

ALALITCOM

**Selected Works from the Alabama Writers' Conclave
2009 Literary Competition**

www.alalit.com

ALALITCOM

© 2009

Marian Lewis, Editor

Authors retain all rights.

Cover Photo contributed by the Editor

INTRODUCTION

The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC) is pleased to present the
2009 ALALITCOM

As the official journal of the AWC—and the fourth issue published online—the 2009 ALALITCOM includes works of first through fourth place winners in the eight categories of the annual AWC Writing Contest. Winners whose work does not appear herein have placed their pieces elsewhere. The AWC is the oldest continuous writers group in the United States. It began in 1923 as a group of women meeting at the Alabama College in the charming town of Montevallo. The original objectives of the Conclave were "to promote fellowship, to provide an opportunity for improvement of craft, and to support Alabama writers."¹ Now—76 years later—the AWC honors these goals through its writing contests and conferences, and has become a nationally known and respected venue of excellence championing the fellowship of writers. Membership in the Conclave is not required to enter the writing contest. In addition to Alabama, the AWC inspires writers from a number of other states as well. California, Oregon, New York, Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, Virginia, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Tennessee and Kentucky are represented in this issue of the ALALITCOM. Congratulations to the winners. Every entry submitted to the AWC writing competition is an expression of a writer's creativity and honor of the craft, thus every entry is a winner.

I hope you will enjoy the 2009 ALALITCOM.

Marian Lewis
Editor

¹ Davis, Raecile Gwaltney. *Giant Sages of the Pen: A Narrative History of the Alabama Writer's Conclave, 1923-1946*. [Alabama]: R.G. Davis, 1993.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	3
When Sheep Won't Leap ~ Randi Lynn Mrvos.....	5
Broken Note ~ Chervis Isom.....	8
Double-Take ~ Kelly Hayes-Raitt	10
Tongue ~ Emma Bolden	17
Just Another Day ~ Elsie Schmied Knoke	18
New Shoes ~ Frankie Tatum.....	22
Four Large Eggs ~ Linda Hudson Hoagland	26
The Surgeons ~ Jane Sasser.....	30
Learn to Ski-After Fifty? ~ Judy Walker.....	31
I Will Watch You Through the Middle of the Night ~ Patrick Cabello Hansel.....	36
Royal Street ~ Suzanne Johnson	37
No More Sky Diving ~ Laura LeHew	44
She ~ Laura Hunter.....	46
Changing the Combinations ~ Sherry Kughn	53
Remember ~Suzanne Coker.....	57
Reading Shame ~ Jessica McCaughey.....	60
Polish Cento I: Mother ~ Ryder Collins	63
Lisa ~ Jane Sasser	65
Murder Goes to the Dogs ~ Jan Martin Harris	72
Country Death ~ Zach Vogelgesang	79
Peas and More Peas ~ Mahala Church.....	82
2009 AWC Writing Competition Winners List	87

When Sheep Won't Leap

Randi Lynn Mrvos

When sunlight fades and nightlights glow
it's time to sleep as Ella knows.
She fluffs a pillow, lays her cheek,
shuts her eyes to count on sheep.

But Ella's sheep refuse to leap,
they steal upon the turned-down sheets
to conga, cha-cha, waltz and tango,
limbo, two-step, dance fandango.

"No this will never, ever do,"
says Ella to the fluffy crew.
"Bedtime calls for leaping sheep."
So she asks others to help her sleep:

a herd of cows with swishing tails,
long eye lashes, milk in pails,

a swarm of bees with honey treats,
sticky, gooey, yummy sweet,

a pack of wolves that trail along,
form a chorus, howl a song,

a drift of toads forsake the lake,
recite the verse of Burns and Blake,

a gam of whales—a group of five—
splash Ella's face with foamy dives,

a troop of monkeys grooms her hair,
braids the tresses with great care,

a trip of goats to dry her skin,
a parade of elephants trumpet in,
a team of mules to pull the sheets,
a sleuth of bears to warm her feet,

a gaggle of geese, waddley-dance,
a leap of leopards, spottedly prance,
a mob of 'roos to bounce the bed,
a bed of clams rest near her head,
a school of fish clasp books in fins,
a clowder of cats with Cheshire grins,
a bevy of quail,
a rout of snails,
a spring of teals,
a pod of seals,
a whole menagerie fills the room,
a litter of dogs to fetch the moon.

But Ella sighs, "I've tried them all,
beast and fowl, big and small.
I know those sheep will do the trick,
it's time to think of something quick."
She slips from bed and creeps downstairs,
tip-toes pass the kitchen chairs,
searches on the pantry shelf,
finds a box and helps herself.

She brings a handful back to bed
(doesn't even turn her head) as
all the creatures watch with glee,
tightly packed so they can see

her coax the flock with crispy oats,
rub their wooly overcoats,
pat their fleecy, fuzzy heads,
and line them up beside the bed then

she says, "Goodnight" and thanks her guests,
"It's time for me to get some rest."
Ella slips into the turned-down sheets
to close her eyes and count on sheep.

