ALALITCOM

Selected Winners from Alabama Writers' Conclave

2008 Literary Competition

www.alalit.com

ALALITCOM

© 2008 Alabama Writers' Conclave

Marian Lewis, Editor

Authors retain all rights.

Cover Photo contributed by the Editor

INTRODUCTION

The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC), the oldest continuous writers group in the United States, is pleased to present the third annual online issue of ALALITCOM. This Journal includes first through fourth place winners in the 2008 AWC Writing Competition who chose to have their works appear in this online publication (www.alalit.com). Congratulations to all winners and a special thank you to those included herein for providing their work in electronic form for ALALITCOM. Winners whose work does not appear have placed their winning pieces elsewhere. Recognizing that each submission to the AWC Writing Competition is a gift (of the writer's creativity, honor of the craft, energy, self-expression, purpose and hours of discipline) lovingly and bravely offered to the wider world, every entry in this contest is a winner.

I hope you will enjoy the gifts presented in the 2008 ALALITCOM.

Marian Lewis
Editor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	Page
Unbroken Circle ~ Carolyn Davis	5
The Blue Bag Cult ~ Gary R. Hoffman	7
Garden of Beaune ~ Rusty Bynum	13
Ode to the Pig ~ Alexander M. Bruce	21
The Funeral ~ Ramey Channell	23
Grandmother Lost ~ Jan Martin Harris	31
East Africa: A Peace Corps Memoir 1962-1964 ~ Rebecca Henderson	32
Gone ~ G. Robert Zambs	38
Hours Not Ours ~ Megan McDaniel	44
Don't Sass Your Momma ~ Reilly Maginn	45
Untitled (I've only been to the lake) ~ Robert Gray	49
The Chocolate Cake Bait ~ Cathy C. Hall	50
The Juice ~ Larry Wilson	54
Sour Grape Babies ~ Jerri Hardesty	58
Winning the War at Home ~ Pamela D. Toler	59
Bedtime Story ~ Deanne Charlton	73
Charlie Bill Leaves Home ~ Ramey Channell	74
Matinee Girl ~ Nina Bayer	77
Secret Sisters ~ Rose Nelson	82
The Highs and Lows of Divine Appointment ~ Vicki H. Moss	92
2008 Winners List	97

Unbroken Circle

Carolyn Davis

The earth revolves (turn, turn)
from winter/spring through summer/fall.
It showers snowflakes, blossoms, leaves,
each in season. Now we've come
to understand that nothing new
beneath the sun is left to meet.

At night, the sun has left to mete
out shadows on the moon. In turn,
the lunar phases, full-to-new,
command the tides to rise and fall.
Celestial cycles seem to come
as explanation. Water leaves

the sky as rain for thirsty leaves
and muddy streams, which flow and meet
broad rivers, misting to become
a nascent cloud, soon high in turn.
As vapor rises, raindrops fall:
an ancient cycle, ever new.

The larva writhes as if it knew
its form, cocooned beneath the leaves
--- a silken ornament since fall ---
will die somehow, but, dying, meet
its own winged beauty in return:
a promised miracle, now come.

And our poor species, what outcome?
History shows we build anew
from empires' ashes. Still we turn
from our best selves and conscience leaves
us lacking. Can expedience meet
ideals before the Second Fall?

A single life's a mere footfall
and yet a soul can overcome,
when legacies of fathers meet
the needs and hopes of offspring new.
We will endure if we believe
that promised good can still return.

The spiral of life will turn and come
full circle, when we meet anew:
ourselves. No one leaves 'til curtain fall.

Carolyn Davis *retired to North Carolina's Smoky Mountains after a varied career (electronics engineer, nonprofit association director, teacher) and is enjoying the luxury of having unencumbered time to write. She is currently working on a chapbook of poems about Appalachia.*

~~~~
~~~~

Humor

The Blue Bag Cult

Gary R. Hoffman

There's an old saying about it takes a good friend to help you move, but it takes a really good friend to help you move a body. I called Marilyn.

"He's gone."

"Define gone."

"Like out of my life forever." I reflected on that. "Actually, out of everybody's life forever."

"Oh my God. You actually did it? You killed him?"

"Well, it was more like an accident."

"What kind of an accident?"

"Well, he had just finished cleaning his pistol. He handed it to me so I could inspect it, and it accidentally went off."

"It *accidentally* went off?"

"Right."

"How many times?"

"Five."

"Five times! What happened? The trigger get stuck?"

"Nope, ran out of shells. He always kept the chamber in front of the firing pin open."

"Val, why are you telling me this?"

"I need help."

"Well, I can't argue with that, but I'm not a lawyer or a shrink."

"No, I need help getting rid of him."

"You want me to help you get rid of his body?"

"Yep!"

"Why don't you just call the police? You said it was an accident."

"Haven't you ever heard me threaten to kill him because he whacked me around?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so."

"There are probably a hundred other people to could testify to that, too."

There was an embarrassingly long pause. "And I'm going to assume you have a plan in mind."

"Oh, yeah. Simple plan. The simplest. You know—simple is always better. I mean, Roger himself was fairly simple, too."

There was another long pause, but I could hear her breathing. She finally spoke. "I'm really not sure I want to hear this, but tell me the plan."

"Well, I've got this old rug I've wanted to dispose of. I'm gonna roll him in the rug and set it for the trash tomorrow morning."

"For the trash?"

"Yeah, why not? Tomorrow is one of those days when you can put anything out, and they'll take it. We got a letter about it last week."

"Did the letter happen to include anything about dead bodies?"

"Well, not specifically. But they'll just take the rug and toss the whole thing into the truck. I just need some help getting him to the curb."

Another long pause. "Do you think we ought to wait until dark? The neighbors might object."

"Yeah, that would be fine. Probably a good idea, in fact. I mean we can do it anytime. Roger ain't goin' anywhere."

"I'll see you around nine."

I took off his clothes and rolled him all nice and neat in the rug. I stepped over the bundle and headed for the kitchen, and a ham and Swiss sandwich. I mean, after all, the living have needs. Right now, mine was hunger.

Marilyn arrived right at nine. It was a struggle--he wasn't bending anymore--but we got the rug moved out by the curb. I got my other trash cans ready and curbed them.

After we got the chores done, I opened a bottle of wine. It gave us a nice warm fuzzy feeling. As Marilyn was leaving, I walked to the curb and stuck the empty wine bottle down in the rug with Roger. No sense filling up my trash cans more when I had someplace to put it.

I had a restless night, so I was up early. One of the first things I did, after the bathroom thing, was to check the curb. I forgot one event that coincides with "put-anything-out-on-the-curb-trash-day." Guys in trucks come around very late or very early, depending on your point of view, and rummage through all the stuff trying to find something good to use or sell.

When I looked out, there was Roger with an empty wine bottle balanced perfectly on his head standing buck naked in-between my two trash cans. Someone must have wanted the rug, but not Roger. I couldn't blame them much for not wanting Roger. I mean, I didn't much want him either. Anyway, it was fortunate there

was nothing sitting on my dining room table because I grabbed the table cloth and headed for the curb. I got it over Roger's head, and he looked like a beach umbrella standing there, but a very fancy lace beach umbrella. I had never seen one like that and wondered if they might sell.

I headed for the phone. "Marilyn, it's me."

"What the hell time is it?"

"Early, but we have a problem."

"We?"

"Someone left Roger standing by the curb."

"What?"

"Roger's outside looking like a beach umbrella. I need you to come over and help me."

"A beach umbrella? And what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, I can't just leave him standing there like that. If the trash guys take him, they'll take the table cloth, too, and I kind of like that table cloth."

"Table cloth?"

"Just get over here, would you please. You'll see what I'm talking about."

Marilyn was puzzled when she looked at Roger. He did look like a beach umbrella, but with a strange foot-like pole on the bottom. "So now what?"

"Help me load him in the trunk of my car. We'll figure the rest out later."

I got my car up close to Roger, but he wouldn't fit in the trunk. He was stiff as yesterday's carp. The only way we could get him almost in was to leave his feet sticking out. "Think we should tie a red flag to his toe?" Marilyn asked.

"How about if we cover his feet with a Wal-Mart bag? I got lots of them." I put the bag around Roger's feet, and got a piece of rope to tie down the trunk lid. I pulled it tight, wrapped the rope around Roger's legs to help hold the plastic bag on, and tied it to the trailer hitch. "If anyone sees him, they'll probably figure we're hauling a mannequin."

"You got some coffee?" Marilyn asked. "I haven't even had a cup of coffee this morning, and I'm stuffing a body in the trunk of a car."

"Sure, come on in. We'll talk about what we're going to do next."

"What "we're" going to do? As in we? I think what I might do next is go home and go back to bed."

"I'm really gonna need some help getting him out of the trunk."

As it turned out, that wasn't the truth at all. We were driving down the interstate heading for someplace that looked like a good place to dump bodies, wherever that was. I mean it's not like they had signs up advertising, "Dump unwanted bodies here!" Anyway, suddenly this bozo cuts me off. I had to slam on the brakes and jerk the car to the left to avoid hitting him. Marilyn leaned out the window and gave him a one finger salute, but I don't think he was impressed.

While Marilyn was busy doing her thing, and we were still weaving and skidding around, I looked in disbelief as the trunk came open. Right at that point, I wished I had paid more attention to my Brownie knot-tying skills. Then in my rear view mirror, I see Roger skidding down the shoulder of the road.

I drove to the next exit, made the loop, and headed back. Too late. There were flashing blue lights on top of the car stopped right behind him. I was almost certain it wasn't a traveling K-Mart having a special.

On the news that night, there was a report of a body being found on the shoulder of the interstate. The Holton Chief of Police was interviewed. "As much as I hate to say this, we may have some sort of new cult in the area. A naked man was found with a blue Wal-Mart bag wrapped around his feet. And his body was just dumped along side the road. He may have been a sacrifice of some kind."

I repeated that out loud. "He may have been a sacrifice." It had a nice ring to it. Well, if sacrifices were supposed to make someone's life better, Roger's being gone would sure help mine.

Gary R. Hoffman *taught English and Speech/Drama for 22 years. He quit teaching 20 years ago. He now lives in a motor home. He has many short stories published in anthologies, -e-zines, and magazines*

~~~~
~~~~

First Chapter Novel

Garden of Beaune

Rusty Bynum

There ought to be a better word for ending life—a word to speak a bridge between the living and the leaving. But then, there ought to be better words for lots of things. Transcendent love, for example. There's not a word for that. Or the pattern of a flock of birds in syncopated dance.

The dance of birds caught her, swept her thoughts with them into a cloudless sky. *No words,* they laughed at her. *Just air and sky and us together. All of us together, dancing above you.*

Lenora Anne Maxwell heard her own laughter.

It occurred to her that lately she didn't hear that very much – her own laughter. Seemed a shame, really. Carlton J had loved the sound of Lenora Anne's laugh. Sometimes in the morning he would brush her bare toes with his fingertips to hear her awaken with a giggle. It was always the sweep of covers across her legs that woke her, but the giggle was genuine. She never told him she was already awake and waiting for his touch. She didn't want to lose his mischievous smile that greeted her when she giggled before opening her sleepy eyes. Besides, there was plenty of time to confess little secrets. They had their whole lives to share.

She blinked her eyes and the cloudless sky was empty, a naked blue canvas stretched beyond the window. The birds were gone, but the light was good. It was going to be a perfect day for painting.

The closet's carved door swung open easily, revealing a mahogany stand layered with quilts of ancient, elaborate designs. Lenora Anne leaned on the stand as she wheeled it out of the closet, laughing yet again at the absurdity of a quilt stand on wheels. Silly or not, it had served its purpose.

A sigh escaped her. How many deceptions had she fashioned in the long decades since those remembered awakenings? How many illusions had she spun to manage life alone? She straightened up slowly, took a deep breath and raised her

head until her chin formed its proper parallel with the gleaming wood floors; only then did she shift her body away from the security of the mahogany quilt stand.

As she walked to the door of the studio, she trailed a graceful hand along the wall for support. She took comfort in the loud click of the lock. This was no time for surprise visits, no matter how well intentioned they might be. On the way back to the closet she reached for the quilt stand and used it as a walker on the last few feet of her journey.

"Today's exhibition," she announced to the empty studio, "is entitled, 'Requiem for a Retrospective'. "

From the depths of the closet Lenora Anne Maxwell retrieved five large paintings: all oil on canvas, all unframed, all painted in exquisite detail. She propped them against the walls of the studio. Turning to study painting after painting, she knew how it would feel to be a wild bird circling above the world and looking down on a whole life.

There was an uncertainty in the brush strokes of the collection's first painting, particularly in the ripples of the water in the lower left corner. By the time one's eye rose to the glint of reflection in the window of the little red houseboat, however, the artist's strokes were confident.

As always, Lenora Anne judged the third painting to be the most tender, its filtered light spilling through the stained glass windows onto the floor beneath the baptismal font. Her heart ached for a child to christen in that magical font, her fingers reached to bathe in the shallow pool of holy water.

The fifth painting held her captive in its sunlight, as she knew it would. Its warmth slowed her breathing, gave her time to savor the sweetness of the flowers that climbed upwards on the ancient garden wall. She was glad she had saved this one for last. This one beckoned her to follow the flowers, to lodge one dainty foot in the crumbling brick and lift herself up, to discover at last what was on the other side.

A deep gasp filled her lungs and left her in a long moaning sigh. She pulled one last canvas from the closet: unprimed, unpainted, a blank reproach. She carried it across the room and set it firmly on an easel. Then she sat herself on a tall stool facing it.

The light was good. It was going to be a perfect day for painting.

Lenora Anne Maxwell sat motionless in the light, turning one question around in her mind: How was she going to explain why she had killed the artist?

• • •

The cornmeal dough was cool in Manuela Villalobos' hands, a reassuring sphere that yielded easily. At the moment of softening, just as the dough began to accept the dents of Manuela's cradling fingers, she smoothed the mound into a deep patty on the breadboard. It was a good batch.

She hummed as she worked, watching New Orleans' dawn blossom from grey to gold outside the little window above the sink. When the first shard of daylight sliced open the new day, Manuela watched in silence.

"Gracias," she whispered, then turned to stir the beef chunks that bubbled and steamed in hot spices.

Half of the tamales would be a perfect gift to herself when she got home tonight. The other half would wait in Señor Carlton's refrigerator—a surprise present for the silly old fool.

By the time the tamales were stuffed, wrapped and baked brown in their cornhusk jackets, Manuela's apartment was spotlessly clean, she was showered and dressed, and the day's letter to her granddaughter was stamped and tucked into her bag for mailing on the way to work.

She slipped an apron over her head before opening the oven door. As she lifted the steaming pan from the rack, Manuela held her breath. Only when the dish was safely settled on the waiting hotpad and Manuela had stepped away two paces, did she allow herself the luxury of breathing again. She inhaled deep draughts of the pungent aroma. She closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of home, of her daughter's adobe house in Mexico, of her granddaughter waiting for tamales.

"Chavela," she sighed. *"Chiquita mia."* My little one.

Half the tamales she ladled into a heavy glass dish. The other half she covered with aluminum foil and returned to the oven. Not until the glass dish was covered in foil and securely nestled in a carrying basket did she risk removing her apron. Every precaution was taken to keep her uniform perfectly, crisply white.

Señor Carlton wouldn't mind if Manuela arrived for work with a speck on her uniform. Actually, he'd view it as a triumph.

Oh, the little war they had waged over uniforms! He insisting Manuela dress in the native costume of Mexico, she requiring that he supply starched white uniforms suitable for a servant of health.

