled down the hallway.

“I get to stay up later than Granny –even though she’s an adult and I’m just a kid,” Sammy grinned.

Twenty minutes later I laughed when Sammy’s snoring drowned out the T.V. Dad carried Sammy to his room, and the rest of us watched TV until 10:00 when I yawned so wide I heard my jaw pop.

Even though I’m too old to be tucked in, it felt good to have Mom and Dad get me settled in bed. I seemed like I had just dozed off when I heard a loud crash and suddenly Whiskers pounced on my bed. I quickly turned on my lamp and saw Granny stooping to pick up some books that fell off my desk.

“Granny, what’s wrong?” I asked as I squinted at the digital alarm clock. “It’s 1:30 in the morning.”

“Something’s burning, Jenna.” Granny said firmly.

I groaned and rubbed my eyes. “Granny no one is burning pork chops or toast. It’s the middle of the night,” I yawned. Whiskers was clawing at my leg and as I went to boot her into the hallway, I took a big whiff and smelled...smoke!”



“Oh, no. Fire!” I yelled.

We had practiced fire drills many times, but now my heart felt ready to jump out of my body.

“Let’s crawl, Granny. It’s better to be near the ground,” I said loudly. We crawled to the door that Granny had left open. Since there was no smoke in the hallway, we crawled toward Sammy’s room and I quickly shook him awake.

Suddenly Mom and Dad burst into Sammy’s room

“It’s the garage. Let’s get out the front door,” Dad said as he scooped Sammy into his arms. Mom and I helped Granny to the door, then we went to stand by the big oak tree, just like we had practiced.

“I’ll go call 9-1-1,” I yelled, as Mom put her arm around Granny’s shivering shoulders and Dad tried to stop Sammy from crying.

I almost tripped on my flannel nightgown as I ran through fallen leaves and rang the doorbell next door. Their porch light flashed on quickly, and Mrs. Campbell threw open the door.

“Jenna, what’s wrong?” she grabbed my shoulders.

“Call 9-1-1. Our garage is on fire!”

The next few hours were like a weird dream. Dad waited outside for the fire department, while Mrs. Campbell yelled for the rest of us to come in her house.

Sammy’s tears turned into hiccups and we laughed as he tried holding his breath.

“Are you okay? What happened?” Mrs. Campbell asked after she had us

settled on her couch with warm blankets and mugs of hot chocolate.

“Granny smelled smoke,” I answered. “She came in my room and it’s because of her that we’re safe,” I smiled as Granny slowly sipped her drink.

“I can’t imagine why the smoke detectors didn’t go off...” Mom shook her head as Mrs. Campbell squeezed her hand.

“That’s what we forgot!” Sammy said suddenly. “Dad knew there was something else we needed at the store – batteries!”

“Well, it’s okay now. Thanks to Granny and Jenna everyone got out fine,” Mom smiled.

“I’m glad the ‘Real Granny’ showed up tonight,” Sammy said.

“Yes, Granny you saved us,” I said as joyful tears fell from every face in the room.

“We love you Granny,” I said. “I hope you always remember that.”

“Even if I seem confused up here,” Granny pointed at her matted gray curls, “I’ll know it in my heart,” she said as Dad came out of the cold and joined the rest of the family.

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***Darlene A. Buechel, a Wisconsin cheesehead, is a proud member of the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association. She’s been published in various children’s magazines including Boys Quest, Hopscotch, Turtle, and Fun For Kidz. Buechel enjoys country life and shares her dairy farm with husband Richard, son Ben and 75 Registered Jersey cows. This piece was written for children ages 9 - 12.***

# PROCESSION

**Allison Joseph**

We gather for another burial,  
dressed in our winter coats, we shiver, sigh.  
What healing is there at a funeral—

just speeches, flowers, endless rituals  
that don't abate my tears, your cries.  
We gather for another burial,

we daughters of the dead, habitual  
attendees of the wakes, the family ties.  
What healing is there at a funeral?

Just platitudes, pain real, not virtual  
as grief sets in beneath the talk and lies.  
We gather for another burial,

hug long-lost relatives mercurial  
in mood, in minds, our hands wiping our eyes.  
Much more than healing at a funeral—

recriminations, yes, silent denials.  
We leave much worse for wear, not wise.  
We gather for another burial,  
find healing's left us at a funeral.