Randi Lynn Mrvos writes for children's and writers' websites and magazines. She is an award-winning picture book writer, a columnist for The Creativity Connection, and an editor for the educational website www.Viatouch.com. Her publishing credits include Scholastic Books, Gryphon House, Highlights for Children, Byline, Mothering, and The Christian Scientist Monitor.



Broken Note

Chervis Isom

The streetcar screeched to a halt on the slick tracks, windows all afog. The doors swung open and we leaped aboard, relieved to get out of the rain. I dropped coins in the slot and, as the car jolted into motion, we lurched down the aisle.

Exhausted, Martha dropped onto the bench seat, rivulets from her raincoat soaking into the fake tweedy fabric, already scummy and moldy from dozens of wet riders through the day.

It was then we heard the sound, a protracted, mournful note, rising in intensity, then falling, sad and lonely as Taps when lights go out.

A few seats behind us, a black man sat, trumpet to his lips, eyes closed against the world.

The note hung in the air, slowly intensified, then dropping into a lower register it withered into a ragged, lifeless plea, flickering weakly like a candle as it gutters out...and after a breath, began again a similar litany—a never ending cry of pain.

It was the sound a small child might have made separated from its mother, the sound of despair as deep as a moonless night.

His eyes were opaque and lifeless, the personification of despair.

Was he stoned? Was he going home after having been fired from his job? Had his wife told him he was worthless and thrown him out? Did he have hungry children at home, and the banker had turned him down for a loan? It had been years before, but I too had felt that kind of despair.

As the note hovered around me, drawing into myself, reminding me of the despair I too had felt, I thought of Miles Davis and his “Sketches of Spain”, the saddest sound I’d ever heard drawn from a musical instrument.

The hair on my neck sprang up; a chill washed over me.

“Knock if off, you weirdo!”

I snapped to attention. A beefy middle aged man bolted to his feet, his face red and enraged.

He towered over the black man, one hand gripping the pole, the other clenched into a fist, crouching, legs spread, spoiling for a fight.

“I said, knock it off. You got no right to blow that horn in here, disturbing the peace like this!”

The trumpet never wavered. The black man momentarily lifted his eyes, but they were fearless and flat and so far away his crying ceased for only a moment.

I was never one to leap into action. My nature has always been to think it through. I think humanity is made up of two kinds of folks—thinkers and doers. Whenever on those occasions I’ve decided that action was justified, the need had usually by then been met by someone else. So in that moment, as I dithered, my Martha leaped from her seat, brandishing her dripping umbrella like a sword.

“Get back to your seat, you idiot!”

She nailed him menacingly with her eyes, her umbrella cocked for action.

He glared as he retreated, but could not meet the unwavering gaze of the resolute school teacher.

Muttering, he dissolved into his seat, pulling his hat low over his eyes in embarrassment.

She abandoned the attacker to his own humiliation, then hovered over the young man, the personification of primitive maternal instinct. I took my position beside her, to show my full support. The lightning coruscating from her golden warrior eyes challenged everyone...even me...as I dug deeper and deeper within myself.

I said nothing as we lurched along, our stop having long passed by.

Unperturbed, the trumpeteer’s single note wailed and bent and broke and wailed again in unceasing pain...

In tandem with the screeching of the trolley on the tracks...

In tandem with the screeching in my heart...

Chervis Isom is an attorney in Birmingham, Alabama. He obtained his B.A. degree from Birmingham-Southern College and his J.D. from Cumberland School of Law, Samford University. He has an avid interest in literature and when he can find time, he enjoys wrestling with words. One of his stories has been published in the Birmingham Arts Journal.

Double-Take

Kelly Hayes-Raitt

“Soura” is one of the few Arabic words I learn, simply because it is shouted good-naturedly whenever I pull out my camera. “*Soura, soura!*” demand three teenage boys one day in the *souk* showing off butchered roosters they carry upside down by the feet. I remember them as rambunctious, playful boys, but later, I feel clever when I title their photo “The Three Turkeys.”

I come home from pre-war Iraq with hundreds of *souras*, mostly portraits of people whose paths I crossed. “Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent,” Lillian Hellman wrote in *Pentimento*. “When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman’s dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.” Over time, my photographs become their own stories. Time, distance and reassimilation sharpen vignettes to frame revised conceptions, dimming the circumstances of the original snapshot.

So it is with the *soura* of Sura, the vivacious brown-eyed beauty I met for ten minutes in pre-war Baghdad. My brief encounter with this twelve-year-old—and the portrait photo I took of her innocent optimism—came to represent my country’s attempts to shape her country’s future.

I met Sura at Amariyah, the neighborhood bomb shelter where over 400 Iraqi children, women and men took refuge during the 1991 Gulf War. Claiming it was a military command center, we dropped two laser controlled bombs, directly hitting the civilian shelter one cold February morning at 4:00 a.m., incinerating nearly all the families trapped inside.

Today, Amariyah stands as a monument to war’s horrors. Grainy photos of the victims line the reinforced cement walls, wilting floral wreaths litter the stained concrete floor, and rebar protrudes at impolite angles through layers of sheet metal, curled like chocolate

shavings from the intense heat. Shafts of sunlight stream through the bombs' gaping entrance point, throwing eerie shadows over the haunting scene.