"Darling," Carlton had drawled, "you're not my nurse. You're my *maid.* And in case you haven't noticed, querida, I really do love color in my home."

"When I keep your house clean, Señor, I help keep you healthy." Manuela's voice was uncompromisingly soft.

He: "Is it asking too much for you to use some imagination? To enjoy a little color?"

She: "Imagine green fuzz on the food in your refrigerator."

He: "I really don't see why I should have to put up with blackmail *and* dull clothing."

She: "Not dull, Señor. White."

She had seen boys like Carlton in her high school history classes in Hermosillo. They were invariably spoiled and almost always smart. Even as a beginning teacher, Manuela realized the potential disaster in such a combination. Early in her career she decided that life had already been much too easy on such boys, leaving them ill equipped to make their way in the world should their parents die without bequeathing adequately luxurious inheritances. Therefore her students came to know Señora Villalobos as a soft-spoken dictator with no regard for democratic practices within her classroom.

In recent months, she'd taken to wearing her grandmother's brooch on the left lapel of her starched white uniform. The first time he saw it, Señor Carlton had choked on his benéit and splashed coffee on the gold-threaded placemat.

Before gathering her purse and basket in preparation for her walk to the bus stop, Manuela made her morning pilgrimage to the small altar in her living room. She had realized some months ago that the Blessed Virgin had granted Manuela a special dispensation so she no longer was required to kneel during her morning devotional. She was grateful for the daily respite from the pain of arthritic knees

grinding against an unyielding hardwood floor, as well as the indignity of having to clasp the altar table to pull herself to her feet once her prayers were finished.

As she took one match from the delicate porcelain bowl beside the votive candle, Manuela's vision softened. She crossed herself, lit the candle, whispered an *Ave.*

"Madre de Dios," she said, *"ayúdame."* Mother of God, help me.

The candle's flicker danced on the brass crucifix, caressed the face of the Virgin Mary's statue beside it. Manuela automatically—unconsciously—stroked the fine silk scarf that served as altarcloth. She took a breath so quick and deep that an onlooker would have thought she gasped. But no, it was a breath of longing, of hope grasped even as it was deferred. Then she blew out the candle and picked up the black felt marker that lay beside it.

Her eyes starkly focused, she looked at the calendar hanging above the altar table, its two-inch day squares topped by this month's reproduction of a Georgia O'Keefe flower, lascivious folds and insistent colors pulling Manuela back from her soft prayers. There was nothing soft about the great "X" Manuela marked across today's two-inch square. In the bottom of the X, trapped inside that letter's black legs, she wrote, "3,928." At the top of the square, in an exaltation that fairly leapt from the arms of the X, Manuela Villalobos wrote, "42."

• • •

"Buenos días," she called as she unlocked the door to Señor Carlton's service entrance, "Manuela is here." Of course there was no answer. It was only 9:45. If Manuela got white uniforms, which she did, then Carlton got to sleep late every morning, which he did. Whatever color Señor Carlton wanted in his life, he got from this huge ancient house and his store full of overpriced antiques. Whatever satisfaction of her early bird ethic Manuela wanted, she got spending her mornings working in her tiny apartment before she unlocked the door to Señor Carlton's service entrance.

Dios, she thought, the two of them compromised just like old married people. The thought gave her a shudder.

• • •

Carlton P. Maxwell, III was out of bed, showered and dressed when he heard the heavy thud of the service entrance door. For a while, during his morning toilet, he had toyed with the notion of surprising Manuela with today's early rising. He relished the thought of her shock, imagining how she'd stammer at his unaccustomed display of responsibility, perhaps even lapsing into Spanish in her confused surprise.

"Ay, Señor!" he could hear Manuela blurt, "what are you doing in my kitchen at this hour?" And then she'd catch herself, recalling one sentence too late that she was only the maid speaking inappropriately to the man who was, after all, her boss. *"Perdóneme, Señor,"* and here the stammering would begin, *"pero no entiendo* ... I don't understand ... *usted nunca, nunca* ... you surprise me ... *todas las mañanas, durmiendo."* Suddenly she would stop herself from talking and take a deep breath. She would close her eyes for the merest moment, scarcely more than a blink but long enough to shut him out of her confusion. Then she would raise her head to look at him directly and say, with great respect, *"Perdóneme, Señor. ¿Quieres café?* Can I fix you some coffee?"

The prospect of Manuela's confusion was such a delicious thought that Carlton laughed out loud as he applied the daily sunscreen to his face and throat, being careful not to neglect the back of his neck and his ears. By the time he had his hair combed into a proper sweep, however, he had talked himself out of it. What if, in the aftermath of her surprise, Manuela assumed that Carlton was turning over a new leaf? What if she expected him to be waiting for her in the kitchen tomorrow? Or three days after tomorrow? Or next month, for heaven's sake? The very idea was almost enough to send Carlton back to bed immediately. Still, he was already dressed, and his face cream was much too expensive to waste as a smear on the satin pillowcase. And he was having a really good hair day.

Instead, Carlton P. had turned his attention elsewhere, taking his own sweet time choosing his ensemble for the day. He'd settled on grey cashmere dress slacks, a silk poet's shirt, and a hand painted scarf tossed with casual precision around his neck.

That was before the scent of Manuela's tamales reached his room at the top of the stairs. Carlton felt his mouth begin to water. What *was* it about Manuela's

tamales? The delicately sautéed onions? The pepper from freshly ground jalapeño chilis? The merest sprinkling of cumin? More likely—and here Carlton knew he brushed against the truth—it was Manuela's magic.

He turned his head toward the bedroom door to catch the scent, realizing he'd been defeated before the day had seen so much as a proper beginning.

It wouldn't do. Carlton was bound to maintain his position. His spirit. His elán. Most importantly, his freedom from feminine wiles. No woman had ever conquered Carlton P. Maxwell, III. Well, not counting Lenora Anne. But Lenora Anne didn't count. She wasn't a woman. She was his mother.

Carlton folded the hand painted scarf, hung the silk poet's shirt beside the cream French cuffs, caught the cashmere slacks in the pant hanger so it preserved the knife-edged crease in both legs. He sighed. Unexpected events demand unexpected wardrobe changes.

By the time Carlton P. stepped down the curved staircase and rounded the hall corner into the kitchen, his morning entrance was right on schedule. The shirt he wore was a monogrammed linen. He'd yearned for a turtleneck, but it would have mussed his hair. At his throat was a multicolored jabot, topped with a brown herringbone tweed jacket. Single breasted. His cream colored slacks had elastic in the back, carefully tailored to be hidden by the hand-carved leather belt. Flashing what he presumed to be a lordly smile at Manuela, he buttoned one button of the herringbone tweed jacket, a final and reassuring girding of his loins as he strode into the day ahead.

"Buenos días, Señor." Manuela made no effort to hide her surprise at Carlton's unaccustomed good humor before he had his morning cups of coffee. She studied his face. "Are you well?"

Carlton shouldn't have been taken aback by Manuela's discerning eye, but he was. He threw out his chest. Darned if he'd let her get the upper hand today.

"Waked up by a beautiful dream, querida," he smiled. "Fields of flowers. Fields and fields. A whole world of color. Like living inside a Georgia O'Keefe painting." He risked a sidelong glance at Manuela. She concentrated on the coffeemaker. "Like the calendar I gave you, but a thousand times over."

Manuela counted the scoops of coffee.

Carlton bent to see if he could catch her eye. “Do you use it, querida? The O’Keefe calendar?”

“Uno momento, por favor,” she held up her hand to stop his questions as she counted the last scoop. She lifted her eyes to meet his. *“Sí, Señor,”* she said evenly. “Every day of my life.”

Rusty Bynum *celebrates the writing life at her home near Monte Sano State Park, in Huntsville, Alabama.*

~~~~
~~~~

Humor

Ode to the Pig

Alexander M. Bruce

O glorious swine,
O princely porcine,
        We thank thee for thy meat;
Thou giv'st us shank,
Ham, chop, and flank,
        And such tender, pickled feet.

What would'st dawn be
Hadst thou not offered me
        Hot bacon, so crisp and fried?
Or sausage pink,
Both disk and link
        Or done up Canadian-ied?

Loin from thy back,
Of ribs, a rack,
        We smok'st, as 't is worth;
So from thee too
Comes Bar-B-Q,
        Most near to manna on earth.

Thou blessest too
Those dieters who
        Must watch what 't is they ate;
Thou grants them snack:
Pork rinds do lack
        The evil carbohydrate.

Some gluttons be
Who favour thee
        For thy oh-so-yummy snout;
Others do hype
Thy wanton tripe—
        Or to say, thine insides-out.

And few, even worse,
Deserve a curse
        When thee they do abuse
By crying—most foul!—
For fatten'd hog-jowl

Or SPAM, the butcher's refuse.

But true lovers, we
Do honour thee
By bringing thy name to light:
We get all giggly
Over "Piggly-Wiggly"
And towns like "Sow's Delight."

So all praise be
To humble thee,
Thou truffle-digging beast:
God shield thee well
'Til death's sharp knell
Makes thee center of our feast.

Alexander M. Bruce *is Associate Dean of Students at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn. An erstwhile English professor, he has written two books and numerous journal essays on academic topics; he enjoys creative writing as a chance to be less serious and more human. His preferred hobbies include brewing beer and serving as a judge at barbecue competitions.*

~~~~
~~~~

Fiction

The Funeral

Ramey Channell

My parents came from families as different as any two families could possibly be. Mama's family, the Satterfields and the Tooeys were all well-to-do landowners here in Rock Ridge, descended from Quakers and French Huguenots who came here seeking religious freedom. My daddy's family, the Nashes, originally spelled their name Naiche, and were mixed-bloods, part Apache. The Mescaleros and Chiricahuas came to Alabama in the 1800's when the United States Government caught all the poor old Apaches and moved them first to Florida, then to Alabama. Finally most of the tribe, at least the ones who had survived, ended up in Oklahoma; but my daddy's people slipped away into the woods with some Choctaws and stayed in Alabama. The dark-skinned Nashes intermarried with the pallid, cotton-haired Isbells, a dynastic farming family who may have invented the word "overpopulation."

One of my earliest memories, way back when I was so little I was still wearing diapers pinned with two pins on each side and dragging an old baby blanket around, is when my daddy's cousins came to live with us. Their names were Henry Hope Nash and Harold Hope Nash, and even though they were twins, you would never have guessed they were brothers by looking at them. Harold was big and heavy, with short black hair slicked back with hair oil. He had a big round face, and he was always smiling. He talked with a booming voice that scared me, and he seemed too big for any room that he walked into.

Henry Hope was totally different from his brother. Henry Hope resembled my daddy, tall with a long thin face. But he was pale and fragile looking, and his eyes were too big for his face. His thin hair was long in front, and the way it hung down around his face made him look pitiful somehow. He followed Harold around, his skinny arms dangling nervously at his sides, his gawky hands plucking and fidgeting at his faded overalls and white shirts. His clothes were always starched and ironed so stiff, it made him look even thinner than he was.

So, when their mamma and daddy, Aunt Lexie and Uncle Jim, were killed in Uncle Jim's logging truck, Harold and Henry Hope came to live with us for a while. I was little then, but I can remember sitting on the floor playing tinker toys with Henry Hope, while Harold laughed and sang crazy songs and ironed his brother's clothes with my mama's electric iron.

Harold sang lots of funny songs and one of them went like this:

> Has everybody heard about Henry?
> He's just come back from the army.
> Everybody knows he's back from the front.
> Hip-hip, hooray for Henry!

When he sang "Hip-hip hooray," Harold slapped his behind loudly, then waved his hand in the air. Henry Hope would duck his head sheepishly and smile, listening to his brother sing; but he never sang along.

Mama and Daddy said Henry Hope was simple-minded, like a child, but that was alright with me. After Harold got a good job and bought a little house in town for him and Henry Hope, they still came to visit us sometimes. Harold went out drinking at night with Daddy and his friends; but Henry Hope always stayed with Mama and me, playing tinker toys even after I stopped caring anything about them. In the still night-time house, Mama read out loud to us, from whatever book she happened to be reading, and Henry Hope's face would have that far-away look. Staring out the window into the dark night, he'd ask,

"Cud'n Sara, when's them . . . boys . . . comin' home?"

He'd ask that same question over and over. But when he got too sleepy, he'd just lay down right on the floor and go to sleep.

The summer that I was eight years old, I hadn't seen Harold and Henry Hope for at least a year. They came every Christmas, but Henry Hope had the flu that year, so they didn't come.

Then Daddy came home from work one afternoon, and told us that Harold had been killed working on the railroad. Two cars had coupled on him. That meant that two of the railroad cars caught Harold between them when they were slamming

together. Mama patted Daddy gently on the back, and just said, “Well, Sam? Well, Sam?”, and they both went into the house, crying.

I sat down right on the porch floor, unable to do anything. Glancing across the yard at the long rope swing in our big hickory tree, I thought about Henry Hope sitting there, a serious look on his face, his big gawky hands holding onto the ropes and his long legs stuck straight out in front of him. I remembered the determined look on his face, like he was working on something really important. And Harold stood on the front porch looking worried sometimes and smiling sometimes as he watched his brother in the swing. The limb was so high and the ropes were so long, the swing moved in a slow, high arc.

“You hold on tight, Henry Hope,” Harold called. “Are you holding on?”

Henry Hope just looked more determined and kept swinging. I pushed him a little bit to keep him going good.

“Don’t push him too high, Baby,” Harold called.

Remembering that day, and how Harold had been so worried about his brother in the swing, I leaned over and threw up right on the porch.

Rock Ridge Baptist Church sits on one side of the mountain road and the Rock Ridge Cemetery is at the end of a narrow dirt driveway on the other side of the road. The cemetery is surrounded by thickets of blackberry, honeysuckle, dogwood and sweet-gum. I guess there are a few people buried there that are not related to us, but most of them are. Some of the tombstones are so old you can’t read the names on them; but there are plenty of Satterfields, Tooeys and Nashes. And Isbells? There’s boo-coos of them!

The cemetery is so far off the road that you never hear any cars or trucks passing by. When you’re there in the graveyard it’s so quiet, all you hear is the sound of birds and katydids. The day of Harold’s funeral was scorching hot, and everybody was quiet, standing in the bright sweltering sun. When anyone whispered or coughed, it sounded really loud.

Henry Hope stood beside me with his hands clasped tight in front of him. Sometimes he’d look at my daddy, like he was watching to see how to stand and what to do.

There was a new young preacher, Brother Goforth, who had only been at Rock Ridge just a few weeks. He stood beside Harold's casket in the glaring sunshine, wearing black pants and a white short-sleeved shirt, holding his black Bible. His face looked stricken and sad, like he had lost a member of his own family.

"This is a sad day," Brother Goforth announced softly, sounding a little puzzled.

It seemed like that was all he intended to say, and everybody just stood there looking at him, waiting. Then he continued, "I didn't know Harold Nash . . . I'd never met him. Never saw him in church. But, I've been told that he was a good, kind man, and I believe it's so. I see he's left many a grievin' heart here today . . . family and friends. And his best friend of all, Mr. Henry Hope Nash, here."

Henry Hope jerked when he heard his name spoken, like you'll do when the teacher calls your name at school. He looked down at me and I looked up at him, and at that very moment I knew he was listening to a strange, tinny, mewing sound that I could hear starting up somewhere at the back of the graveyard.

"Book of St. John, chapter fourteen," the young preacher announced. "Let not your heart be troubled, our Lord Jesus said. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you."

"Amen," a few of the older men called out. "Amen, Brother."

Somewhere in the distance, the high-pitched sound started up again, like someone humming in a high, squeaky voice. Henry Hope looked out across the crowd, then he looked down at me again.