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***Allison Joseph** lives, writes and teaches in Carbondale, Illinois, where she's on the faculty at Southern Illinois University. Her books of poems include In Every Seam, Soul Train, and Worldly Pleasures. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in Rock River Times, Gertrude: A Journal of Voice and Vision and The Litchfield Review.*

# PIECES OF HER

**Carol Robbins Hull**

“A lady’s purse is personal. You don’t ever plunder through it. When you need something that you think might be in there, ask me.” I had heard those words before, and I knew that mother meant every one of them. One simply did not go into her purse. Other friends rummaged through the purses of their mothers or grandmothers, but I knew better. My younger brother had not learned this and had decided to look in mother’s purse for something. Although there was no spanking or other punishment, mother’s soft, yet firm, tone of voice let him know that it would not be wise to ever bother her purse again.

Many years later I came to know the contents of her purses – not that there were any surprises. When we were children she had often produced a comb from it or a seemingly endless supply of tissues during any season, particularly winter. Mother never carried a large purse, but then in those days one was rarely needed. There were no cell phones or palm pilots or other electronic devices to carry. Our house was never locked and car keys stayed in the ignition, so her purse didn’t even contain keys. In her later years when I helped her with her purse I made sure that there was a clean, ironed handkerchief – a linen square with delicate embroidery in the corner – along with the tissues. When she could no longer see to sign her checks or credit card receipts I would fold her money for her in the system she had devised. One dollar bills were left unfolded, fives were folded in half crosswise once, tens twice, and twenties folded lengthwise. Friends were amazed that she could reach in her purse and find exactly the right amount of money whenever she went out to eat with them. Most of them never noticed the folds. That was our little secret.

After mother died I began the slow process of settling her estate. She had entrusted to me the distribution of her personal and household items. She would have been glad that some of her clothes went to those who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina, while others went to women trying to get back into the work force. But somehow her purses remained on the shelf in her closet much longer. I told myself that they were not as necessary as clothing, but the truth was that I postponed going through them after

one of my friends had mentioned how sad it was to go through her mother's purses after her death.

But the time came when it was necessary to make sure the purses were empty before giving them away. I pulled them all from the shelf one day and sat cross-legged on the floor going through them. I shed tears as I pulled out tissues and handkerchiefs still scented with her perfume. I laughed over the number of Tylenol caplets- each purse contained at least one or two in the zippered coin section. Some contained mirrors, combs, and change. One contained her silver colored "purse cross." Most contained partial rolls of Certs breath mints.

Although she used little makeup, mother did not think a lady should go out without at least a little power and lipstick. I remember her saying once that she did not mind if others didn't think she was beautiful, but she hoped that Daddy thought she was. He did not often tell her often with words, but he expressed it in other ways. I found one such piece of evidence, a delicate gold-plated compact, in a favorite purse. About the size of the pocket watch that my grandfather carried, it had been an extravagant Christmas gift in a lean year. Since I knew what the box contained I was watching both of them when she opened it and will always remember the looks that passed between them when she first lifted the lid on the box. Although not as well worn or as unique as the compact was the tube of lipstick – Windsor Rose. When she was younger she wore red lipstick, but when her hair became a lovely white cloud and her skin color paled she insisted on the soft rose color for her lips and nails.

I opened the lipstick, noticing once again the distinctive shape formed by her lips. I raised it to my own lips as the tears began to fall again. Mother was right; a lady's purse is personal. In each of hers I found little pieces of her.

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*Carol Robbins Hull is an artist and writer now retired from teaching. She is a member of Press and Authors, a member and past president of the Creative Writers of Montgomery, a docent with the Montgomery Museum of Art, and an author "groupie."*

# DEGREES OF REMORSE

Rebecca F. Chaney

## Chapter One

Early last summer I plotted the murder of the Reverend Leslie Carter Ackerman. My family thinks I suffered from temporary insanity. My mother tells me so frequently, with a hopeful emphasis on the short-lived aspect. It's almost like everyone is trying to convince me as well. I'm writing this story not to excuse my behavior or place blame elsewhere but to expose the truth as I understand it. What drives a previously easygoing wife and mother into considering homicide? I did not have the same feelings about my father's murder a decade earlier. I've always tried to live a good life as a law-abiding citizen, a Daughter of the American Revolution, a Christian.