In February 2003, Sura was acting in a TV commemoration of this grim national tragedy. During a break, the chirpy little girl took my hand and led me around the shelter, pointing out the shadowed outlines of mothers who had died clutching their babies, of the bloody splotches preserved in full horror, of the scum of skin that literally baked off boiling bodies and clung to the shelter's walls.

Once home, my photo of her open, easy face and quick smile came to represent the face of this war—the girl who pays for every gallon of gasoline I use, the girl who pays for every vote not cast or counted, the girl who pays for every moment I spend on the busyness of my life that keeps me from being attentive to my life.

“Sura was born the year of the Gulf War,” I told audiences throughout California. “In her brief lifetime, she has known nothing but recovering from one war and preparing for another.” I attached twelve years of failed diplomatic, economic and military policies to ten minutes of smiles and gestures.

On my return to Iraq after the invasion, I try to find Sura. Although mail was not allowed between our countries, we had optimistically exchanged addresses. Every morning, I hired a translator to take me to neighborhoods that had been bombed so that I might see firsthand the impact of our “shock and awe” campaign and interview people for a column I was writing for my local newspaper. Without hesitation, I was driven to a new neighborhood pockmarked by bullet holes and engraved with terrifying memories.

To find Sura, we drive the labyrinthine Baghdadi streets, passing US tanks and bombed buildings. My translator pulls over on a commercial street and disappears behind a gate and up a staircase. As I stand waiting on the sidewalk, I begin to worry. Would this girl remember me? How would her parents feel about a strange American showing up at their doorstep looking for their daughter? ...Was she even alive?

I am not as welcomed on this, my second, trip. Rumors on the street are spread that American troops deliberately cut electricity to certain neighborhoods to retaliate against Iraqis for not turning in their guns. No power, no water. No power, no refrigeration. No A/C. Tempers rise with the temperature—an exhausting and volatile 120 degrees well into the evening.

The *dinar's* value is also volatile, so much so that money-changers operate from curbside card tables bearing foot-and-a-half stacks of the Saddam-monikered bills. These sidewalk entrepreneurs ring Fidor Square, where a giant statue the size of Saddam's ego once ruled and was famously pulled down for the international media. In its place now is an indecipherable sculpture that looks like an angel after a bad night. Stenciled in foot-high red letters along the cement base is "ALL DONNE. GO HOME."

While I negotiated exchange rates on my first day back in Baghdad, a car pulled along side and an irate Iraqi family screamed their frustration at me: "No water," the driver shook an empty jug like a raised fist. "America bad. Saddam good! Bush bad," he shouted while a woman in a black *abaya* and a teenage girl admonished in high-pitched Arabic. He sped off, punctuating his emotional outburst with a grimy cloud of exhaust.

I wait nervously in the inhospitable heat outside Sura's apartment, attracting a crowd of laughing children. "Hello mister! Where are you from?" they sing.

Through the corner of my eye, I see a streak of red as Sura explodes through the gate and leaps into my arms, throwing multiple kisses to my left cheek, then to my right, then to my left again, laughing and chatting and kissing in one excited, jumbled moment.

I blink back tears, overjoyed that she is not one of the "collateral" casualties of the war and—selfishly—that she remembers me. She grabs my hand and pulls me upstairs to show me off to her family, chatting excitedly in Arabic as if I can understand her.

She leads me through a makeshift kitchen on an outdoor porch, where her sister is cooking over propane hotplates, and into the living room. My translator is already seated. I am given the chair of honor amid profuse apologies for the stifling heat. "*Karada,*" says Sura's father with frustrated gestures at the silent ceiling fan, reminding me that my country helped kill their power.

"It's time for the Americans to go," Sura's father says through my translator. "We have no electricity, no water. We are glad Saddam is gone, but now the Americans need to go, too."

Sura watches her father solemnly and glances toward him for confirmation before answering any of my questions. I try to explain through the interpreter how I've shown her photo to many Americans, how so many people have come to care about her and her family, how we all send our love and our wishes for peace. I see her bewildered look and I lose my ability to articulate.

“Thank you for your feeling,” she says awkwardly, after coaching from her father. “We wish you a happy life.”

I hand her the photos I took of her in February, including one of the two of us that she touches to her heart. She leaps up—every movement matches her delightful, delighted exuberance—and disappears to get a small album of photos showing off her dazzling smile.

I ask her if she wants to be a model. “No,” she answers, eyes flashing, glancing at her father. “A dentist. But, I like being an actress.”

In a room Sura shares with some of her six sisters hangs a framed photo of her mother, who died years ago. I meet three of her sisters, all with the same sparkling eyes and full, rich smiles. Her family, along with two brothers, fled Baghdad during the war to take refuge with relatives.

The younger children, Sura’s nieces, still have nightmares, but no one wants to talk about the war today. My visit is a celebration. They pour me a tepid 7-UP, take turns fanning me with a hand-woven fan and clown for my camera. I think about the time I am taking from their chores, their children and their day. I am reminded of my complicated, consumptive lifestyle that makes just simple visiting with friends a major logistics endeavor.

Our conversation ultimately turns political again: I ask Sura why she thinks the war occurred. Unhesitatingly, without a glance toward her father, she answers simply: “Oil.”