"Then our Lord said, I go to prepare a place for you," the preacher continued. "That where I am, there ye may be also."

Brother Goforth looked sincerely at the faces in front of him and said, "I believe Harold Hope Nash is in that place today, that place prepared for him by our Lord."

This time the squeaky sound was closer, right in the middle of the crowd, and getting louder. I listened, thinking that it sounded almost like short, quick notes of music from a fiddle. Not really a tune, just a series of notes.

People in the crowd started shuffling around, moving their feet and whispering a little. Brother Goforth continued.

"And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the light."

At this point, the whining, singing noise was really loud, and the crowd parted, making a clear path straight up to Harold's flower-covered casket. Henry Hope touched my shoulder and we both leaned forward, looking for the source of the high-pitched squeaking sound.

Just then someone whispered loudly, "The lord! It's a possum!"

Now possums are usually nocturnal, but if they get disturbed or curious about what's going on, they'll come out in the day-time. Sure enough, as we all watched, a mama possum with a bunch of little baby possums hanging onto her back, waddled out of the crowd, heading straight for Harold's casket. The mama possum was fat and gray with a long pink tail dragging the ground behind her. The baby possums were gray with white faces and white ears that were ruffled around the edges. They had little pink tails, tiny pink hands, and tiny black shining eyes. As she waddled along, the mama possum made soft smacking noises; but the baby possums were singing. It was the prettiest, sweetest sound I had ever heard; sweet high-pitched notes of music.

The astonished preacher stared at the possums.

The possums got louder.

Everyone in the crowd looked astounded and confused, and I was afraid that someone might hurt the mama possum and her babies, trying to run them away from the funeral. Then I heard Henry Hope's voice.

"Them possums . . . are . . . singin' to my brother."

My breath caught in my throat, and sudden tears filled my eyes. The preacher remained standing with his mouth open, looking at the singing possums.

The mama possum settled down right in front of us, and started grooming herself, licking one front paw, then wiping and combing her fur. The baby possums kept singing. When one fell off the mama's back, his squeaky song stopped abruptly till he managed to climb back on, then he joined back in with the others.

Gradually, I began to hear a melody, just a slight pattern of a tune, up and down, up and down. At the front of the crowd, Estaleen Howard stood with her husband,

Cowboy. She had a red crepe-paper flower in her hair, and Cowboy had a white one stuck in the top button-hole of his faded shirt. Somehow the sight of them looking so sad with their crepe-paper flowers just about broke my heart. Estaleen held baby Junior against her shoulder and he bounced up and down like some kind of wind-up toy, in time with the possum singing. Very softly, in a clear gentle voice, Estaleen began to sing, almost like the words came unconsciously, like someone talking to herself.

"Trouble and trials often betray those
On in the weary body to stray"

The words matched exactly with the rhythm of the sounds the possums made. Other voices joined in, and I heard my daddy's soft deep voice as the crowd sang the lyrics, Estaleen's clear voice leading them.

But we shall walk beside the still waters
With the Good Shepherd leading the way.
Those who have strayed were sought by the Master
He who once gave his life for the sheep.
Out on the mountain, still He is searching
Bringing them in forever to keep.

Going up home to live in green pastures
Where we shall live and die never more
Even the Lord will be in that number
When we shall reach that Heavenly shore.

We will not heed the voice of a stranger
For he would lead us all to despair.
Following on with Jesus our savior
We shall all reach that country so fair.

Going up home to live in green pastures
Where we shall live and die never more
Even the Lord will be in that number
When we shall reach that Heavenly shore.

With the last word of the song, everybody fell totally silent. The baby in Estaleen's arms stopped jumping up and down, and the mama possum stopped grooming herself and looked at the crowd for the first time.

Everybody stared at the possum, and the possum stared at us.

Someone stepped forward out of the crowd and softly approached the possums. It was Studebaker Freeman, a young black man with a reputation for being eccentric, or just plain crazy.

"Get from here!" he whispered, stomping his foot in the hot dust. "Get from here!"

The possum obediently waddled past the casket, past the preacher, and made her way toward the bushes at the edge of the graveyard.

"Um-hm," Studebaker hummed as the baby possums continued to sing their squeaky sweet notes. "That's real fine, but you got to get on away from here, 'less you want to end up on a plank with some sweet potatoes!"

Mama had stood absolutely still during the entire possum cantata, a seriously puzzled expression on her face. Daddy took a deep breath after all that singing. When the possums disappeared into the woods he looked at me, then at Henry Hope, and just said, "Well, I'll say!"

Studebaker returned, looking official and business-like, and stood at the back of the crowd.

Brother Goforth cleared his throat a few times and finally regained his voice, then said, "You know, brothers and sisters, the Bible says that the Lord shall use foolish things to confound the wise,"

"I know that's the truth. He <u>will</u> do that!" Studebaker called out from the back of the crowd.

The older men all turned and looked at Studebaker, then turned back toward the preacher and said "Amen. Amen, Brother!", not wanting to be outdone.

"Mr. Preacher," Henry Hope spoke up. "I think my brother is . . . in Heaven now."

"I think so, too," the preacher said. "I think so, too." Then he walked over to Henry Hope and put both arms around his neck and hugged him.

The new preacher was proud and stunned when several people got converted that day and asked to join the church. I guess it just goes to show you. Most everybody there lined up to shake Henry Hope's hand and pat him on the back, and he shyly allowed them to do so. The crowd broke up, shaking hands with each other and patting each other on the back. Men removed their hats and wiped their sweaty foreheads with handkerchiefs, and women fanned themselves with their Sunday hats. We took Henry Hope with us to our house to get out of the blazing heat.

At home, Mama put quilts and pillows and an electric fan on the shady front porch, and we all collapsed onto the cool soft pallets to take a nap. When I woke up it was night-time. I could hear a hoot-owl calling, and Henry Hope was sitting up in one of the front-porch rocking chairs, humming the same haunting tune we had heard the possums sing.

I climbed onto his lap and leaned my head against his heart, Henry Hope laid his wet cheek against the top of my head, and we listened to the hoot-owl calling in the dark.

Ramey Channell *is a writer, artist and musician from Leeds, Alabama. She attended Bellarmine College and UAB, where she received the Barksdale Maynard Award for her short story Voltus Electricalus and Strata Illuminata. Ramey's fiction and poetry have been published by Aura Literary Arts Review and numerous other collections.*

~~~~
~~~~

Grandmother Lost

Jan Martin Harris

Grandmother Cassie died with undo haste.
She left this earth when Mother was just four.
Her family looked to find her in my face.

I'm told she lived her life with Southern grace
although Chicago winds beat at her door.
Grandmother Cassie died with undo haste.

Her death at twenty-nine was such a waste
of years to live and know her family lore.
The family looked to find her in my face.

Of motherhood she only had a taste.
Her baby daughters sorely needed more.
Grandmother Cassie died with undo haste.

The growing daughters moved from place to place.
Their move to Alabama was a chore.
Her siblings couldn't find her loving face.

The grief of loss has been a blackened lace
that changed my mother's life forevermore.
Grandmother Cassie died with undo haste.
Her family thought they saw her in my face.

Jan Martin Harris *is a neonatal nurse at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has been a nurse for thirty-three years and a writer for nineteen. She has written and published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction and has two completed novels she's seeking to publish, with three more novels underway.*

~~~~
~~~~

Nonfiction

East Africa: A Peace Corps Memoir 1962-1964

Rebecca Davis Henderson

The plane descended and flew along the coastline. The beach and ocean seemed to touch like the flowing seam of a giant robe. Villages of round mud huts erupted like bumps on the giant spreading skin. I soaked up the scene as a thirsty cloud might draw water.

In 1962 I was 21 years old and had never seen a documentary on East Africa. That, and I'd never been out of the Southern United States. But after six weeks of training at Syracuse University (and all those necessary shots), I joined nineteen other eager girls, boarding the plane bound for Tanganyika (now Tanzania) that September day.

And after eighteen hours flying time and seven hours of stops, East Africa came into view as the pilot circled Kilimanjaro. We were glued to the windows and snapped photo after photo of its snow-covered peak.

The first morning I woke to unfamiliar birdcalls and gazed upward to the thatched roof of the one-room hut. I'm here! The kapok-stuffed mattress sagged almost to the floor and contained me like a hollowed-out log. Two lizards living in the thatched ceiling were given the names Murt and Gurt. This was the Salvation Army Hostel where six more weeks of training continued.

Constant moist skin, matching the high humidity and heat, was a given. Sunglasses were a must for light sensitive eyes, and a year-round tan was no trouble

at all. Air-conditioning and iced drinks existed only in vivid dreams that melted with the rising sun.

We had no radios or televisions, no magazines to browse, no daily news, and no weather reports.

The game parks teemed with animals to thrill anyone and tsetse flies to thrill any entomologist. A net over the bed foiled the mosquitoes' fun. But a once-a-week malaria prophylactic pill was still necessary.

My first bicycle replaced my first car. As I peddled into town, children called out, "Jambo! Jambo!" One route passed a Moslem mosque. The other, Ocean Road, followed the curves of the beach and passed a Hindu crematorium. Land rovers shared the roundabouts with bicycles.

Town was picture-postcard-perfect Dar es Salaam—"Port of Peace". In its natural harbor ancient-looking dhows moved slowly, like great white swans, among the modern ships loaded with sisal and kapok.

While one street vendor sold British fish and chips, another sold roasted cassava and pierced coconuts. The shock of seeing beggars, some with leprosy, made textbook information a reality.

On the waterfront, swallows flew in the evenings around the old German Lutheran church steeple. They appeared to be winding an imaginary clock. Farther down the waterfront, the Roman Catholic Church bell called people to mass. Other familiar religions were also represented.

Then in this country the size of Texas, the diversity of German, British, Indian, African, and Arab cultures met. And flowing saris, punjabi dresses, black bui-buis, babies tied on backs with colorful kangas, men in long white kanzas, their heads

covered with embroidered kofias, and turbaned Sikhs all seemed to move like paint that refused to stay put on the canvas of my mind.

For the first six weeks I was awed by everything as Swahili language classes continued. Culture classes explained that multiple greetings were expected. And couples should not hold hands in public. Given that, I was shocked one day to see a man, along the roadway into town, turn his back and urinate. I got used to it.

People paid little attention to the passing of time. If scheduled to come for an appointment today, they might show up tomorrow or the next day and consider annoyance over their tardiness bad manners.

The long and short rains, monsoons that come and go in regular patterns, marked the passing seasons. The rains came about the same time every day, seemingly set by a cosmic clock.

When the six weeks of orientation ended, the idealized tourist picture ended also as the hospital scene unfolded all that stateside training did not foresee.

The floor of Muhumbili hospital, indeed the entire building, was spotlessly clean. The Peace Corps nurses learned why. Once a week on "decki" day the beds in the wards, with patients therein, were pushed into the halls. All personnel scrubbed the floor and walls. The unbathed patients forewent medications during this cleaning frenzy.

Afterwards, with ceremonial pomp, British Matron, her staff in tow, made "white glove" rounds. She greeted the patients; she did not inspect under the sheets. And steel needles were boiled in an open pan, not always long enough to reach sterility.

Intestinal parasites were common as well as malaria. One parasite, schistosoma, found in Africa and Asia, enters the skin from fresh water snails and causes much tissue damage and blood loss. Because of it, we were instructed to not even wade in fresh water. And the moist, hot climate encouraged the growth of bacteria, making it easy for wounds to go septic.

Babies were usually healthy until weaned from mother's milk, at which time they were fed "ugoli". This is a pasty food made from ground cassava and water. On one occasion at the hospital, I saw a young boy with amazingly light colored skin and hair. He was not an albino. He had kwashiorkor, a sever malnutrition condition, resulting from a diet not providing enough protein to even color his skin and hair.

In the lab where I worked, no sterile lancets for sticking fingers existed, only a corked needle in a bottle of alcohol. The microscope had one eyepiece. The small pipettes used to measure miniscule blood samples were broken on the tips, rendering them hopelessly inaccurate.

Following this short assignment, I worked at Ocean Road Hospital for three months. Blood samples came here from all over the country. The lab was housed in a picturesque former mosque. Its domed ceiling seemed to say, "Please whisper."

And the pupils of my eyes surely dilated that first day as I wondered, "Is this a historical section of the Smithsonian? Did Leevenhook or Pasteur work with this archaic-looking equipment? Am I expected to perform test here?"

And the electrical outlets were not standardized. Try imagining three sizes of outlets, all of the same voltage, in one room. The young Africa I worked with propped his feet on a desk and read the "Tanganyika Standard". I did the work. Even though I did not come all this way to do his work for him, neither did I come to offend.

Finally, the country's first medical school opened. On Ribbon Cutting Day, I snapped pictures of Tanganyika's President, Julius Nereye, and listened to his address. Thankfully, I did not fall from the outdoor second floor balcony when he said, "...and two Peace Corps Volunteers."

That's Lee and me! She and I were privileged to work alongside the teaching physicians from Australia, Germany, Scotland, and Switzerland. The students were some of the countries' finest. After five years of training, each graduate would be in charge of a bush country medical clinic. Upgrading care in these outlying districts was a vital need.

Since Tanganyika had no industry and few motor vehicles, the sky was clear, unpolluted blue. The stars seemed brighter than I remembered them at home. About suppertime every evening, drumming from across the way filled the air with mystique.

Hiring someone to cook for us girls provided an African with employment. The kitchen had an oversized stove but a very small refrigerator with only two ice trays. Our cook previously worked for a British lady. Her recommendation stated, "I wish that I could take Mohammed back to England with me."

And dear, barefooted Mohammed, dressed in white shorts and shirt, liked preparing a huge pot of rice. He had been instructed over and over, "Kidogo, kidogo", Swahili meaning "only a little". But the next day one of us girls turned the excess into rice pudding. For him a complete meal might be rice.

When several of us girls were sick, Mohammed was told, "Please wash the dishes thoroughly." He just pointed to the moon. I guess that "old devil moon" can be blamed for anything from heartache to diarrhea.

Now forty-five years of daily life has passed. Sometimes my memories rotate in what seems a kaleidoscope, all worthy of recognition. But one is especially bright.

After being in the country a year, I visited the southern highlands; a great contrast to the coastal region of Dar. Early one evening I sat on a hillside. Twilight wrapped me in its silence.

The almost barren plains far beyond softened in the setting sun's glow. Then my eyes came to rest on an isolated round village of round mud huts. They were but a bump on the spreading skin of a vast continent. All at once smoke like a prayer rose from the village cooking fire.

In the luminosity, I recalled the Hebrew Scriptures' account of creation. God said of his work, "It is good. Very good."

For a few moments I knew that perfection.

Rebecca "Becky" Henderson *now lives in her childhood home in Cullman, Alabama. Here she sorts through all that two people could store in an attic, eleven closets and a full basement. And from the kitchen windows she has observed, for three years, a momma groundhog with her babies. She has won various awards for her poetry and prose.*

~~~~
~~~~

Fiction

Gone

G. Robert Zambs

The steam spiraled up from the cup of coffee like smoke from a chimney on a raw, cold, January day in the nation's capital, which in fact it was. The long, slender fingers clutched the cup of hot coffee attempting to trap every bit of heat radiating from the cup. Sitting in the booth, I stared at the fingers. It seemed as though I was looking into a slide viewer and someone suddenly changed the slide. The image in one eye was the scratched, chapped fingers with dirty, bitten nails that clutched the cup. But, the image in the other eye was of beautiful, delicate fingers with well-manicured nails that I remembered from years gone by. I blinked my eyes to get both my vision and my mind back in focus. The person whose hands the fingers belonged to, slowly lifted the cup off the table. The cup seemed to hover close to lips that blew the coffee before sipping it. The hands were shaking and some coffee spilled on the long, suede trench coat that I had given her a few years ago. Once a beautiful garment, it now looked worse than a horse blanket. But it was warm! Considering her life style, I was amazed that she still had it----and, that something had not happened to her because of it. What looked like an old wool sock concealed most of the matted, tangle mess that once was long, silky blond hair. Crudely eating the second egg and sausage biscuit, without looking up she spoke for the first time.