Contrary to the newspapers' reports, my marital problems, though unpleasant, did not contribute to last summer's madness. Experts say the female is the more deadly in any species especially when her young are threatened. I can testify to that. However, I'm not sure I can explain my overwhelming need, my compulsion, to single-handedly rid the world of this particular predator even though I was convinced he wasted fresh air. Some people say I must have been demon-possessed. Perhaps they are right.

The madness began for me late one afternoon last June when my husband, Marshall Fredericks Wilson, one of two vascular surgeons in

Kennerley, Mississippi, answered a page during the middle of one of our more contentious arguments. His ruddy face blanched as he told me about the attempted suicide of Tyler Aiken, the thirteen-year-old son of our next-door neighbors, Peter and Karen. Assuming his surgeon's authoritative manner, Marshall shouted at me as he ran out the door, "Bel, go check on the other Aiken kids. They're alone."

I embody the mother hen with only one chick so I checked on my own ten-year-old first. I found Bailey in his room looking at one of his sports magazines, enshrouded again by the white-faced stillness I dreaded seeing. God help me, I thought this upset a result of my fight with his father. "Son, there's been an accident. I'm running next door to get the Aiken kids. You stay here. We'll be right back."

The Aikens had three children: Tyler, Thomas, and Theresa. I've never understood Karen Aiken's preference for alliterative names but I did think she was a good mother and her children well-adjusted. I hurried next door and rang the kitchen doorbell of the Aiken's Tudor-style house. I couldn't help noticing large drops of blood on the garage floor and a long red smear on the wall near the door opener. I found out later that Peter Aiken had carried the bleeding Tyler through the house and placed him in Karen's arms in the backseat of their Buick for the short ride to Kennerley Memorial Hospital.

Peering through the storm door, I saw eleven-year-old Thomas patting the shoulder of Theresa, age five. She looked as though she'd been wailing for a while—her normally sunny blue eyes were puffy and her sweet face swollen. Her

little cheeks bore deep red blotches like blush applied too liberally with a trembling hand. Thomas looked up at me gratefully and hurried to let me in. What on earth should I say? Still sobbing, Theresa came running to me and attached herself to my waist. I grabbed a paper napkin, wiped her face and nose, and picked her up in one smooth, never-quite-forgotten maternal movement. “You two are coming home with me,” I announced.

“What if Mom and Dad call?” asked Thomas, ruffling his dark brown curls with a shaking hand. “You can take Tessa but maybe I need to stay here.” I noticed a muscle in his jaw twitching.

“I’ll call the hospital and tell them you’re with me. Have you had supper?”

Thomas, shaking his head and looking sick, said he didn’t think he could eat. Theresa clung to me even tighter but raised her head long enough to ask, “Do you have any cake, Miss Annabel?”

I nodded, unable to speak, while Thomas attached a leash to their dog, Grover Cleveland. We trudged next door, my arms around the children, and found Bailey waiting for us in the kitchen with our five year old Scottie, Prince Charlie. The dogs were old friends and sniffed each other cordially as they pranced in circles in the middle of the floor. Bailey looked up at me with uncertainty written all over his face—he and Thomas played together often. Should they go upstairs now?

I shook my head. “Why don’t we all sit down at the breakfast table?” I said, pointing toward the big bay window. “Thomas can tell us what happened and we can talk about it.”



Thomas' story came out slowly at first, gathering momentum as he continued. Thomas had heard something fall in the bathroom he shared with his brother. He called out to Tyler several times but got no response. Thomas didn't want the teenaged Tyler to be angry with him so he thought about it some before eventually deciding to tell his mother. His heart broken by remorse, Thomas feared he had waited too long to summon help. Did I think it would have made any difference?

How should I answer that? I could foresee this burden crippling Thomas for years to come. Yet, how could I lie to this sweet child? I shook my head and said, "I don't know, Thomas. Perhaps my husband will be able to tell you."

Theresa looked up at me, too. "Tyler has a bad bo-bo," she said and started sobbing again.

I hugged her close, smoothing her hair. Thomas continued as if she hadn't said anything. He figured it must have been the knife that fell. He cried a little when he thought Bailey wasn't watching. Theresa finally calmed down and, alien to her nature, sat quietly wearing a stricken expression. Even the dogs seemed subdued. I managed the best I could, gave the children fish sticks with macaroni and cheese for supper along with a salad, and let them drink lemonade instead of milk. I even thawed a chocolate cheesecake I'd planned to send my mother and we all ate pieces of it for dessert. Comfort food.