I later return to the Amariyah bomb shelter where I first met Sura, longing for someplace solemn and respectful amid Baghdad’s chaos and cataclysm. When I arrive this time, the electricity is out and I bribe the guards to let me in. Alone in the creepy darkness that had sheltered so much death, I think about the workers outside planting a memorial garden in the bright sunlight. Inside the tomb it’s quiet, almost prayerful. A single shaft of light weaves through the tangled rebar and spotlights a wreath marked “peace” in English and Arabic. On the walls, abstract shadows intermingle with the bloodstains, old paint on a canvas too stubborn to fade.

Fifteen years ago, there was blood on the walls there, too, and bits of hair, in the apartment where my brother died. Driving out to it, the car felt too small to contain my mother and her two ex-husbands and me, these three people who used to be at each other’s throats, who hadn’t been in the same room in two decades. My father and stepfather sat in the back, politely discussing cholesterol and the new studies on fiber, while I un-

derstood what it meant to be a character in a Salvador Dali painting, melting surreally in the stifling Florida heat.

The blood-soaked couch and formerly snow-white bed pillow assaulted us the moment we opened the front door. Bits of bone lay on the floor like scattered cigarette ashes. We moved delicately around the cramped apartment, pointing out half empty bottles of beer in hushed tones, trying to avoid the couch and bones and blood and the intimacy and the intrusion of understanding my brother's final hours.

"It's like a movie scene," my mother stage-whispered to no one, and, indeed, the couch looked more like it was rusting than bleeding. Perhaps that was so. My brother had been dead for two days and the sheriff had already removed his body for an autopsy, leaving the couch purposeless.

In the bedroom, we found racy photos of his recent ex-fiancée and handcuffs on the bedpost. You'd think if you were going to shoot yourself you'd at least clean up a little first, I think, sanitize the memory. I could kill my brother for this.

The tiptoeing was getting on my nerves. I got a dishtowel and picked up the bones in that gingerly disdainful way one picks up a dead cockroach with toilet paper, knowing it was once alive and wanting to make it someone else's disposal problem. I forced my father and stepfather to carry the couch out to the dumpster in the parking lot of the fast food joint next door. "Well, who do you think is going to do this after you leave? Mom?" I glared.

The void made the blood on the wall more naked. I gathered wet towels and knelt as I had all those Sundays growing up, priests intoning death as a sacrifice. This death was no sacrifice, this death was selfish. The only thing that made sense to me in that moment was the painful, pitiful look on my mother's face as she watched me wash away the last physical vestige of her son.

After my brother's death, I traveled to Europe, alone, exchanging my small Santa Monica apartment for a small Parisian apartment. I tried going to mass at Notre Dame, but left crying before communion, leaving untouched the body and blood of Christ given up for my sins. I could no longer find either refuge or community in the ritualistic passing of the sanitized host and grape juice in a chalice.

Fifteen years later, I marveled at how Iraqis, who had experienced so much violence maintained their faith. We often bombed them at dawn, as they were preparing for morning prayers. Entire communities bound in shared horror.

“It was a kind of destruction I cannot describe,” says Isam Hindi. The tall, slight man gestures to the decimated statues in the park across the street from his home in Baghdad. “There were many dead bodies in front of us. They were shooting fire randomly from a helicopter and dropping rockets. I was frightened and saw many dead bodies—and body parts, hands, legs,” he says through the translator. “These were the hours of death.”

“I told my children, if we are going to die, we should die together in the house,” the solemn man says as he leads us past his curious children into a living room where there had not been much living going on lately. The room is disheveled, furniture askew, books piled along the walls. A cloth clumsily hung attempts to cover a ragged, foot-wide hole in the wall.

Isam is a soft-spoken, 28-year-old computer professor at Al-Mansour University. As he cowered with his wife and children in their living room that terrifying morning, a grenade pierced his wall and set the room on fire. “They shot my picture of Mohammed, our prophet,” he says, holding the remnants of a framed photo. Shrapnel tore into the middle finger of his right hand, leaving a gash black with infection. He cannot get antibiotics.

Since the invasion, Isam has been out of work. His 9-year-old daughter, Sahar, and 6-year-old son, Ibrahim, still cry through sleepless nights.

Isam turns to me. “I would like to show you the dignity and hospitality and honesty of the Iraqi people and give you this painting to remember us by,” he says proudly, picking up a painting that rested against the couch.

Through tears, I gaze at the darkly moody painting of a solitary man, shoulders hunched, walking away from me through an empty *souk*. His roughly defined figure suggests he is avoiding something, but the shifty scene in the foreground offers no clues. Not knowing what to say, I shake Isam’s injured hand and humbly accept his gift.

It took me years to frame the painting, which haunted me with its danger and ambiguity. Now hung, however, my perspective has shifted, and I see a man leaving behind something sinister, moving into a foggy unknown. It’s his future that haunts me now, not his past.

####

"Photos is the metaphor. I'm connecting with Iraqis through my own loss. I am reevaluating my life—seeing my life differently. I am also respecting boundaries."