"I shouldn't be in here. Even though this is a crummy neighborhood, they don't like us to come in here. You know, street people, trash."

"Screw them," I responded looking around at the other customers in the worst fast-food eating-place, I had ever seen. The eatery was just off New York Avenue in an area of Washington that I only ventured into in the daytime. Then, it would only be a reason for which I would risk my life. The reason was sitting across the table from me. I looked at the reason, then at the other people milling around or sitting. A sudden feeling for a change of scenery engulfed me. However, it was impossible for me to see through the frost-covered window. I moved my head so that I was again looking at the people in the dismal fast-food joint. For an instant, I was looking at a still frame of destitution, failure, heartache, emptiness, dejection and abandonment of the will to live. It all seemed surreal. Suddenly I felt nausea. I thought that it was bizarre that my nostrils were portals to my stomach. A plenitude of odors not restricted to just greasy, fried food. Unwashed bodies swathed in dirty clothes soiled with God knows what. Air, polluted from the breath of a multitude of mouths that smelled worst than a cesspool. The only preferred customers in this place were those with the means to pay. I had dressed to attract as little attention as possible. I was wearing my old jump boots, scuffed and as dirty as I could get them. My pants looked like I had used them to clean every stable in Virginia. I had soiled a Good Will fatigue jacket with grease and dirt, in addition to cutting it in several places. Also, I was wearing an old watch hat pulled down over my ears.

Unceremoniously, she finished eating by wiping her mouth on the sleeve of her coat. She looked into my eyes for the first time. Emotions almost got the best of me. What were once beautiful violet, blue eyes that were windows, through which you could see

excitement and hope, were not looking at me. Instead, it was as though I was looking into a deep, dark hole---an endless unlighted tunnel---an empty room. How in God's name had she let herself sink this low?

"I have to go," she said with no intonation, no physical movement, and no emotion. It was as if she had depressed a button on a tape player concealed in her coat and I was listening to a recording.

I wanted to ask her not to go. Instead, come with me, if not home, then somewhere where I could take care of her. I ached to tell her that it would not be to start over, but to start anew. Tell her that it would be a chance to look forward, and not back at the past. However, I knew that it would do no good. I had tried many times before. Instead, I asked her if she wanted to take some food and coffee with her. She nodded yes.

I slid over on the bench to get out of the booth. It felt as though someone had strapped a bag of rocks on my back. The emotional weight of our meeting was a burden that was extremely difficult for me to endure. One step from the booth I stopped. Turning my head so that I could see her I said, "You won't leave while I'm gone will you?"

"No." Then she added, "I promise."

Warped humor I thought. For her to promise me anything but misery was surreal. The place was not so crowded now and I noted that I could watch her while I was away from

the booth. Also, while getting some burgers and coffee to go, might give me the opportunity to hide some money. I was hesitant to give her money for a couple of reasons. On the street just having food could raise a red flag. Having money could get you killed. Additionally, I knew that if she were able to keep the money, she would not spend it on food. Even so, I had brought twenty one-dollar bills with me to put in the bag with the burgers. I decided that she would not be so apt to have problems if observed with a small denomination bill. The alarm going off in my head kept repeating, "Flawed logic." I decided that I would do it anyway.

Being whipped would not have been as painful as it was watching her as I waited for my order. She had not moved. How did it ever come to this I thought? Sure, the signs had been there. Her behavior changed, and she lost interest in anything at home. She became indifferent to me, to herself, to everyone and everything. She consistently missed work. Numerous times, I bailed her out of jail for driving under the influence---even for shoplifting. She had several car accidents that resulted in serious injuries and multiple purchases of vehicles. There had been repeated proof of drug use, and unexplained disappearance of money. She would stay away for a day or two only to return home a disgusting mess--- strung out and looking as though she had been sleeping in a garbage can. Then one day she left the business that I had started for her and the new apartment without a word and hardly any possessions except what was on her back. I waited, wondered and worried. That was ten months ago. If it had not been for a street lawyer friend and Father Mike at the Potomac River Front Shelter, I probably would not have found her. Father Mike had arranged for today's meeting.

A tap on the shoulder startled me. "Hey man, your order is ready", a large black man whose face looked as though he had tried to shave with a meat grinder mumbled incoherently. He must have been watching me drifting back in time.

I had one hand with twenty one-dollar bills clutched tightly in it, shoved in a pocket of my tattered field jacket. I picked up my order and opened the bag as if checking to see if I got everything. Putting my hand with the money into the bag, I let the one-dollar bills drop in with the food. I accomplished the action as nonchalantly as possible. Particularly considering the situation and feeling as though every vagrant in the place was watching me. God, I wonder if the meat grinder face is still observing me. Turning to walk back to the booth, I looked around as though I was not sure which one I had left. When I did, I noticed that she was still there.

Sliding back into the booth, I pushed the bag across the table to her. The bag quickly disappeared somewhere inside her ragged coat and I said lowly, "Be sure to look inside the bag when you are alone." She nodded and glanced quickly at me as if she got my cryptic message.

"I have to go now. It will be dark soon." With the most I had heard her say in months, she pulled her cap down more on the tangled mop of hair, buttoned her coat up to neck and slid out of the booth.

I could not look up. My eyes were burning from the tears that were shamelessly running in rivulets down my cheeks. She passed like a wisp. The touch on my shoulder was as soft as the voice that said, "Thanks Dad." When I finally looked up, she was gone.

G. Robert Zambs *was born in New York City to immigrant Italian parents. Around the world, careers provided a vast core of experience that his prose/poetry is based on. His writing has won awards, and appeared in publications* including The Beginnings, ByLine, This That and the Other, AWC Newsletter, *and several anthologies*

~~~~
~~~~

Free Verse

Hours Not Ours

Meagan McDaniel

This is not our furniture.
This is not our heat, however
the cats are fooled.
We have moved from the place of
no light to the place
of no doors and dark,
pressing heat, and it is not ours.
It is a place of not real and undecided.
Thin walls breathe radio, bark
morning, OUTSIDE—night.
Bed sheets, imaginary, whisper
quiet and *not ours*.
Beans are plastic, corn is decoration,
freezer is empty and
not ours.
I am hot and without
spoons that we forgot or coasters
to separate ours from
not ours. Hours
separate us from the time
that we will slip across
uncrushed carpet like oil
on water and leave
this place of Not
for what is Ours.

Meagan McDaniel *is a rising senior at the University of South Alabama majoring in English with a focus in Creative Writing. She hails from Leeds, Alabama and was most recently published in her university's literary journal, the Oracle*

~~~~
~~~~

Short Fiction

Don't Sass Your Momma

Reilly Maginn

We called him Mother. He was the landing officer aboard our carrier steaming through the south Pacific in search of the fleeing Japanese fleet. He was our guardian angel and guided us in for the immensely difficult carrier landings. More planes and pilots were lost in carrier landings than in combat in WW II. It was 1944 and our flight of eight ancient and obsolete torpedo-bomber-fighters had taken off for the battle of the Philippine Sea. These outdated aircraft were all we had to throw at the Japanese at the time. That day American fighters shot down more than 600 of their carrier based planes in the Marianas Turkey Shoot and sank three of their carriers. Our stunning victory was gained not without paying a price, though. I was the sole survivor of my squadron as the other seven planes of our flight were lost to enemy fire. So much for our clumsy, slow, lumbering torpedo planes.

I began frantically searching for our carrier after leaving the attack and dogfight. Through the broken cloud cover, as the sun sank slowly in the west, I saw only a vast empty ocean. No place to land my damaged and airplane; moreover I was nearly out of fuel.

There! Wait, over there to starboard. There in the distance was the wake of a ship. A carrier. Must be her, my carrier, my home base and hopefully, there would be Mother standing on her fantail waiting to bring me in. I dropped down to sea level, leaned up the gasoline mixture and throttled the engine down to conserve fuel. I was seriously concerned about running out of gas and having to ditch in the black,

threatening ocean. The needle was near empty. They would never find me in the dark if I ditched in the ocean at night.

I followed the wake of the carrier until I was only a few miles from her stern. Breaking radio silence, I called for help. Breaking radio silence was a real no-no; there were enemy submarines in the vicinity. "This is Red Fox leader. I'm desperately low on fuel, have a damaged aircraft and will need some deck illumination for a night landing. This is an emergency. I request a priority landing as I don't have the fuel to proceed into a standard landing pattern." The sun had already set and no moon was visible behind the cloud cover.

No reply. Nothing. *Was my radio working? Didn't they hear me? Why no reply?* Again I attempted to raise the carrier. "Red Fox leader attempting a landing with a damaged aircraft low on fuel. Please give me thirty seconds of deck light that I might make an emergency landing."

And again, no reply. Silence. I thought to myself, *under no circumstances am I going to ditch in the ocean. They'll never be able to find me in the dark. I'd rather crash on deck than ditch and drown in the sea.* I continued my approach toward the fantail of the carrier as I began the landing checklist in my head. *Wheels down. Flaps down. Hook down, Canopy back. Seat belts loosened for quick exit. Throttle back.* The plane began to flutter and waver just maintaining enough speed to prevent a stall. The engine began to miss and cough. I was running on fumes.

As I approached the stern, there was Mother, the landing officer with his paddles, frantically waving me off a landing. The landing officer is responsible for deciding if a landing aircraft is "in the groove", and is capable of landing safely. A fiery crash on deck can jeopardize the entire ship and its crew and it is Mother's

responsibility to allow only safe landings. He was also to wave off a plane that might crash and burn if it threatened the safety of the ship.. It was drummed into us in flight school that one never questions or disobeys Mothers orders; in this case, a "wave off "of an attempted landing. Never sass Momma.

Not sure if I had enough fuel to do a turn around, I gunned the plane and banked to port, avoiding the carrier's bridge island as I again lined up with the wake of the carrier. It was black as the inside of a burned out gun barrel. On the radio, I announced, once more, "I'm coming in momma, wave off or no. I will not ditch in the sea. I can't swim. I have enough fuel for one more try and I'm going to land or crash on deck, one way or another."

The engine began missing and sputtering as I throttled down. *Wheels down, Flaps down, Hook down, Canopy back, Restraints loosened,* I approached the carrier's stern. There was Mother, again waving his landing paddles frantically, trying to wave me off. As I cleared the stern, just twenty feet off the deck, the engine sputtered and quit. The Avenger flies like a brick when she loses power and I dropped heavily to the deck. My plane bounced once as I missed the first and second restraining cables. My tail hook caught the third wire, jerking to a stop just in front of the barrier at the end of the flight deck.

Perspiration beaded my forehead and face as I pulled off my helmet, goggles, oxygen mask and throat radio as I stood up in the cockpit. I thought to myself, *Thank you Lord. I'm down. I'll probably get a court martial for disobeying Mother's wave offs and orders not to land. Yet, maybe they'll give me a commendation for a difficult night landing and saving this pilot and this aircraft. Not likely, but just maybe.*

At that moment, a man in a yellow garrison cap bearing the rising sun red ball of the Japanese Navy, scurried from under the wing, looked up smiling toothily and said,

"Ah so, American Pilot, you make a very good night landing."

Dr. Reilly Maginn *is a storyteller. A medical outreach physician for fifteen years, he has hundreds of stories to tell. His debut novel,* BIO*, is a medical action thriller set in the south Pacific and has been well received by the reading public. Dr. Maginn likes what he does and is happy in his role of purveyor of tales, yarns and fables.*

~~~~
~~~~

Untitled

Robert Gray

i've only been to the lake
a few times since
my brother drew died
but i have often wondered
if he is still there
skiing through the narrows
like he always did
a single step off
the wooden platform
at the back of
the ski nautique
barefoot
with one leg crossed
over the other
as though he were sitting
in his own church pew
in his own cathedral
holding the rope handle
in the crook of his elbow
cigarette in one hand
and a miller high life in the other

if you're not out there
on the water now brother
i hope heaven is as good
as the lake would have been

Robert Gray *works at the University of South Alabama and lives in Mobile. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in English and a Ph.D. in Instructional Technology from the University of Alabama. His chapbook,* I Wish That I Were Langston Hughes*, will be out this summer from Negative Capability Press.*

~~~~
~~~~

The Chocolate Cake Bait

Cathy C. Hall

The sun shone brightly, the blue water sparkled, and the breeze was just swift enough to keep the bugs off His Royal Highness Jonathan Thomas Stuart the Third. It should have been a perfect day for fishing. And yet, there sat the king, crossed-legged on the palace dock, a scowl on his face, an empty bucket by his side.

Now do not think for one moment that our young Royal Highness, (for he is only 11 and a half years old), did not have the proper fishing equipment. Oh, no. His rod was polished ebony; his reel glittered like spun gold; even his hooks were hand-carved ivory. It was as handsome a fishing rig as could be found in the entire kingdom. But every fisherman must also have the proper bait.

"Cook," the young king had ordered that very morning, "I need bait fit for a king!"

The cook, who I'm sure wondered why the king would be ordering bait from the kitchen, stood waiting for further instructions.

"I've got it!" said the king. "The Royal Chocolate Cake!"

"Of course, sire," answered the cook. He dared not question the king's orders. A king is a king, even if he is just a boy.

And so the boy king had sat on the dock with his fine fishing gear and a scowl on his face the whole afternoon. Because, as you have already guessed, he could not catch a single, solitary fish with chocolate cake bait.

The next day, the king sat on the dock again, his empty bucket by his side. Once more, a scowl scrunched up his royal countenance. Eventually, he noticed several fishermen in a small rowboat, casting out their lines. They pulled one fish after another from the deep, blue water.

"Aha!" said the king. "I shall take the royal rowboat out into the deep, blue water and throw my line into the river. The dock is no place for a king to fish!"

So the king had his royal rowboat loaded with several scrumptious chocolate cakes and his fine fishing pole. He rowed out to the very middle of the beautiful river.

He cast his glittery line with a large chunk of chocolate cake bait into the deep, blue water. But do you honestly think the king got a bite?

The king watched as one fisherman after another scooped fish after fish from the deep, blue water. But His Royal Highness simply had no clue as to why he could not catch a fish himself. And he would not ask for help, for a king is a king, even if he is just a boy.

The following morning, the king rowed his boat further out into the beautiful river to try his luck again. Once more, a very serious scowl swept across the king's brow as his bucket remained empty beside him. This time, the king noticed a fisherman straining to pull a huge net from the deep, deep water. When the net finally landed on the fisherman's boat, it was brimming with all kinds of marvelous fish!

"Aha!" said the king. "I shall get a net of my own and cast it into the beautiful river. Obviously, a king needs a splendid net if he wants to catch fine, kingly fish!"

So the king loaded the royal rowboat with a dazzling net, weaved from strands of silver and gold. He stacked several royal desserts on the seat beside him. When the king was far out into the river, he flung the chocolate cake bait overboard. Next, he flung his royal dazzling net and set for awhile.

But when he pulled the net from the river, what do you think he found? I'm afraid you're right. Not a single kingly fish did he spot in the net. Of course, the king could have asked for help, but he didn't. A king is a king, even if he is just a boy.