I still remember the waiting that night to be nearly as difficult as anything that came afterwards. I tried to keep us all occupied but I ran out of ideas. The

children didn't want to be alone, didn't feel like playing or watching television and neither did I. And so, it was in my kitchen that Karen Aiken found us a couple of hours later drinking hot chocolate, baking date-nut

cookies and trying hard not to worry. The warm smell of hot, sticky dates fills me with dread to this day and Bailey now refuses to eat them even though they were once his favorite. I

looked up as the door opened and knew immediately from Karen's face. Thomas and Theresa ran to her and she fell to her knees and hugged them, all of them sobbing. Bailey's lips quivered and tears filled his eyes. I noticed he wouldn't even glance at me.

When Karen recovered enough to speak, she explained that both Marshall and Peter had stayed next door with the police while they searched Tyler's room. She kept asking why Tyler would do it—Tyler, the gifted athlete, the Honor Roll student, the Class Favorite. She sat with her children on either side of her, holding them tightly. I hugged Bailey too, and we sat there wrapped in the warm, sweet smell and our grief. Later we put the children to bed in our house, Little Theresa in the guest room, Bailey and Prince sharing bunk beds with Thomas and Grover in Bailey's room.

Marshall and Peter appeared about an hour after Karen's arrival and we began to learn more about what had happened. It seemed Tyler had written a three-page letter addressed to his father before taking off his outer clothes, climbing into the bathtub, and after two unsuccessful tries, cutting his wrists to

the bone. We learned later that the autopsy revealed Tyler had taken almost fifty acetaminophen capsules over an hour earlier. Perhaps he thought they would lessen the pain? He had survived just long enough for the Emergency Room staff to deplete the city's entire supply of O negative blood. Marshall hadn't even had time to scrub for surgery.

Peter, looking devastated, held a copy of the letter Tyler had written. After some indecision, he decided to let Karen, Marshall and me read it. Parts of it are still chiseled in my

brain. What Tyler described made me feel like my bone marrow melted and lodged in my stomach. I thought I would choke with the horror of it. He manfully asked his Dad not to tell Karen the whole truth. Tyler didn't want to upset his mother any more than necessary. Karen sobbed aloud. He wrote of cruelty both mental and physical, of sexual abuse so heinous, of despair so overwhelming that Tyler couldn't face the aftermath of his revelations. He said that his "education" had been declared complete after his thirteenth birthday and a younger person would be found to take his place. He begged his father to protect Thomas. And then, Tyler Aiken detailed times, dates and occasions when he'd been molested, tortured even, by the Youth Minister of Sardis Place Church, the Reverend Les Ackerman. Karen became hysterical and Marshall administered an intravenous injection of diazepam while Peter and I held her still. I felt her almost immediate relaxation just before Karen, now weeping quietly, turned and clutched Peter. He buried his face in her shoulder. Repressing a

sob, I had to look away.

Our horror and shock were so complete that Marshall and I clung together much like Karen and Peter did as they walked to their empty house. The police had gone. I hoped someone had cleaned the boys' bathroom. As Marshall locked our front door and closed the world out, I could tell we were thinking about the same thing—Les Ackerman's recent camping trip with the boys in Bailey's Sunday School class. We lay in each others' arms all night, not sleeping, closer than we had been in months. We were both overwhelmed by our fear and dread. We decided to question Bailey in private very gently. Theresa wandered into our room about three-fifteen, crying softly for her mother and we held her, too, until she drifted off again.

Peter came for his children and Grover early the next morning, a Friday. He told us that Karen still slept. He didn't want to wake her, thinking she would need all the rest she could get to manage during the next few days. He expected all the grandparents would arrive later that day. Peter accepted a cup of coffee and hugged his children to him as if they'd been separated for a month instead of just one night. Theresa sat on his lap and sucked her thumb, her big blue eyes looking at me with so much sadness and bewilderment that I had difficulty not crying out loud. Thomas still blamed himself and I watched Peter realize he needed to comfort his remaining son. He clutched Thomas and held him close, their shoulders shaking. But my heart

shattered into pieces when my sweet Bailey patted Thomas on the back and told him nothing was his fault. Peter promised to call us if we could help them in any other way as he left with tears filling his eyes and one of my cakes thawing in his hands. I could only imagine the ordeal he faced.