Kelly Hayes-Raitt: *Reporting on her trips to pre- and post-invasion Iraq, war-torn Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, slums in the Philippines and Iraq refugee neighborhoods in Syria, Kelly Hayes-Raitt's forthcoming book Keeping the Faith: An American Woman's Listening Tour Among the World's Forgotten chronicles her connections with economic and political refugees. "Double-Take" is an excerpt. She blogs at www.PeacePATHFoundation.org.*

~~~~



# Tongue

**Emma Bolden**

In the front seat of his Impala with  
a *Recovering Catholic* bumper  
sticker, Timothy taught me how to kiss,  
to tilt my chin, to tease the fat wet stump  
of his tongue into action. Not the way  
I'd seen it done on film—that jaw-drop lean,  
mouths wide and working to the music's sway—  
not what I wanted. I was there to learn  
how to want for him. *This is just charity*,  
he'd say—thick glasses, thick body, he thought  
no other guy would want to teach me.  
Once I slipped (poor sight, poor aim) and he laughed.  
He thought I'd never get the hang of it.  
How I wanted to bite, to feel his tongue split.

---

**Emma Bolden** is the author of three chapbooks of poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in such journals as the *Indiana Review* and *Prairie Schooner*. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Georgetown College in Kentucky, where she serves as poetry editor of the *Georgetown Review*.



# Just Another Day

**Elsie Schmied Knoke**

It began as just another foggy Saturday in Tennessee. We slept late, had breakfast and read the paper. Cal left for a ten mile bike ride and I drove down to Melton Lake Park to walk along the river.

As I left I noticed an old Ford Taurus parked at the entrance to our development. The car had no visible damage, no one was in it, and I didn't give it another thought. We had noticed it last night and remarked how unusual it was to park on the street when everyone has a garage. A half block away, on the road to the quarry, an expensive SUV was parked beside the inlet. Why would anyone park there when there were plenty of handier parking spots, I wondered?

The fog was so thick the river was barely visible. I supposed this is what Londoners have to deal with all the time. Up close vapors rose from the water, giving it an eerie effect, like little foglets dancing on the surface; the air smelled clean and fresh. My long sleeved tee shirt and cap didn't do much to keep moisture off me. I hate it when my hair gets damp, undoing all my efforts to control the curls. But I love this time of the early morning when I can be alone with my thoughts, observing or ignoring the peeping of the coots and mallards and the honks of the silly looking Muscovy ducks, depending upon my mood. I often have my best inspirations for stories or articles when I let my mind wander as I walk. Today there were half a dozen walkers and only a few helmeted bikers. The Canada geese were absent, but a great blue heron walked along the boat pier, stretching his neck and searching for fish as I passed by. I've seen two or three families of herons here and their six foot wingspan and graceful flight always thrill although their raucous squawking is disturbing.

I was almost at the point where I reverse course when I noticed a Bass boat with two fishermen standing aboard; they weren't fishing, but rather pointing at something in the water. It appeared to be a black lump about four feet long, around thirty feet from the shore, looking like those logs that float here when water is released from the dam and the river rises.

"Call the police," one of the men shouted, "We've got a body floating here. Looks like an older woman."

"I'll find someone with a phone." I don't own a cell phone.

I scrambled up the rise to the roadway and began frantically waving my arms at traffic, grateful that my shirt was white and had long sleeves, making me visible. This was unreal, like *CSI*, or *Law and Order*. Nothing like this happens in our small town. What could have happened? As I tried to flag down the passing cars I was both energized and surprisingly calm. It was almost as if I were observing someone else in a movie or on television.

Three or four cars passed before two stopped but those drivers had no phones and sped away after I shared the situation. An older gray Chevrolet pickup truck finally stopped. The driver was a big man and he did have a cell phone. When I filled him in he agreed to call 911 and wait for the police. He didn't get out of his car to look, though.

Soon after we called, a slender young policewoman drove up, blue lights flashing, cell phone to her ear, then hurried out of her patrol car. She worked her way down from the road to the trail and the boat, now floating near the shoreline. The fishermen pulled up closer and she jumped aboard.

I found myself both thrilled and a little frightened, too. I've seen enough TV programs where a scenario like this was ordinary; here it was highly unusual. Could it be a murder, I wondered? Somebody probably robbed the poor woman and killed her, perhaps accidentally, then became panicky threw her into the river. There was no sign of an auto accident. So that wasn't it. At the time it never occurred to me that she might have jumped in. My imagination was working overtime as I stood there, watching, and spinning possible scenarios.

It wasn't long before two more police cars drove up with more flashing blue lights and a pair of brawny officers approached the scene. When the policewoman came ashore and told them about the car at our entrance, mentioning the abandoned SUV on the next street, the younger one returned to his car, made a in illegal u-turn and sped off in that direction. The older policeman assumed charge and shooed me and three other walkers away from the scene. I reluctantly resumed my walk, but needless to say, I didn't go very far nor very fast; I forgot about working on my exercise routine. Next to arrive was the fire department rescue squad and a fire truck; three firemen lumbered out in full gear so I stopped. I simply had to see what was happening, wishing I had a camera. Two firemen

went down to the river while the third pulled out a roll of that ubiquitous yellow crime scene tape. He tied it around two saplings effectively blocking the trail from the east. Another fireman headed about fifty feet in the opposite direction to block access from that side. I walked alongside him as he unwound the yellow tape; mentioned the benefit concert the fire department had sponsored the week before. I wondered aloud if maybe there was yet another body because of the second abandoned vehicle. He just looked at me and shook his head. Rebuffed, I resumed my walk.

When I finally reached my car and drove toward home, I passed the scene; the rescue crew was still in place and a large orange plastic bundle lay on the trail. And at our entrance, two police cars and a civilian car as well as the abandoned car blocked my way, four men stood talking. But my curiosity was never satisfied. I later heard that a teenage driver had run out of gas the night before and had only now come to pick up his car.

My husband also noticed the emergency vehicles when he returned from his ride and I filled him in with what little I knew. Still on a high, I e-mailed my sons and daughter, all of whom live far away, and told them what I had experienced. Their response was mostly, "Wow!"

That evening Cal and I went to dinner with two other couples from the neighborhood. The waiter had just handed us the menus when one of the men blurted out, "You'll never guess what we saw when we went for our walk today! They were pulling a floater out of the river; even blocked the trail so we had to walk in the street around the trucks."

The others asked him questions, but since that was the extent of his knowledge I volunteered my part in the episode. Everyone speculated on what might have happened but we soon exhausted the topic and the conversation turned to more pleasant subjects as we ordered dinner.

After church the following day Cal and I went out with our "lunch bunch" and they were all atwitter. There was a short paragraph in the morning paper, but no more information other than what I already had, which I shared. One of the women said that her neighbor said she heard the victim was a friend of a friend of hers. We also speculated, like my neighbors, about what might have happened to her. In the weeks ahead there was never a news story in either of the local papers to satisfy our curiosity.

However, news travels quickly in our small town. Through the grapevine we learned that the abandoned SUV belonged to the woman in the lake and that the incident occurred

on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day her husband had died. Someone said she had left a suicide note for her family, in the car. The photograph in her obituary showed an attractive smiling woman. Apparently she had been involved in many charitable activities and seemed to have many friends. She left one son, his wife and children.

As more details surfaced, I shuddered to learn she was about my age. I kept wondering how she could have been so depressed and made such a final decision without anyone having a clue as to her state of mind. She had even attended the high school football game that Friday night and according to those who went with her, she seemed to be in good spirits. Friends said that she always seemed to be in a good mood. In retrospect, I knew that when people decide to take their own lives, they are in a good mood, as if a burden had been lifted by the decision, so that follows. I remembered that was true of two of our patients who took their lives.

What I still can't comprehend is how anyone can do this to herself. When I lost my husband more than ten years ago, I was certainly grief stricken at first, but I did manage, with the help of family and friends, to overcome it in time. I even found a new love and a new life.

The memory of that day keeps haunting me. I drive past the location every day and each time I wonder about her. Did she ever seek help? Did she ever talk about how she was feeling? She haunts me on those nights when I cannot sleep.

I've read that depression is insidious, that people who are depressed seldom recognize that in themselves. Certainly there are plenty of stories about the disease and hundreds of commercials advertising products to help fight it. Perhaps when one is so depressed she doesn't pay attention to those commercials or advertisements. But one thing I do know: if ever I find myself that depressed, I'm going to talk about it to someone, anyone. I couldn't put my family through that trauma.

Besides, I know how to swim.

---

*Elsie Schmied Knoke is a retired RN/hospital administrator living in Tennessee. She records textbooks for the blind and dyslexic, sings in the church choir and travels extensively with her husband, Cal. She has written novels, articles, poetry and short stories. "Homeless," her latest story, is on [WWW.MindWingsAudio.com](http://WWW.MindWingsAudio.com).*