The discouraged king returned to the royal dock, for he was exhausted from all that rowing and flinging. But when he arrived at his usual spot, he was exceedingly annoyed to find a boy, sitting crossed-legged on the dock, with a pole in his hands.

"What…how…who!" sputtered His Royal Highness Jonathan Thomas Stuart the Third. "This is the ROYAL dock!" he yelled with his customary scowl.

"Oh, your m-m-majesty," stammered the boy. "I'm so s-sorry. I didn't know you still used the royal dock."

The scared little fisherman hastily grabbed his pole. In his hurry to escape, the boy knocked over his own bucket and swoosh! Several fish slipped out of the bucket and flapped onto the dock.

“Hold on,” said the king, stopping the boy in his tracks. His Royal Highness had noticed the flapping fish. “There’s no need to hurry away yet. Just for today, you may fish from the royal dock. But do not disturb me, as I have many fine fish to catch!”

The young king sat a few feet further down the dock, all the while keeping an extremely close eye on his visitor.

So when the boy grabbed his simple bamboo pole, the king grabbed his ebony rod. When the boy picked up his very crooked hook, the king picked up his ivory hook. When the boy reached into a tin can and pulled out a squirming worm, the king jumped straight up into the air. I’m sure *you’re* not surprised, but the king was very shocked, indeed!

“Worms!” said the king, right out loud.

“These are the best worms in the entire kingdom,” bragged the boy. “They’re my secret bait!”

The king did not know what to say. Worms? Secret bait? Oh, dear. The king needed help, for he had not a single worm of his own and no idea where he might find this amazing secret bait that worked so well. But he couldn’t ask, for as we all know by now, a king is a king, even if he is just a boy.

“Wel-l-l-l,” the king tapped his finger against his chin. Could he have come up with a plan?

“I have the best chocolate cake in the entire kingdom,” said the king.

“Ooooh,” said the boy. “It does look awfully good.”

“If only you had something to trade,” offered the king. “Then you could have a piece.”

The boy thought for a moment. “What about my worms?” he asked. “The best worms in the kingdom for the best chocolate cake!”

“Hmmm. I suppose so, if that’s all you have,” said the king. “It’s a deal.”

The boy traded a handful of worms for a tiny sliver of chocolate cake. The king baited his ivory hook with his new and improved squiggly, squirming worm. He dropped his glittering line over the side of the dock into the beautiful river.

Suddenly, the line twitched, followed by a most definite tug! The king carefully reeled the line in, pulling it closer and closer. At last! There, dangling from the ivory hook, was the most glorious fish the king had ever seen.

"Look what I caught!" cried His Royal Highness. "All by myself!"

"Hooray for you!" said the boy.

The king's smile slowly faded. Perhaps it had occurred to the king that he would still be using that ridiculous chocolate cake bait, if not for a helping hand, er, worm, from the little fisherman. Whatever the reason, the king cut another, extra large piece of the Royal Chocolate Cake and gave it to the boy.

"Perhaps, um, we could meet again. Say tomorrow?" asked the king, shyly. "You could bring more worms and I could bring a cake," he said.

"M-m-m-m, sure," said the boy, chocolate crumbs spraying from his mouth.

Why, what do you know? The chocolate cake bait *had* caught something, hadn't it?

"You know," said the king to his new pal, "I think this is the beginning of a great friendship!"

And of course, it was. For boys will be boys, even if one is a king.

Cathy C. Hall *is a humor columnist for several magazines in the metro Atlanta area. Her essays have also appeared in anthologies, including most recently,* Chicken Soup for the Tea Lover's Soul. *She is currently juggling a handful of projects in children's fiction.*

~~~~
~~~~

Short Fiction

The Juice

Larry Wilson

Alanya, on the Turkish Mediterranean Coast, was relatively undiscovered by Americans in the summer of 1968. Alanya, a small fishing village, was surrounded by Roman ruins and the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. That morning the sea was as clear as a pane of glass and almost as flat. We were having breakfast at an outdoor café attached to a run-down beachfront hotel where we'd spent the night. A tattered canvas umbrella fended off the morning sun and white clouds hung almost motionless over the water .

The night before we dined at a table carried to the edge of the Mediterranean's calm waters. There were no English menus so we picked out our food by walking through the restaurant's kitchen. We ate mussels, fish, rice, fresh vegetables and Turkish bread called Ekmek baked fresh that morning. A bottle of Turkish white wine, crisp and dry, was wonderful and the fact that Muslims made such good wine amazed me. For me it had been nearly perfect but my family found it far different.

My wife, her eyes shielded by sunglasses, smoked a cigarette in silence. Her hand trembled slightly as she tapped off the ashes. "I hate this place. Why did we have to come here?" Her words were slurred as they often were when she took Valium, the sixties' answer to everything.

My daughter, barely two years old, whined unceasingly. Rejecting the typical Turkish breakfast of fruit, bread, jam, feta cheese and black olives she demanded, "cereal."

"I brought you some cereal dear. You can have some when we go back to the room," my wife said.

"Try the Ekmek, Diane," I said, "it's really good."

"No. Cereal."

"I don't want her eating this stuff, she'll get sick." My wife crushed out her cigarette and pulled Diane into her lap.

From a bougainvillea, the color of burgundy wine in the sun, a large wasp like creature darted out and grabbed a honey bee and flew back to its perch. In an instant it had bitten the bees head off and was eating the rest.

Oh God," my wife said and covered Diane's eyes so she wouldn't see. "I want to go home. Damn you, take me home." She pulled another Valium out of her purse and swallowed it with a gulp of hand-squeezed orange juice.

"All right we'll go, just let me finish my breakfast."

A young blonde woman walked around the corner of the motel carrying a back pack and starred at us for a moment before walking over.

"English?" She asked, her voice heavy with a German accent.

"American," I replied.

"Ah, American. Not many Americans come here. Could I please have a cigarette, I haven't had a decent cigarette in weeks. The Turkish ones are awful."

She wore a thin print skirt and a coarsely woven white cotton blouse snugged in by a silver harem belt. She stood leaning backwards slightly which caused the glistening silver belt to seem glued to her flat stomach as it flowed down between her legs to mid-thigh. Her skin was browned by the sun and her hair was bleached until it was nearly white.

"Sure." I pulled a fresh pack of Winstons from my shirt pocket and handed them to her. My wife frowned and Diane hid her face as the woman shook out a cigarette and lit it.

She inhaled deeply, blew out the smoke and immediately took another puff pulling the smoke deep into her lungs while staring at the food on the table.

"Ah, this is so good."

"Would you like to join us for breakfast? There's plenty."

"Could I? I'm really very hungry."

My wife's frown deepened.

"Have you been here long, in Turkey?" I asked as she devoured a slice of bread covered with cheese and jam.

"In Turkey since spring, in Alanya, for two weeks. This is my favorite spot so far. It's so beautiful here."

My wife stood up knocking her chair over and bumping the table so that my coffee splashed out of the cup. "I'm going to the room and pack. I want to get going right away." She walked away carrying Diane and staggering slightly.

I pulled a cigarette from the pack, lit it and watched the blonde girl eat. She finished all the bread, cheese and jam and then grabbed an apple from a bowl of fruit.. When she bit into it a trickle of juice ran down her chin and into the opening of her blouse. She wiped the juice off, moving the napkin slowly and looking directly at me. The wiping pulled open a button on her blouse revealing more of her tanned breasts.

"How long are you staying in Turkey?" I asked, trying not to stare.

"Germans don't worry as much as Americans. I will go home when it is time. There is no rush to life. For now, like the woman in your Marlon Brando movie, 'I depend on the kindness of strangers.' Do you know that movie."

"Yes, I know that movie."

"I'm sorry you are not here alone, she said softly."

"Lets go." My wife called from the car as she threw our bags in.

I signaled the waiter, paid the bill then picked up the cigarettes and handed them to her.

"Keep these, I have another pack in the car.

"Thank you," she said, slipping the cigarettes in the pocket of her skirt. Then, with a grin, she winked at me.

In the car Diane cried and my wife's only comment, before she drifted off into a Valium daze, was, "well, did you get her number."

Alanya has been discovered now but after forty years I remember it as it was then. Dinner on the sand next to the Mediterranean Sea and breakfast in an outdoor café. I remember a blonde German girl who in my mind never grows old. I remember how the juice from the apple ran down her chin and on to her breasts.

And I wish I had been alone.

Larry Wilson *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. Larry has also written a play and has a half finished draft of a novel gathering dust.*

~~~~
~~~~

Sour Grape Babies

Jerri Hardesty

I do not understand them,
Tiny squirming helpless things,
Always bundled up in fluffy layers,
Looking too delicate to hold.
I do not understand them,
Little screaming diaper machines,
2 AM alarming keens,
And they terrify me,
Frighten me in all they mean
And all they are.
I do not understand them.

And it seems I cannot have one.

Jerri Hardesty *lives in the woods of Alabama with husband, Kirk, and too many animals. Their nonprofit organization, New Dawn Unlimited, Inc., provides poetry publishing, production, performance, promotion, preservation, and education. They also organize live poetry events and websites, such as NewDawnUnlimited.com, PoetrySlam.net, and AlabamaPoetry.com.*

~~~~
~~~~

First Chapter Novel

Winning the War at Home

Pamela D. Toler

Angie Porter sat behind the counter of Night Owl's 24-Hour Bookstore and glared at the front page of the Chicago Tribune. She hadn't had a good night's sleep since Iraq invaded Kuwait two weeks earlier. She lay awake each night and wondered what she would do if Peter were sent to the Gulf. How would she run the bookstore without him?

Normally Angie loved the morning shift. She enjoyed the early birds, insomniacs, students, and occasional maniacs who wandered into the store at seven in the morning. The early morning regulars were fanatics who liked to start the day with an invigorating dip in the written word. Angie was a fanatic, too. They got along fine.

But not this morning. This morning Angie wanted everyone to leave her alone. Summer sunlight sparkled through the front window, mocking her exhaustion. The mingled smells of hot coffee and the lemon oil the cleaners used on the graffiti-scarred wooden tables made her stomach roll. The Howlin' Wolf recording that the night manager had left in the sound system scraped her nerves with every guitar riff. When she couldn't stand it any more, she replaced Howlin' Wolf with the gentle punctuation of a Mozart trio. It wasn't an improvement. It felt like the piano hammers were hitting the back of her eyeballs with every note.

She pressed her cup of coffee against her forehead for comfort. *Get a grip, Porter*, Angie told herself. *The current events table won't change itself*. She pulled

up the inventory records on the computer and began to make notes on books that would help their customers understand Iraq. *That new history of the Islamic world by Hourani. Maybe Lawrence's book on fundamentalism. The Penguin edition of the Qu'ran. An illustrated edition of the Arabian Nights for fun.*

Angie was scanning the records for a half-remembered history of America's oil industry when she heard the bell on the front door chime. She braced herself for a cheerful greeting from one of the morning regulars and turned toward the door with a forced smile. Her "hello" caught in her throat and changed into an apprehensive "oh hell". She stepped from behind the counter to meet her business partner. Peter never came to the store this early. He was the Night Owl the store was named after.

Peter walked past her to the current events table and patted three piles of books back into neat alignment with a practiced gesture. Angie watched his eyes sweep the room for a customer who might have a question. He didn't find one. Angie's early morning crowd was very different from his late night regulars. He turned back toward Angie. For the first time since she had known him, he had lost his focused edge.

Peter pulled off the faded red Sierra Club cap he wore all summer. He mopped his forehead with a green bandanna, then ran his hand over freshly cropped brown hair, cut so short that the gray didn't show.

That's an active duty haircut.

"My unit's been called up, Angie. I leave on Monday."

"So soon?" Angie couldn't control the tremor in her voice. The late nights she'd spent worrying about Peter leaving hadn't prepared her for the reality. For a moment her mind went blank. Then it began to run like a gerbil on a wheel. *I'll have*

to reorganize the shifts so I can take over his share of the administrative work, she started the list in her head. *Assign a manager for his shift. Maybe hire an extra clerk*.

"Most of the guys in the unit only have thirty-six hours to report." The tense lines around Peter's mouth deepened. He looked older than forty-five this morning. "The old man gave me some extra time to make arrangements for the boys."

Angie flushed, ashamed of herself for forgetting, even for a moment, that Peter had bigger responsibilities than the bookstore. "How soon can Maureen get back from Africa?" she asked.

"Burkina Faso," Peter located Maureen more precisely. "I'm not sure. She's traveling between villages without a schedule right now and I don't have a way to reach her. Most of the places where she's doing fieldwork don't have international phone service. Hell, some of them don't even have regular bus service."

Peter ran his hand through the fresh bristles of his hair again. Angie had seen him make the same gesture hundreds of times over the last sixteen years. It always made her think of a little boy rubbing a rabbit's foot for luck.

"I've already put a letter in the mail, but Maureen won't get it until she circles back to the anthropology department at Ouagadougou," he continued. "With any luck, she'll call on Sunday morning. If not, it could be several weeks before she gets the news." He twisted the Sierra Club cap into a red baton. "Right now I'm mostly worried about who'll take care of the boys until Maureen can get here."

Angie retreated behind the counter and cradled her coffee cup as if her hands were cold. He wouldn't send the boys to either Maureen's parents or his own. His

were too frail and hers were too far away. "What about Maureen's sister? She's still in Minneapolis, isn't she?"

"I called Cheryl last night. She offered to take them, but I don't want to move them to new schools if I can help it. They already had their routines upset when Maureen left."

Angie knew what was coming. She frowned into her coffee, refusing to look Peter in the eye.

"What about you, Angie?" Peter leaned against the half-door that separated the counter from the sales floor, trapping Angie behind the counter. "You've always gotten along with the boys. And Alex is sixteen. That's old enough to help. It wouldn't be long. Just until Maureen gets back."

"Me?" Angie's voice tightened into a squeak. "I don't know anything about kids."

"You know these kids." He stretched his arms across the counter and folded her hands into his. "Please, Angie. I don't want to tear their lives up any more than I have to."

"No." She snatched her hands away. "I can't. There has to be someone else."

The tinkling precision of Mozart's Trio in B Flat was as insistent as a bass drum in the silence between them.

Peter didn't argue. "I have things to do," he said over his shoulder as he headed for the door. "I'll be back at three." The shop bell chimed again and he was gone.

He didn't have to argue, Angie told herself. *I can make the argument for him as well as he can*.

What about the time you were down with pneumonia for five weeks? I brought you groceries and returned your library books, he would start. My cousin took Jeremy up in a small plane on his birthday, she'd remind him. I introduced you to Barbara Pym's novels, he'd point out. John Buchan, she'd counter.

There was no end to it. Their lives had become intertwined in a thousand and one ways over the last sixteen years, a complicated pattern of favors, debts, celebrations and memories. Not as simple as romance, though she'd had a major crush on him her freshman year at the university. More intense than friendship. *Family*, she told herself. *We're like family. All the more reason for him to ask you for help*, the unwelcome thought flashed through her head.

The Peter of her imagination weighed in with his final argument. Remember the night your dad died? I stayed with you as long as you needed me. We drove you to the airport to catch the early flight. Alex took care of the cats.

Angie looked down at her father's old metal watch, the steel links heavy against the fine bones of her wrist. She remembered.

Angie shimmied her head and shoulders as if she could shake the argument right out of her head. *I'm going to have enough to do running the store by myself. I can't take care of the boys, too*. She pulled over a notepad, wrote "Peter's Responsibilities" across the top and underlined it, twice, three times, with firm black lines.

"1. Evening shift," she began the list.

* * *

Peter had switched to the three to eleven shift three years ago, when Gus was old enough for nursery school and Maureen decided it was time to finish her anthropology degree. Until then, he'd always worked the night shift.