Just after the Aikens left around nine o'clock and Bailey had gone back to bed, our pastor, Dr. Bill Logan, called. When I saw his name on the caller I.D., my throat developed a sudden paralysis. I backed away from the phone and Marshall answered it on the fourth ring. I could hear Dr. Logan's voice clearly even though I stood several feet away. First, he expressed sorrow over Tyler's death. Then, he said, "We heard he left a letter?"

Shaking his head and looking heavenward, Marshall replied, "Yes, I believe he did."

Dr. Logan waited but Marshall didn't add anything further. The very air seemed filled with electricity to me. I could almost hear it fizzing.

Finally, Dr. Logan said, "The police picked up Les early this morning." He went on to explain that Mrs. Logan had rushed to the Ackerman's home as soon as she heard about it. She had found Les' wife, Cheryl, and their two little girls leaving for Cheryl's mother's house in Brandon. It seemed to me Dr. Logan, having shared what he knew, hoped Marshall would do the same. When Marshall didn't reciprocate, I could hear Dr. Logan asking questions. Our pastor's frustration came through clearly even over the telephone line. For once

I could empathize. Marshall said, “Yes, it’s a terrible tragedy.” He repeated it three times before Dr. Logan capitulated and ended the call.

Marshall’s red-rimmed eyes avoided mine as he walked into the library and closed the door. I expected him to call his office with instructions to cancel his appointments that morning. Marshall always kept his workload light on Fridays so he could get to the golf course as early as possible. My ear at the door, I heard him tell his office manager, Angela Bowen, he would check on his patients in the hospital later in the day. Not really surprised, I heard him add in an agonized voice, “Angel, I wish I could, but I’ve got to spend some time with Bailey today. He needs me.” He paused as she said something and then my husband replied, “Yes, more than you do.”

I had suspected Angela was the latest of Marshall’s infidelities. I guess I hadn’t really wanted to know or maybe I suffered from inertia—not wanting to dismantle my home and disrupt my subsidized lifestyle. I told myself I stayed for Bailey’s sake. But that morning life seemed too short and too precious to waste. And so, early last summer, even before I contemplated murder, I plotted divorce. As soon as Marshall turned on the water in the shower, I called the

best lawyer in Kennerley and said, “Henry, this is Annabel Wilson, go ahead and hire the detective. I’ve made up my mind.”

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**Rebecca F. Chaney’s** love of mysteries began with the *Bobbsey Twins*. A pharmacist by profession, Rebecca says she enjoys writing—it’s one thing she can do with her feet up. She also researches genealogy and most of the

*references in Degrees of Remorse are her own "brick walls." She lives in Meridian, Mississippi with a very spoiled Maltese named Sissy.*

# 2007 AWC Writing Competition Winners List

## FICTION - 2500 WORDS

1 Laura Loomis	<i>Repentance</i>	Pittsburg, CA
2 Van Newell	<i>Man's Angels</i>	Birmingham, AL
3 D. Jeanne Wilson	<i>Locked In</i>	Grantsville, WV
4 Patsy Evans Pittman	<i>Veronica Lake Jones</i>	Vienna, WV

## HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Deborah Ann Cidboy	<i>The Amulet</i>	Jefferson, GA
Donna Wade Cornelius	<i>Glory Days</i>	Trussville, AL
Matthew C. Johnson	<i>Lady Like</i>	Clarkston, GA
Jane Sasser	<i>Caught</i>	Oak Ridge, TN

## SHORT FICTION - 1000 WORDS

1 Rusty Bynum	<i>Compatriots</i>	Huntsville, AL
2 Larry Wilson	<i>The Inheritance</i>	Wetumpka, AL
3 Bill Case	<i>Emma in Umbra</i>	Madison, AL
4 Stacy Jones	<i>Waiting in the Noose</i>	Memphis, TN

## HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Rebecca Brooks Carroll	<i>Encounters with Doors</i>	Oak Ridge, TN
Judith G. Finkel	<i>The Accident</i>	Houston, TX
Carol Robbins Hull	<i>Empty Boxes</i>	Montgomery, AL
Reilly Maginn	<i>Grateful</i>	Daphne, AL