~~~~~

New Shoes

Frankie Strong Tatum

I sat on the edge of the porch with my feet on the next step down waiting for my grandmother to pick me up. An August sun sent shafts of late morning light across the six broad wooden steps, which sagged in the middle with age. Light filtered through the fingers of flat, glossy leaves and spread raggedly across the grass.

My Mother had pinned my straight, brown hair up above each ear, but already one of the pins was beginning to lose its grip on the silky thin strands. I looked up and down the street from behind my wire rim glasses. I was the only girl in third grade who wore glasses. I would have taken them off every chance, but I couldn't read without them. I got used to being called "four eyes."

Davis pulled the limousine to the curb. My grandmother, Mema, rolled down the window and waved to me with her immaculate, white-gloved hand. I turned a waved good bye to my mother, who stood behind the screen door, and walked carefully down the steps. I wanted my grandmother to see that I could walk like a lady even without the heavy book on top of my head. My sister D. J. had spent the night at her friend's, and she wouldn't be going with us this time. Davis opened the door for me, and I slid in next to Mema. She re-pinned my hair on both sides, twisting it away from my face and catching the pins just above my ears.

I only got to ride in the limousine when Mema took us to town. The limousine was to take my Grandpa for rides when he felt like getting out. He had arthritis and had to stay in bed most of the time. But on warm Sunday afternoons Davis would drive him around the neighborhood and he would visit with the neighbors through the windows.

Today Mema was buying me new shoes. My school shoes from last year were tan with an oxblood saddle. The heels had been replaced twice and the toes were almost worn through. Mother said she couldn't believe any boy could be harder on shoes.