That was how Angie and Peter met. It was her first week at the University of Chicago. She'd left the library at eleven -- too wound up to wait for the bus back to the dorm and too young to stop at Bruno's Tap. She had wandered down 57th Street in the mild October night. A group of graduate students, drunk on cheap beer and chaos theory, argued their way down the street ahead of her. They stopped so abruptly that she almost ran into them. Then they stumbled down a set of steps that she hadn't noticed into a store below the level of the sidewalk. Golden light, the smell of fresh coffee, and the wolfish invitation of a saxophone drifted up the stairs. Curious, she peered into the store. "Night Owl's," the sign in the window offered. "Books, coffee, conversation, 24 hours a day."

Night Owl's was like no bookstore she had ever seen. A miscellany of cups hung on hooks along the wall next to a battered coffee urn. Customers hunched over their books at little wooden tables. The graduate students had pushed together several tables and were continuing their debate in an urgent murmur.

There's nothing like this back home in Paducah.

"You gonna get a cup of coffee, kid, or you just gonna guard it from the rest of us?" a caffeine deprived voice growled behind her.

Angie hurried forward, poured a cup of coffee and headed for an empty table in the corner. It was sticky with a half-dried mess of sugar and cream. She looked for another table. They were all full. She thought about leaving, but only for a

moment. It felt like she journeyed a thousand miles and her entire life to get here. She wasn't ready to leave.

A lean man in his thirties sat behind the cash register, nodding his head in time to the jazz playing on the stereo behind him. His eyes were closed and his chair was tipped back against the wall, but there was nothing relaxed about the way he listened. He was as focused as a greyhound at the starting gate. He was fascinating; maybe not as fascinating as the bookstore, but close.

"Could I have a cloth to clean the table?" she asked him.

He opened one eye, leaned forward to grope under the counter, and tossed her a damp rag. "Have a ball," Peter said and closed his eyes again.

Night Owl's became a regular stop on her way back to the dorm each night. Peter would pull up a chair when things got slow, stretch out his legs, and talk. He showed her pictures of his new baby. She told him it had a face like a squashed tomato. He expounded on Coltrane, Davis and Monk, the difference between French roast and espresso, and the decline of the publishing industry since the days when "absolute John" Murray published Byron and the other Romantic poets. Angie told him that growing up in Paducah had felt like wearing an itchy sweater. She said things she'd never said to anyone, not even to herself. That the thought of living her mother's life -- "husband, two kids, and the Methodist women's circle" -- made her feel like she couldn't breathe. That she didn't think she'd ever appeal to the average guy in Paducah. That she didn't want to appeal to the average guy in Paducah. That she suspected her natural audience was the lunatic fringe.

"Easy to find that at the University," he said.

One night, strung out by mid-terms and lack of sleep, she asked his advice about staying in school. "Maybe I'm not ready," she said. "Maybe I should take a year off and do something real.

"Don't you start, too," he groaned. "Maureen just decided to drop out of her doctoral program until the baby's a little older. I think she's making a big mistake. She's going to lose the momentum. And it's not going to be any easier when he's old enough to resent her going back."

It's like having an older brother, she wrote to her best friend, Liz. Only without the ridicule and the head thumps.

* * *

"Excuse me."

Angie jerked back to the present.

Ellen Castori stood in front of the cash register with a volume of Jane Kenyon's poems and the latest issue of Art in America. Ellen browsed through the new books and looked at the magazines for exactly thirty minutes every day. Peter claimed that her husband fed their four-year-old twins breakfast before he left for his chemistry lab, giving Ellen a little time for herself. Angie was sure he was right; Peter always knew about the regulars. A shard of panic caught in her throat. How would she manage the store alone? She knew about books and payroll and insurance. But Peter knew the customers.

"Why don't you ever buy a novel?" Angie asked, trying to disguise her preoccupation with conversation as she rang up the sale.

"Are you kidding? These days I'm too frazzled to remember what happens from one minute to the next. I'll catch up on fiction when the girls go away to college."

Definitely not for me. If I wanted that life, I'd have stayed in Paducah.

* * *

At 3:00 Monica sailed into the bookstore from her job at the bank next door. "I've got time for one last cup of coffee before I pick Andrew up at school," she announced in a ringing voice.

Indignant heads whipped up from the books they were inspecting. Some of them stayed up.

Monica was a work of art. Her blonde hair rippled away from her face in careless waves that were the result of precise work with a curling iron. The polish on her long nails echoed her lipstick. A cascade of gold chains glittered at the neck of her butter-yellow Chanel-style suit. Matching stilettos showed off long legs and raised her height to a full six-feet. Angie was sure Monica had turned heads even when she worked downtown as a securities analyst. In Hyde Park, home of sensible shoes and punk haircuts, she was as unlikely as the green parakeets that nested in Jackson Park.

For just a moment, Angie felt short, grubby, and inadequate. The reaction was as involuntary as a growling stomach. She stood up straighter, trying to lengthen her four foot eleven into at least five feet. She fluffed her short, dark bob and hid her unpolished nails deep in the pockets of her black jeans. She looked down at her feet with sudden insecurity. *Are the cowboy boots a witty accent or just silly?* Reason

triumphed over instinct. She poured a cup of coffee and joined Monica at the table next to the cash register.

Monica picked up her coffee mug, closed her eyes, and inhaled with a dramatic heave of her bosom and a jangle of gold bracelets. "Even the smell makes me feel better." She opened her eyes and settled back in her chair. "What a deadly day! Ever since the trouble started in Kuwait, loan applications have just dried up." She looked across the table at Angie. "Bad day, short stuff?"

Angie grimaced. "Is it that obvious?"

"Lady, you look like you lost your best friend. But I'm sitting right here, so it must be something else. What's up?"

"Peter's unit's been called to active duty."

"That stinks." Monica took a reflective sip of coffee. "But you knew it might happen."

"And he wants me to take care of the boys until Maureen gets back."

"You've got to be kidding. Hasn't he ever heard your tirade about not wanting kids? Even my darling Andrew makes you nervous."

"Your darling Andrew is seven going on Cary Grant." Angie tried to change the subject. "He'll be dangerous when he's two feet taller."

Monica did not allow herself to be diverted. "When do you start the baby-sitting marathon?"

"I told him no." The guilt she'd battled all afternoon made it hard to look Monica in the eye.

"You what?" Monica set down her coffee with a thump and sat straight up.

Angie braced herself.

Monica nodded unexpected approval. "Good for you. He's got family. He doesn't need to stick you with this."

Angie began an incoherent defense against the attack that hadn't come. The words tumbled out in a broken stream like shallow water running over rocks. She stopped in mid-sentence, open-mouthed and confused, as she realized what Monica had said.

"Don't look so surprised," Monica said. "It's about time you said no to Peter. I know you don't want to hear it, but I agree with your mother on this one. You are way too involved with that man." It was an old argument. Before Angie could recover from her surprise and begin her usual defense of her friendship with Peter, Monica asked, "What did Dave say?"

"I didn't even think about calling Dave," Angie admitted, adding embarrassment to the layers of emotion that had been piling up all day. Each new feeling had been thrown on the stack before she had a chance to deal with the last one. One more and the whole mess might come crashing down.

"Did I mention way too involved with Peter?" Monica looked up at the ceiling and asked the universe.

"I'm having dinner with Dave tonight. I'll tell him then."

"Get him drunk first," Monica advised as she stood up to go. "Maybe he won't be such a—" she searched for the right epithet and settled on "litigator about it if he's plastered." She picked up her purse and searched for her keys. "Lunch tomorrow?"

* * *

Angie didn't get a chance to tell Dave that Peter was going on active duty during dinner. A story involving lying witnesses, an inept translator and a Nigerian

drug runner with a crazy girlfriend carried him from the salade niçoise through the strawberry shortcake without a break.

Angie usually listened to Dave's stories with pleasure. She liked the way he brought characters to life with a quick gesture and a slash of wit. She liked the imaginative sympathy he brought to even the guiltiest client. She'd read somewhere that every good litigator was a bit of an actor; knowing Dave, she'd come to believe it was true.

Tonight his storytelling left her edgy and impatient.

At her apartment after dinner, they stretched out on the loveseat and watched the flickering flames of the candles that filled the little fireplace. The illusion of a fire soothed Angie's nerves. She could almost smell the smoke and hear the popping of the logs. She snuggled closer into Dave's arms. Her cats, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, sat in the chair next to the fireplace and stared at them, gold eyes unblinking.

The pattern of silence between them was predictable. Angie waited. When it seemed like he was almost asleep, Dave asked, as always, "So, how was life in the bookstore today?"

Her usual answer was "Bookstores never change." The gentle comedies of the bookstore sounded dull compared to the drama of Chinatown gambling rings and Colombian gang members. Tonight she said, "Bad news. Things must be getting worse in Kuwait. Peter's unit was called up for active duty. He leaves on Monday."

"I don't understand those guys. One tour in Vietnam was enough for me. Did I tell you about the time we –"

Angie interrupted. If he started telling stories from the past she wouldn't get another word in. "It's going to mean long hours for me until he gets back. I probably won't see you much for the next few weeks."

"Just give some of the extra work to the night manager." She felt Dave shrug behind her.

Angie clenched her jaw so tightly that the muscles in her neck tensed. The fact that he was right didn't make it any less annoying. She wanted sympathy, not solutions. "He asked me to take care of the kids until Maureen gets back. If I'd agreed to that I wouldn't have time for you at all." She glanced up at Dave to see how he reacted.

She was not pleased when he laughed. "What do you know about kids?" he teased. "I bet you don't even have a jar of peanut butter in the kitchen. You going to read Flaubert to the little one at bedtime? I can just hear you at dinner." His falsetto sounded so much like his mother it was creepy. "Jeffrey, dear, clean your plate. Calamari is good for you. What does your first grade teacher think about post-colonial theory, Matthew? Besides," he went on in his normal voice, "Look at you. You have all the authority of a china doll." She turned to argue. He caught her chin and tilted it up. "I was never interested in playing with dolls until I met you," he murmured.

"Don't be such a butthead," Angie protested before she let herself be distracted by a kiss. She rested her head against Dave's chest for a moment, then raised her chin for another kiss, determined to enjoy the rest of the evening. *I'll worry about Peter and the store tomorrow*.

It wasn't easy. Dave wouldn't let the joke go. He cracked himself up with repeated references to the PTA, bedtime stories, and grape jelly. He was so jolly that Angie wanted to bite him. He was still chuckling when she kissed him good-bye.

"It's not that funny," Angie said when he was gone. A complicated rush of anger at Dave, Peter, and herself welled up from the pit of her stomach and left her vibrating. She glanced at the clock. Ten to eleven. She still had time to catch Peter at the store.

"Have you found anyone to take care of the boys?" she asked. "Tell Cheryl to forget it. You don't have to pack them off to Minneapolis. I'll do it." She cut off Peter's thanks and questions. "We can talk about it tomorrow,"

She hung up, as drained as if she had run a long-distance race in the August heat. "We're going to regret this, boys," she told the cats as they wound around her ankles, begging for attention.

Pamela D. Toler *(pdtoler@sbcglobal.net) is a freelance writer, specializing in history and the arts. She has written about ancient Peruvian feather hats, Siberian reindeer hair embroidery, pyramid cults and the first translation of the Arabian Nights. "Winning the War at Home" is her first novel.*

~~~~
~~~~

Bedtime Story

Deanne Charlton

"No," you said
when I asked
if you were seeing
other women.
Turning your back
to me, you sought
shorts in a drawer.
"You got crab lice
from the dog,"
you declared
and got into bed
beside me.
Turning my back
to you, I sought
to distance myself
from the beat
of your irregular heart.

Deanne Charlton *is a well-traveled Alabama native, back for the last dozen years in her ancestral home. She says, "Here I am considered radically liberal; my far-flung friends find me quaintly conservative." Deanne writes essays and creative nonfiction, short stories – and poetry for the challenge of paring thoughts to their seeds and core.*

~~~~
~~~~

Juvenile Fiction

Charlie Bill Leaves Home

Ramey Channell

In a big Pueblo village, where the sun shines every day and the stars shine every night, a chubby little boy named Charlie Bill lived with his happy parents in a small room on the edge of the big village. As soon as the little boy learned to walk, he always wanted to travel and explore. His parents worried that one day he might wander away from home, so they tied a string around him and set the big ball of string by the front door.

And one day, Charlie Bill walked down the path leading from the front door and out into the surrounding desert.

He walked through the desert and into a forest. He walked past a waterfall, under huge leafy trees and over gigantic rocks. He passed through a jungle and up onto a high mountain. Then he traveled across the sky and all through the universe with the string tied to him.

Back home, every time the ball of string would run out, Charlie Bill's father tied the end to a new ball of string. So the chubby little explorer could just keep wandering and exploring.

The little boy kept traveling through the universe, past brilliant stars and mysterious planets, seeing everything there was to see out there. And as time passed, Charlie Bill forgot where he had come from in the beginning.

Then one day he came up onto a hill and looked down at a beautiful city filled with light. Everything was golden, and there were beautiful crops growing. He could see the people, and they were all smiling and happy.

It was such a peaceful, wonderful place, and Charlie Bill wanted to go there. But when he tried to walk down the hill, the string had finally run out, and he couldn't go any further. He tried to free himself from the string, but it had been tied to him for such a long time that the knot was fixed, and it wouldn't untie. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't go down into the beautiful city.

So, Charlie Bill stayed there, up on the hill, looking down at the beautiful golden city until the end of the day, and at night he built a little campfire. The sky was high and dark and all the stars came out. All the animals of the night came up and sat around his campfire and sang songs to him about the beautiful golden village.

After spending a few nights there, Charlie Bill felt his heart was just about to break from wanting to go down there and live in that happy place. So, he decided he'd follow the string that was tied to him, and go back to find his own family and his own place to live.

He started following the string back to see where he had come from. He went over the hill and across the sky, past brilliant stars and mysterious planets. He crossed a high mountain and passed through a jungle, over gigantic rocks and under huge leafy trees, past a waterfall, through a forest, and across a desert.

Then he came to a trail that led to a quiet little path that carried him into the village where he had started out long ago. He followed the path, still tied to the long piece of string that had been attached to him for so long.

Charlie Bill couldn't believe his eyes when he recognized the beautiful golden village that he had seen from the top of the hill. The sun was setting and his mother and father were waiting for him at the door, and all the animals of the night gathered around and sang a song to welcome him home. His father smiled and held up the end of the string that he had tied to the front door.

So the big ball of string had brought the chubby little explorer all the way back around to the place he had come from, a long, long time ago.

Ramey Channell *is a writer, artist and musician from Leeds, Alabama. She attended Bellarmine College and UAB, where she received the Barksdale Maynard Award for her short story Voltus Electricalus and Strata Illuminata. Ramey's fiction and poetry have been published by* Aura Literary Arts Review *and numerous other collections.*

~~~~
~~~~

Short Fiction

Matinee Girl

Nina Bayer

It was ten minutes into the movie and I still hadn't been able to find a seat. Each time my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I began to stumble my way down the aisle, the door in the back of the theater would open and the sudden flash of light would start the dilation process all over again. My popcorn was cold. My patience was thin. Why couldn't people arrive at movies on time?

It wasn't the way I had intended to spend my Saturday afternoon, standing in the back of a crowded theater watching *Lethal Weapon 5* all by myself. Wasn't it bad enough that I no longer had a regular Saturday afternoon date? That my girlfriend, Tiffany, had just broken up with me that morning? That she'd taken all of her things out of our apartment, including our laminated collection of matinee ticket stubs? Did I have to watch the whole movie standing up, too?