## FREE VERSE POEM

1 Shann Palmer	<i>Coranach</i>	Richmond, VA
2 Suzanne Coker	<i>Starlight Shift</i>	Helena, AL
3 Jane Sasser	<i>An Invocation</i>	Oak Ridge, TN
4 Allison Joseph	<i>Melancholia</i>	Carbondale, IL

## HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Ramey Channell	<i>Dobby Mauby, On the Loss of Paradise</i>	Leeds, AL
Wendy W. Cleveland	<i>Jewel</i>	Auburn, AL
Judy Lee Green	<i>I Go Home</i>	Murfreesboro, TN
Joseph L. Whitten	<i>The Torn Hat</i>	Odenville, AL



## TRADITIONAL POEM

1 Allison Joseph	<i>Procession</i>	Carbondale, IL
2 Sylvia Morris	<i>Old Age</i>	Cullman, AL
3 Phyllis H. Peck	<i>A Day with the Mississippi</i>	Fairhope, AL
4 Jennifer Soule	<i>Seasonal Moves</i>	Auburn, AL

### HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Judy Lee Green	<i>Banks of the Nile</i>	Murfreesboro, TN
Mary Brunini McArdle	<i>The Legend of the Christmas Kitten</i>	Madison, AL
Jane Sasser	<i>At St. Paul's</i>	Oak Ridge, TN
Joseph L. Whitten	<i>Daybreak</i>	Odenville, AL

## NONFICTION

1 Carol Robbins Hull	<i>Pieces of Her</i>	Montgomery, AL
2 Annell Gordon	<i>The Mentor</i>	Grove Hill, AL
3 Sara Prince	<i>The Face of Fear</i>	Montgomery, AL
4 Jennifer G. Margeson	<i>Bluebonnet Blues</i>	Opelika, AL

### HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Alice G. Duckett	<i>Mama's Weed Bouquets</i>	Anniston, AL
Daniel Leonard	<i>The Hot Dog Lady</i>	Oak Ridge, TN
Reilly Maginn	<i>Vicarious</i>	Daphne, AL
Patricia J. Weaver	<i>The Witness</i>	Florence, AL

## JUVENILE FICTION

1 Darlene Buechel	<i>The Return of the Real Granny</i>	Chilton, WI
2 Deborah Ann Cidboy	<i>The Henge</i>	Jefferson, GA
3 Patricia J. Weaver	<i>Cheating</i>	Florence, AL
4 Ramey Channell	<i>Big Team, the Little Turtle</i>	Leeds, AL

### HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Matt A. Bragga	<i>Stitchy</i>	Cookeville, TN
Bill Case	<i>Celia the Cell- and the Power of I</i>	Madison, AL
Evan Guilford-Blake	<i>SnapDragon</i>	Stone Mountain, GA
Renate Harder	<i>Stinging Nettles</i>	Ashville, AL

## HUMOR

- |                        |  |                 |
|------------------------|--|-----------------|
| 1 Donna Wade Cornelius | <i>The Beauty Walk: Here Come the Judges</i> | Trussville, AL  |
| 2 Allison Joseph       | <i>Poeinfomercial</i>                        | Carbondale, IL  |
| 3 Vicki H. Moss        | <i>Life 101</i>                              | Chattanooga, TN |
| 4 Jerri Hardesty       | <i>Faux Pas</i>                              | Brierfield, AL  |

### HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

- |                         |                               |             |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Rebecca Davis Henderson | <i>As the twig is bent...</i> | Cullman, AL |
| Jennifer Soule          | <i>Imagine a Dog</i>          | Auburn, AL  |

## FIRST CHAPTER OF NOVEL

- |                      |                           |               |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| 1 Laura Loomis       | <i>Best Interests</i>     | Pittsburg, CA |
| 2 Rebecca F. Chaney  | <i>Degrees of Remorse</i> | Meridian, MS  |
| 3 C. Hope Clark      | <i>Hog Tied</i>           | Chapin, SC    |
| 4 Deborah Ann Cidboy | <i>The Blue Room</i>      | Jefferson, GA |

### HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

- |                    |                                  |                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Matthew C. Johnson | <i>untitled</i>                  | Clarkston, GA    |
| Stacy Jones        | <i>Cross City Blues</i>          | Memphis, TN      |
| Susan Santos       | <i>Three Bags and a Backpack</i> | West Chester, OH |
| Jane Sasser        | <i>Emma Justine</i>              | Oak Ridge, TN    |