We rode into town and got out right in front of Lovelady's. When Mema took me shopping we always had lunch in Lovelady's Tearoom. Then we'd go to the girls' department. Someone Mema knew would help us choose. Mema had bought my sailor coat

there; it was my favorite, with its thick white braid circling the cuffs in three straight rows. Brass buttons lined up in two rows down the front, and the blue velvet sailor collar spread smoothly across my shoulders. Mother let the hem out as far as it would go, and I wore the coat three winters.

After lunch, Mema and I walked to Bergher's. The streets were crowded. The men had left comb rows in their oiled hair. Women in high heeled shoes and navy suits hurried back to their offices. I watched my reflection in department store windows as we passed.

We took the stairs to Bergher's shoe department. Shoes of every kind were grouped neatly in pairs along the top of a carpet-covered counter. Some patent slippers with ankle straps were placed atop dark wooden boxes; fine cotton socks trimmed with lace lay across the toe. Oxfords in brown and black and tan oxfords with navy saddles stood sturdily, waiting to be chosen for school duty.

Then I saw the most beautiful shoes. Black suede slippers with one thin strap across the foot stood alone on a square of silver satin. The satin was draped around the shoes like a frame. The shoes were placed with the heels close; the toes pointed outward, like a ballerina had just stepped out of them. Silver leather leaves followed the curve of the shoe, slightly overlapping at the ends.

My grandmother saw me. I was gently rubbing my fingers across the toe of the shoe and tracing the shapes of the leaves. These shoes would be perfect with the black skirt and weskit that my mother had made and trimmed with silver buttons. It wasn't a school dress but for special times like church and the movies. We called it my party dress when I wore it with a ruffled blouse. But I never went to many parties.

The saleslady found the shoes in my size, and I tried them with dressy cotton socks. They felt snug, but I could wiggle my toes. I looked at them in the mirror, from the sides and the back. I walked up and down in front of the saleslady so she could check the heel. She declared them a perfect fit.

Mema paid for the shoes. I carefully carried the bag that held my new shoes, some new socks with two rows of lace, and a small special brush for cleaning suede. We went back to Lovelady's and had lemonade while we waited for Davis to pick us up. When we went outside, the big stone clock that hung on the corner of Lovejoy's said four o'clock. The sun's heat had settled into the sidewalk, and was being released in shimmering waves.

Mema patted her face with a crisp linen handkerchief. I pulled my damp, wispy hair behind my ears.

Mother was in the kitchen when I got home. I let the screen door slam behind me and pushed the heavy wooden door closed. Mother laid down the paring knife and wiped her hands on a faded yellow towel as I handed her my shopping bag. We sat at the wooden kitchen table, its green paint worn away in three evenly-spaced places. I twisted the salt and pepper shakers between my fingers while Mother opened the box.

I watched as she unfolded the tissue from around the shoes. She touched the leather leaves, then turned the shoes so she could see the size printed in black on the but-tery leather inside. She re-wrapped each shoe with the crinkly white tissue and laid them carefully inside the box. She sighed the way she always did when we were out of milk or eggs.

“You needed shoes for school, not party shoes,” she said and slid the box toward me across the table. She went back to the sink to finish peeling potatoes. I took my new shoes and went upstairs. My bed was next to the window, across from D. J.’s. Mine was the one always made up, with the striped spread tucked carefully under the pillow. My doll was propped up, smiling, her head listing to one side.

I turned on the lamp between the beds. The sky was a smoky blue now that the sun was low. Shadows darkened the corners of my room. I tried on my new shoes again, with the new socks, and walked around the room. The heels tapped against the bare floor. I walked to the mirror in the hall and spun around on the smooth leather shoe bottom, my skirt flaring out like a ballerina.

I took off the new suede shoes and put them at the foot of my bed, next to my tan saddle shoes. The saddle shoes were worn to the shape of my feet, the toes turned up slightly. A small hole was hollowed on the inside of each heel. The dark brown laces had long since lost the coating on the end, and I had to wet the frayed ends in my mouth to thread them through the holes.

I tried on my school shoes. They needed polish. A summer of going barefoot made them feel tight. I wiggled my toes and tried to spread them inside the cramped shoes.

I brushed the suede on my new shoes then carefully wrapped them and put them back in their box. I put them in the bottom of the closet, next to my mother’s old brown suitcase with the scuffed edges. I saved the new shoes to wear with my special black skirt

and weskit, the ones I wore with my ruffled blouse when I went to parties. But I never went to many parties.

Frankie Strong Tatum *is a native of Birmingham, a retired fund raiser and distance runner. She has spent a lifetime gathering stories, and now intends to tell them.*



Four Large Eggs

Linda Hudson Hoagland

Four large eggs are all that I have left between me and starvation.

I look inside my refrigerator and see them cradled in their cardboard carton enticing me to delve into their delicate texture and taste.

I can't. I have already eaten my eggs for the day. I must wait until tomorrow to be able to eat two more.

It isn't heart problems that prevent me from eating the eggs and the cholesterol building numerical figure that many people are faced with nowadays, what keeps me from eating those eggs is that I have nothing else to eat tomorrow if I eat them today. It is the same set of circumstances for the next day. I know I have a meal of two fried eggs for each day. After that, the job prospect that I have already interviewed will come through, I hope.