On the screen, flames exploded from beneath the hood of a car. I choked up. *God,* I thought. *Tiffany would have loved this.*

The door opened again. I was about to make a rude comment to the intruder, when a tall redhead pushed her way butt-first into the theater. She wore Wrangler jeans and toe-tip boots, and an auburn braid that ran the length of her back like a spine. Her long, lean arms were struggling to hold onto a leather bag, a super-sized tray of nachos, and a giant box of Junior Mints. In her teeth she clutched a nearly full, lidless cup of Mountain Dew – the neon yellow color unmistakable, even in the darkened theater. Surmising that she might be mere seconds away from a junk food disaster, I removed the cup from her lips and said, "Here, let me help you with that."

“Thanks," she whispered.

It was the sweetest voice I had ever heard. Soft as baby powder, smooth as the fuzz on a peach.

"Did I miss anything?" she said.

"I don't think so," I lied.

Her hair reflected the nutmeg-colored flames of the screen and she smelled like cinnamon. Or was it the Junior Mints?

"I can't see a thing!" she said. She pulled a plastic straw from the back pocket of her jeans and squinted into the darkness. "How do you ever find a seat?"

"Why don't we do it together," I said, and boldly slipped my hand beneath her elbow. She smiled. I was in.

Praying we wouldn't *both* go flying to the carpet, I lead her to the front of the theater, blindly tapping the downward slope of the floor with my foot so I wouldn’t fall, and watching for the first row of open seats.

Then, during the next bright burst of movie light, I guided her into the second row from the screen and took a seat beside her. We were near the middle of the row, knees to nose and nose to screen. But she didn't seem to mind, and I didn't either. At least she didn't ask me to leave.

"What's your name?" I said, my voice barely audible above the decibel of the film.

"Imari," she said.

"Shhh," said an old guy sitting behind us.

"E-mah- what?" I said, ignoring the old guy.

"Eee-mah-RRRee," she drawled it out like a rodeo announcer. "You have to roll the R, even though there's only one." She handed me a nacho.

I set my bag of popcorn on the floor and slipped the nacho into my mouth. Cheese clung to my chin and Imari laughed, handed me a napkin.

"Hispanic?" I said, leaning toward her.

"Half. On my mother's side." Her shoulder brushed mine. I was fifteen all over again.

"Come on you guys!" the old guy said.

"Your mother must be beautiful," I said, but it was a stupid thing to say. Of *course* her mother was beautiful. *My* mother is beautiful. *Everybody's* mother is beautiful.

As she watched the movie and sipped her soda, I memorized the features of her face. A side view of Danny Glover reflected in her large brown eyes. The strobe from the screen bounced off her cheeks, like little flickers of campfire light, and made her eyelashes look really long. *Really* long. Even the old guy had noticed and was now staring.

Eee-mah-RRRee, I thought. Eee-mah-RRRee, Eee-mah-RRRee, *Eee-mah-RRRee*. Sitting beside ME in the flashing darkness of the theater, enjoying *Lethal Weapon 5* like a Mel Gibson groupie. As if she and I were... as if we were ... *Tiffany, who?*

On the screen, Mel bragged to Danny: "And then she looked down from the window and dropped me a set of keys. I was in!"

Imari sighed and leaned toward my ear. "Isn't that just the sweetest thing?" she said. Our shoulders brushed again.

I wished the theater was even darker, that we were the only ones there. I wished the old guy would quit staring. I wished Imari would take my hand and ask my name, offer to feed me another nacho. If there was a tunnel anywhere in my small, abandoned world, a light was now shining at the end of it. If only I had kept my ticket stub.

The door in the back of the theater opened and footsteps headed down our aisle. The movie was half over. *You've got to be kidding?* I thought.

I tried not to let the intrusion bother me, to break the spell of what was happening between Imari and me. But when the intruder slipped into our row, then sat right beside Imari, irritation crept up my spine like a dozen tiny antagonists.

"Excuse me," I said, leaning across Imari and scowling into the darkness. "We'd like to be alone here."

"I'm sorry ... it was the traffic," the intruder said.

"Will you three *please* shut up?" the old guy said.

"No, it's my fault," Imari said. "I should have introduced you. This is my friend, Tiffany."

Another explosion on the screen.

"Tiffany?" I said, squinting at the shadowy figure sitting beside Imari.

"Geez, Louise!" the old guy said, throwing himself back into his seat.

"Uh, huh," said Imari. "And, I'm sorry, what did you say *your* name was?"

Nina Bayer *holds a BA from the University of Washington, and an MFA from the Whidbey Writers Workshop. She works as the editor of* Lunch Hour Stories *short fiction magazine, and also teaches Writing at Edmonds Community College. She resides in Bothell, WA with her partner, George, and an apricot tabby named Jameson.*

~~~~
~~~~

Juvenile Fiction

Secret Sisters

Rose Nelson

Catherine winced as the piercing Colorado wind whipped through her wool skirt. Oh, please let there be a letter! the 11-year old prayed. Catherine knew that snow and ice along the Oregon Trail often delayed mail all winter. Would she have to wait until spring? Could she? As she scanned the gray horizon for the stagecoach, her blue eyes sparkled expectantly. The December day was bitterly cold, but Catherine was remembering the heat of last June . . .

The sweltering air by the creek threatened to smother Catherine. It didn't matter. This was her secret hideaway. Not that anyone cared. Since arriving in North Carolina three weeks earlier her relations had paid but scant attention to her.

Uncle Jack and Aunt Susanna always seemed engaged in managing the tobacco plantation. Their two daughters barely spoke to their cousin. At 16, Cousin Annabelle occupied herself with a steady stream of suitors. Even ten-year old Amy preferred her china dolls to her lively cousin.

Catherine wished her parents had taken her out west. They wouldn't return for her until the Colorado homestead was built. How long the coming months loomed.

Setting her dinner pail and fishing pole under a willow, Catherine undressed down to her chemise. She had discovered the creek a week ago while exploring. She learned from the cook it was a branch of the Neuse River.

Today she waded into the water and swam until her muscles cramped. The water felt tepid but it provided relief from the swarms of biting mosquitoes.

Coming out of the water, Catherine suddenly heard leaves rustling. Instinctively she plunged her head back under. When she came up to breathe, she realized she wasn't alone.

On the bank a girl about her age stood, staring at her. She had dark skin, like the servants in Uncle's house, and she was tall and lean. Her chestnut eyes were wide with fear. Suddenly she scurried away.

"No, wait!" Catherine yelled, wading clumsily toward shore. "Please wait!"

The girl halted. Catherine climbed the embankment and caught up to her. "Don't go! I didn't mean to frighten you."

Suspiciously, the girl eyed the dripping Catherine.

"My name is Catherine Whitehall. Amy and Annabelle Anderson are my cousins. Do you know them?"

The girl raised one eyebrow like a question mark. "Yes'm. I know 'em."

"Oh! Are you friends? Do you live nearby?"

The girl frowned incredulously. "Where you from?" she more accused than asked.

Catherine wrung the water from her braided ponytail. "Ohio. My parents are out west setting up a ranch."

When the girl didn't respond, Catherine asked, "Where do you live?"

Self-consciously the girl smoothed her worn homespun dress.

"I've been coming here near a fortnight now!" Catherine said excitedly, "Do you fish?"

The lanky girl nodded her kerchief-wrapped head. "Sure."

They walked back to the creek. Catherine picked up her fishing pole. “Papa and I fish all summer on the Ohio.”

Gesturing for Catherine to wait, the girl disappeared into the woods. Quickly she returned with a willow pole and a canning jar filled with crickets. “Anyone know yous here?” she asked warily.

“Of course not. It’s my ***secret*** hideaway.” Catherine patted the ground next to her, “Come on!”

The girls sat together fishing until well past noon. Then suddenly Catherine realized something. “I didn’t ask your name!”

The girl smiled shyly. “Hattie Sue.”

“I’m glad to meet you, Hattie Sue.”

The two were silent a few minutes before Hattie Sue spoke. “Miss Catherine, can I ask you somethin’? ‘bout Ohio?”

“Of course.”

“Does you know? I mean, have you seed—any coloreds up there?”

“Coloreds? You mean like rainbow trout?”

At this, the dark-skinned girl broke into a fit of laughter. Catherine stared at her, amazed. Hattie Sue hadn’t smiled once but here she was, head thrown back, white teeth flashing and her ribs rattling over Lord knew what.

Catherine gazed at her and then found herself infected by the girl’s giggles. Soon she was laughing as hard as Hattie Sue.

After a few minutes Hattie Sue suddenly grew sober and asked again, “Do black folk live up there wi’ you?”

“Some,” Catherine answered, “Not many near our farm. In town, though, there’s a church that black families attend. Sometimes our congregations have picnics together. Why?”

“Them white folks and black folks get ‘long up north?” Hattie Sue asked.

“Well, mostly. Once Mrs. Peabody tried to keep a new black family from moving into town. They’d come from the South and she said they didn’t belong in Ohio. Papa said some people are just prejudiced.”

“Well, I tell yous. Them white folk down here—theys all like Mizzuz Peabody, leastways the ones I seed.”

Catherine dangled her feet in the stream, pondering the girl’s words. Certainly her aunt and uncle seemed prejudiced, treating their servants like work mules. She didn’t understand why and she didn’t like it.

Hattie Sue stood up. “I gotta go,” she announced abruptly. She snatched up the two gars she had caught.

“Come back tomorrow!” Catherine called. The girl didn’t answer and her expression looked uncertain.

Every day that week Catherine waited but Hattie Sue didn’t return to the secret hideaway. Catherine’s heart sank. She had finally made a friend but that was no good if she never saw her. Maybe she thinks *I’m* prejudiced, Catherine thought miserably. To make matters worse, Amy suddenly began pestering Catherine about where she went every day.

The following Monday, after her swim, Catherine decided to read. She had just finished one page when she felt a touch on her shoulder. Turning, she grinned up at Hattie Sue.

“I’m so happy to see you! I thought I scared you away!”

Hattie Sue smiled a wide, white-toothed smile. She sat beside Catherine and asked, “What’s tha’ book?”

“’Robinson Crusoe.’ I just started it. Want to read it together?”

“Go on. I be listenen.”

For the next couple weeks, Catherine waited for Hattie Sue every day in their secret hideaway. She showed up twice each week. Realizing Hattie Sue couldn’t read, Catherine read aloud to her, pointing to the words. Hattie Sue followed along, and after only a couple hours, could identify at least 20 words.

Catherine also realized Hattie Sue was poor. Her dress was so threadbare it looked like brown paper. Catherine tried to give her one of her dresses, but Hattie Sue got flustered and refused it.

To Catherine’s surprise, Hattie Sue brought her a gift one day. It was a knitted marker for her book. The yarn was frayed but the top had been shaped into a heart.

“Oh, Hattie Sue! It’s beautiful! You made this *for me*?” Catherine’s eyes filled with tears.

“Yes’m, Miss Catherine.”

“Thank you!” Catherine hugged her close.

Just then Amy suddenly burst into the clearing. Catherine couldn’t speak or move. With her mouth hanging open, Amy appeared equally shocked. Hattie Sue bolted into the woods.

Finally Amy found her voice. “I’m telling on you, Catherine!” she shrieked.

“Telling what?” Catherine responded, “It’s just a secret hideaway.”

“You’ve been cavorting with a slave! Plotting her escape no doubt. Daddy says all you Northerners are sympathizers—even kinsfolk.” Amy was hissing the words.

Catherine began to shake. What was Amy accusing her of? Before she could ask, Amy turned and huffed off.

In bed that night Catherine couldn’t get the dreadful words out of her head. Her aunt and uncle had tried to explain that Hattie Sue was a slave and their property. It was not fitting for Catherine to befriend her. All their “servants” were slaves they had bought to work the plantation. Catherine must try to understand, they said. But Catherine couldn’t understand.

Desperate for fresh air, Catherine leaned out the bedroom window. Even after dark the heat was stifling.

In the yard below she suddenly heard voices. Someone was wailing. ”Please, Auntie Hash, please lemme stay at the big house! Them folks never know!”

Catherine cocked her ears. That voice was Hattie Sue’s. Straining her eyes, she could make out a burly black woman pulling the girl toward the back gate.

Without hesitation, Catherine lowered herself out the window. She slid down a porch column to the ground. Once out the gate, she took pursuit.

She soon caught sight of the two figures. Both held lanterns and were just a few yards ahead of her. They were moving toward lights twinkling through a stand of longleaf pines.

Past the trees, the two slaves slowed. There, in a clearing, stood several rows of tiny ramshackle cabins. The doors were all ajar, lamplight fleeing into the woods. Sweet, haunting music drifted from the most distant cabin; otherwise the place set deathly silent. These must be the slave quarters Catherine thought.

The big woman led Hattie Sue to a dark cabin in the second row. Leaving the girl inside, she hurried back to the main house.

Catherine scrunched behind a tree. She waited until most of the cabins went dark. Then she stole over to Hattie Sue's cabin. Softly she knocked on the open door.

There was no response. She knocked louder, calling out, "Hattie Sue! It's Catherine!"

Hattie Sue appeared in the doorway. "Go!" she whispered harshly.

"I had to see you!"

"Please, no! Things be real bad if you doesn't go."

Catherine pushed her way inside the cabin. The stale heat instantly made her queasy. "Please, Hattie Sue! I'm so sorry this happened!"

"Jus' go! Please!" Hattie Sue pleaded.

"I didn't realize you were a slave. But I'm still your friend!"

"Then go. Next off I get the lash or ---."

"Or what?" Catherine screeched. In the weak moonlight, Catherine eyed her friend. The girl was leaner than Catherine had noticed before, actually dangerously thin.

She scanned the stuffy, windowless cabin. The only contents were two sleeping mats, a couple pots and spoons, a bag of cornmeal, and a bucket of water. Catherine thought she might retch. The horse stables were cleaner and more spacious.

Catherine didn't know what to say or do. Hattie Sue's eyes were round with fear. Tearfully Catherine hugged her friend and returned to the house.

All night Catherine tossed and turned. When she awoke she was determined to help her friend. Amy had accused her of planning Hattie Sue's escape. Was that possible? How? Then suddenly the answer came to her. And it was so simple!

Catherine's parents would take Hattie Sue west! Catherine knew black folks lived there. The old Zionist preacher, Reverend Brown, had retired to the Dakota Territory. He had kin there.

In the meantime Catherine would leave extra food for Hattie Sue. Since the girl shared the cabin with Auntie Hash, Catherine would have to find a secret drop-off.

Catherine drew a map showing a route to a hollow tree. She pushed it under the cabin door one morning right after she saw Auntie Hash leave.

To Catherine's delight Hattie Sue discovered the hollow the first day. Catherine hoped to encounter Hattie Sue but she didn't.

Along with food and fresh water, Catherine left pages from a reading primer she discovered in the Anderson library. Since Hattie Sue was a quick study, Catherine thought she might learn to read and write from it.

In return, Hattie left wildflowers for Catherine. Then one day Catherine got a wonderful surprise. Written on the top of a primer page was a note. The writing was scrawled and the words misspelled but the message was clear: *Tank yu, sistr!*

Catherine laughed with joy. *Sistr.* Hattie Sue considered her a sister. After that she wrote a message to Hattie Sue every day. By September the girls had a regular correspondence going. And every day Hattie Sue's writing became neater and the messages longer.

Thrilled with her friend's progress, Catherine longed to see her. She learned from the kitchen slaves that Hattie Sue had been sent to the fields to work. If it weren't for

the extra food, Catherine felt certain Hattie Sue would have died from the long, hard labor.

After harvest, the weather quickly cooled, frost often arriving with the dawn. The leaves glittered ruby and gold. Before Catherine knew it, October came. A letter from her parents informed her they were headed back for her.

Catherine couldn't wait for their return. What a surprise Hattie Sue would have.

But the surprise was for Catherine. Two days after arriving, her parents were packed for the trip back west. Catherine asked to talk with them. They listened carefully, but when she finished, they only shook their heads.

Catherine frowned. They couldn't possibly be saying no. Not after what she had told them.

Unable to accept their heartlessness, Catherine burst into a tantrum. "How can you say no? How can you be a party to such evil? Why can't we save just one slave? She would be a great help too!" Catherine went on until her mind was blank and her throat raw. Tears streaked her reddened cheeks.

Her mother reached out to comfort her, but Catherine recoiled. "I'm sorry," the woman muttered helplessly.

Catherine looked to her father. "Someday you'll understand, Catherine," he said. But Catherine knew she never would . . . even less now in DECEMBER.

The unrelenting Colorado wind continued lashing Catherine. It hurt almost as much as leaving Hattie Sue. She hadn't seen her again. In her last note, Hattie Sue told Catherine to write to her since she collected the mail. Catherine would write "SS" on the envelopes intended for Hattie Sue. Only they knew "SS" stood for secret sister. But would Hattie Sue write back?

Just then Catherine spied the stage plowing its way through some distant snowdrifts.

Hopeful, her cheeks flushed red. Time seemed suspended as the mailbags were unloaded, sorted, and at length, distributed to the waiting crowd.

Then suddenly Catherine found herself clutching an envelope. Glancing down at it, joy thawed her chilled soul. Printed on it were two uneven but beautiful letters: "SS."

A former teacher, **Rose Nelson** *is currently raising her five children. In March, the Tennessee Mountain Writers awarded here first place in their children's contest. She received an honorable mention in the 2007* Writer's Digest Competition *and last August she sold five stories to* Family English. *Rose is now finishing an historical children's novel.*

~~~~
~~~~

Nonfiction

The Highs And Lows Of Divine Appointments

Vicki H. Moss

I have to admit, eating at the London Ritz was nothing like experiencing USA southern town fast food take out. Once, while in London with my sister, I made it a point to partake of *high* tea. I made a reservation at the Ritz Hotel thinking it would be my life's divine appointment. But first we had some sightseeing to do.

Since I'd already been to London several times and longed to see different sights, my sister and I split up, to meet back at the Ritz for tea later in the afternoon. I arrived early. The door man inquired of my name. This was during the height of the beginning of the Iraq war and security was beefed up. Yet, I was still impressed when the doorman checked through my shopping bag and purse and asked me my name. It was reassuring to know I wasn't going to be blown to high heaven during high tea with a crumpet in my mouth.

I sat in a posh hallway lounge and read a newspaper while waiting for sis. I tried to be in a conspicuous spot where I wouldn't be missed when she arrived. I waited and waited, smiling a lot, while trying to look like someone who didn't need profiling. Concerned about sis's tardiness, I went back outside

to look for her. Perhaps she was waiting for me outside on the street. I wondered if she'd been accosted by anti-George W. Bush fans who'd discovered she was an American. The day before, on the train back from Wales, we'd been separated in a boarding crush and she'd partied with inebriated soccer fans having a merry time discussing the war issue while I suffered stomach cramps — from the virus she'd just whipped — a couple of cars back.

As I stepped outside the Ritz, the doorman said, "Goodbye," and called me by name. I was impressed. Out of all of the people passing through his doors, he'd remembered me *and* my name. I couldn't have pulled off such magnificent recall.

Obviously, he'd gone to security training where attention to detail was a prerequisite. Either that or I was trailing toilet paper from my waistband and unforgettable.

I circled outside and looked around. No sis. I scanned pedestrians for awhile and finally stepped back into the hotel.

"Welcome back." The doorman called me by name again.

Once more, I was impressed. I'd tried to work on my memory loss in my mid-thirties with one of those tapes where you try to remember twenty objects. You're supposed to hear a word and think of something to help remind you of the word. For instance, you see a cat, and you think about something like a dog, to remind you of a cat. It *should* remind you of a cat. My problem was, I'd think about the word *dog*, and think about fox hunts and thoroughbreds which would lead me off on wild goose chases and I'd remember feather pillows and forget about cats all together. I never made it past five words at most.

At last, I decided to check out the rest of the lobby. Maybe sis had slipped past me somehow. I finally found her around the corner. She'd missed me when she came in and assumed I would look for her. After finally connecting, we enjoyed a lovely tea with scones and lemon curd and various other delicacies. High tea at the Ritz was truly divine and up there close to heaven.

Now, I loved high tea and scones and lemon curd and being close to God. But every now and then I craved fast food with clogged arteries and porker's paunch. It's called *low* prices. Sometimes, I'd go through a corn dawg craze at Krystal. Especially when I was hauling horses. Get into a bind in traffic, and I tossed my corn dawg on the dash board without too much of a mess when trying to steer clear of an eighteen-wheeler, then picked it back up and continued where I'd last bitten off. But the last time I was at Krystal, I was rear ended by an octogenarian while passing change through the sliding glass window. Just an amorous love tap, or maybe the little lady was desperate for a gutbomb. I let it pass, thinking, *That could be me in a few months. Help me Jesus! But for the grace of God go I.*

But since that episode, I've been craving chili dawgs. You know, the kind that comes with mayo and mustard and a generous dollop of slaw the length of the Santa Fe trail. I won't mention where I went to get these chili dawgs; it could make the lines

longer and make the service worse than it already was. They had the best chili dawgs in town, along with cobbler. But they also had the worst record for employee forgetfulness south of the Mason Dixon line. I could always count on them forgetting something or bungling the entire order. Where they found their employees, I couldn't fathom. They must've included in their classifieds, "Climb The Corporate Ladder With Us. Stupid is a plus."

But let me get something straight, it's hard to eat a chili dawg with a spoon and it's downright impossible to scoop up cobbler juice with a fork. Forget the ketchup with seasoned fries. I gave up on that luxury long ago. I've learned to eat my starch dry. Ketchup's never thrown in unless I sat there and honked, so I'd learned to do without.

I learned years ago to stay in line until I checked out the bag for plastic ware. Most of the time, my bag held the chili dawg without the chili. Sometimes, I found my chili dawg without slaw or condiments. Sometimes, they just bungled everything from the get-go while we're yakking at the speaker and trying to foist mad cow on me. They didn't even try to get it right, they just guessed lots of times.

Why did I keep going back? I'd been trying to work on my promise to God to practice patience? I wasn't that holy. Try door number two; because their dawgs were the best in town and they served cherry cobbler. I was a sucker for a wet fruit pie. But the last time I was there, the speaker system wasn't working and I wasn't dressed up enough for inside fast food dining so I had to drive next door to Sonic. Yeah, I know. I had to look pretty skanky.

Okay.

I'd been chopping and slashing thorny climbing rose bushes that were threatening to take over the free world and I had bleeding wounds and was garnished with a sweat bead necklace. Not to mention a hoard of invading chiggers and such, fighting around the territorial elastic of my big girl panties as though they were burrowing down and digging in to keep Atlanta from falling to Sherman.

All that aside, the waitress told me there had been a horrendous lightning storm the night before. It had blown out the speaker system at my favorite hot dawg establishment and blown the headsets off the Sonic waiters next door. One girl had

to go to the hospital because of ear drum damage. Sounded like God was trying to get somebody's attention. Hear me now?

Apprehensive, I ordered Sonic's chili dawg. Yes! They even had slaw! But when it was delivered to my car window and I
opened it, the top was laced with onions. Now, folks, if I'd wanted onions, I'd have ordered onions. The last time I tango'd with an onion, it wasn't closely related to a Georgia Vidalia and heartburn and acid reflux haunted me for days. It was so bad, I thought about resurfacing my lower teeth. And you guessed it - no spoon, fork, or napkin. I decided to give the waitress a break, figuring her ears were still ringing from the lightning strike the night before.

I was half-starved by then and had already eaten the dead skin from around my hang nails so I peeled back the foil wrapper and began scarfing down the dawg. When I got close to the end, I thought, O*h, well, – I'm not really dressed for high tea, no one here knows me, I'll go ahead and dive right in. The chili and mustard stains will add extra beading to my sweat bead necklace.*

You know how a chili dog with slaw gets, close to the last inch or two from the end — kind of watery and sketchy looking where the mayo has mingled incestuously with the mustard and chili, and you need a strap-on feed bag with a bib, along with a couple of yards of lap napkin before you can finish it off? I snorted mustard through my nose and licked my fingers the whole way home.

I made sure I didn't run any stoplights or break any speed limits because I didn't want to be stopped by the police and asked, "What's your name and where have you been young lady?"

Now, my burning question was, if our teenagers are as smart as they think they are, why couldn't they get a fast food order
right? Why couldn't they look at a beverage cup and think, *I'd better take a paper napkin and wipe the outside off so she doesn't get sticky stuff all over her car or her hands.* Why can't they think, *chili dawg – cherry cobbler. She looks a mess now, better not trust her without the necessities. Send out a*
bath towel and towlettes because if she gets stopped on the way home, they'll be taking her straight to lock-up thinking she's laid out all night and been into one mess of a fight. Kinda looks like she's been ice-picked.

I wasn't asking that fast food servers know my name. In fact, that's why I went to fast food because I didn't want anyone to recognize me. Especially after battling rose bushes. But, perhaps they could be trained with one of those memory tapes, once hired. When they heard the word *cobbler*, they could associate the word *spoon*. When they heard *chili dawg*, they could associate the word *fork*.

My luck though, they'd hear *cobbler* and throw in an old shoe, and *chili dawg*, and throw in a rusty looking cat.

Guess I'd just keep checking my greasy bag before driving off and besides, if I was going to get rear ended, a fast food window was the best place to be. There's not enough runway to be rammed too hard, and who knows, the person behind me could be my next divine appointment!

Vicki H. Moss *was reared in Chattanooga, Tennessee during the week and raised on her family's Alabama farm during summer vacations and weekends. Her blood bled orange while attending the University of Tennessee but now bleeds red every time she opens a vein, pouring out stories that must flow. Sometimes the process is painful, most of the time pure pleasure. Writing songs and keeping journals and diaries since she was nine, she's published children's stories in magazines, a recent poem in Chattanooga's "In The City" magazine and has won various contests and awards in different adult genres while working on a novel.*

~~~~
~~~~

2008 AWC Writing Competition Winners

FICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Denton Loving	A Sorrow of Mothers	Speedwell, TN
2. Ramey Channell	The Funeral	Leeds, AL
3. Evan Guilford-Blake	Absence	Stone Mountain, GA
4. G. Robert Zambs	Gone	Fairhope, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Deborah Ann Cidboy	For Hannah Stokes	Jefferson, GA
Patrick Cabello Hansel	You Can Say	Minneapolis, MN
Jan Martin Harris	The Down-Side of Phone Book Delivery	Birmingham, AL
Jane Sasser	My Blue Period	Oak Ridge, TN

SHORT FICTION – 1000 WORDS

1. Larry Wilson	The Juice	Wetumpka, AL
2. Laura Loomis	Suspicious Package	Pittsburg, CA
3. Nina Bayer	Matinee Girl	Bothell,WA
4. Reilly Maginn	Don't Say No to Your Momma	Daphne, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Annell Gordon	Rose's Trip	Grove Hill, AL
Jim Herod	Hiram's Son	Grove Hill, AL
Riley N. Kelly	Saddle Bag Souvenirs	Excel, AL
Rodney Walther	A Capsized Life	Sugar Land, TX

HUMOR – 2000 WORDS

1. Alexander M. Bruce	Ode to the Pig	Birmingham, AL
2. Gary R. Hoffman	The Blue Bag Cult	Pensacola, FL
3. Linda Elin Hamner	Plots for Sale	Philomath, OR
4. Vicki H. Moss	The Highs and Lows of Divine Appointments	Chattanooga, TN

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Carolyn Davis	Praising the Apple	Marshall, NC
Carol Robbins Hull	[Bless Your Heart, Shugah, You Can't Help Being Crazy]	Montgomery, AL

Susie Kimbrough Kennedy	Bruister's Trip	Lower Peach Tree, AL
Larry Williamson	King of the World	Tallassee, AL

FREE VERSE POEM

1. Jerri Hardesty	Sour Grape Babies	Brierfield, AL
2. Deanne Charlton	Bedtime Stories	Montgomery, AL
3. Robert Gray	Untitled (I've only been to the lake)	Mobile, AL
4. Meagan McDaniel	Hours Not Ours	Mobile, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Judy Lee Green	Telling the Bees	Murfreesboro, TN
Ellaraine Lockie	Evolution	Sunnyvale, CA
Peggy A. Stelpflug	Old Men	Auburn, AL
Sylvia Woods	Why I Want to Meet Her	Oak Ridge, TN

JUVENILE FICTION - maximum 2500 WORDS

1. Rose Nelson	Secret Sisters	Greenville, NC
2. Cathy C. Hall	The Chocolate Cake Bait	Lilburn, GA
3. Deborah Ann Cidboy	Canyon Adventure	Jefferson, GA
4. Ramey Channell	Charlie Bill Leaves Home	Leeds, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Renate Harder	A Fright Over Furryball	Ashville, AL
Rusty Harris	Beat You to the Mulberry Tree	Simi Valley, CA
Daniel J. Leonard	A Bird at the Window	Oak Ridge, TN
Randi Lynn Mrvos	A Place to Call Home	Lexington, KY

NONFICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Judy Lee Green	Deep Roots and Mountain Spirit	Murfreesboro, TN
2. Donna McClanahan	Balls	Irvine, KY
3. C. Lill Ahrens	The Birds and Bees and Little Red Peppers	Corvallis, OR
4. Rebecca Davis Henderson	[East Africa: A Peace Corps Memoir 1962-1964]	Cullman, AL

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Annell Gordon	A Mother's Love	Grove Hill, AL
Riley N. Kelly	Never Mind the Red Bugs, Briars and Snakes	Excel, AL
Sara W. McDaris	A New Vision	Huntsville, AL

Vicki H. Moss	When the Devil Stops Beating His Wife	Chattanooga, TN

TRADITIONAL POETRY

1. Catherine Moran	Thoughts on Being Picked Up in the Bar	Little Rock, AR
2. Evan Guilford-Blake	Renaissance	Stone Mountain, GA
3. Jan Martin Harris	Grandmother Lost	Birmingham, AL
4. Carolyn Davis	Unbroken Circle	Marshall, NC

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Allison Joseph	After Prejudice, Elizabeth Confides to Darcy	Carbondale, IL
Mary Brunini McArdle	Sonnet to the Suspension of Reality	Madison, AL
Megan McDaniel	Encephalitis	Mobile, AL
Emily BlakeVail	[On Seeing a Near-Blind Student Reading with a Magnifying Glass]	Morrow, GA

FIRST CHAPTER NOVEL

1. Rusty Bynum	Garden of Beaune	Huntsville, AL
2. Irene Westcott	The Model-Maker	Chicago, IL
3. Pamela D. Toler	Winning the War at Home	Chicago, IL
4. Deborah Ann Cidboy	The Flame	Jefferson, GA

HONORABLE MENTION (listed in alphabetical order)

Bill Case	Nede	Madison, AL
Bill Goodson	Where Snow has Lain	Huntsville, AL
Jennifer G. Margeson	[Texas Reunion: The War Eagle Tip and Nuck Series Book One – Susannah's Story]	Opelika, AL
Anna Steinke	The Pocket Dragon	Florence, AL

www.alabamawritersconclave.org