What do you do when you have no food and you have no money?

At least, I have a place to live the next few days. It is a small house for which I have taken over the rent payment from my brother after he moved out and into his girlfriend's home. I do have a place to go if I don't mind starving to death.

It is time for my daily walk to scour the trashcans for newspapers. Most people when finished with their daily reading will give the newspaper a toss and that's what I am counting on. I need to find out if there is anything available for an almost starving woman.

I must keep in mind that I have four large eggs.

My brother's phone is still connected and, of course, it is in his name. I begged him to let me keep it until I could find a job at which time he could take it out of his name and I would get it transferred to my name. That is my hope.

At the rate things were going, my hope is nothing more than a pipe dream.

The only job I am able to find that looks the least bit interesting is with a CB radio warehouse. Mr. Owens is the man who talked to me. He seemed encouraging. I told him I had seen his ad in the newspaper and I was willing to work for anything, minimum wage, if nothing else, so that I could get my feet wet again after pulling up stakes three months earlier and moving two hundred fifty miles south.

I moved south to be with my parents, especially my dad because of his failing health. Dad passed on and mom finally settled and accepted dad's death and is now able to carry on.

I moved out searching for a life where I could start over.

When I left mom I had enough money to pay for one month's rent in this little house and forty dollars for gas money, twenty to get to where I am now and twenty to get back to live with mom if all else fails.

I don't want to fail. I want to stay right where I am and resume my life as it was before my dad became seriously ill.

Time is running out. I don't know what I am going to do

I stroll along the street lifting the tops off of the protected trashcans and peer inside looking for a newspaper. I can find everything but what I want in that trash can. I walk on to the next one. I rip the top off of it and stare down at a neatly folded today's date newspaper.

I grab it up only to discover that folded neatly inside of it is somebody's vomit.

"Yuck!!" I shout as I throw it back into the trashcan.

I continue walking to the next trashcan where at the bottom of it is another newspaper that has been basically pulled from its folds but it is still intact meaning that it looks as though the classified section is there. That's what I need, the classified section, just in case my job interview fails me.

I was never good on job interviews but I think he is willing to hire me. I hope he will. I don't want to wander too far out on the street. I have to go back to be near the phone between eight and five to await that phone call. The only reason I am out now is that it is lunch time and I am assuming he will eat lunch between twelve and one so that I can go newspaper searching.

I walk back to the house where I sit on my sofa and stare at the telephone that isn't ringing.

With each passing moment the tension is building up and the stress level is making me so hungry that I want to attack the refrigerator and fry me a couple more eggs. I am hungry. I have spent four days already surviving on two eggs per day. I thought my body should have adjusted to the fact that I am only getting two eggs per day. It isn't adjusting and I am hungry.

I count the seconds down because my goal is to sit there until five o'clock when I know his work hours end at Commtron. Then, I am going to go search those very same trashcans for a couple of morsels of food that look like they are fit to eat without causing me to die from some deadly contagion. I focus my mind on what is comically known as dumpster diving for food.

At about two minutes before five I rise from the sofa and start moving around.

The phone rings.

"Oh, my God, the phone. Please let it be him," I pray.

I pluck the receiver from its cradle.

"Hello?"

"Miss Holcombe, this is Tim Owens from Commtron."

"Oh, hi, Mr. Owens."

"I'm calling to see when you will be able to come to work. We want to hire you. It will be minimum wage and it will be part time. We'll see how things work out. If everything goes well, we'll change it to full time and give you a little more money."

"That's great, Mr. Owens, when can I start?"

"Tomorrow. Can you come in tomorrow?"

"Yes, Sir, I can. Mr. Owens, thank you, thank you so much."

The need for food suddenly leaves me. All I can do is smile and say, "Thank you, thank you, God, thank you."

It is hard to sleep because I am much too excited. I rise bright and early to get ready to drive to my new found job. I have to drive because I can't take a bus. Reason number one for driving is that I don't know how to get to Commtron on a bus. The second reason is that I don't think I can scratch up the money to put into the fare box when I know I have enough gas in my car to get me to and from work for a couple of days.

The job Tim hired me for is to be a file clerk to straighten out some extremely awful customer files that a person who has never filed before had totally discombobulated.

"Ellen, you know how to file, right?"

"Yes, Sir. You asked me that when we first talked."

"Good. That's what you will be doing for a while. I can not find anything. If a customer has a question or a complaint, it takes me a good three days to find the file. Please start with that file cabinet and begin with the letter "A". Don't just assume that what's in

there is right because what's in there is wrong. You'll have to go from A to Z fresh and new."

"Yes, Sir."

I work, the lunch hour arrives, and I don't leave.

"Ellen, aren't you going to lunch?"

"No, Sir, I thought I'd just stay here."

"Well, I'm going to go. You want me to bring you something back?"

"No, Sir, I don't – no, I'm not hungry."

"What is it you like, Ellen? Do you like hamburgers? I'll bring you a hamburger."

"Thank you, Sir."

He leaves for lunch and I want to cry. He must have guessed that I don't have any money for food.

My stomach is making mild, rumbling noises due to hunger the entire time he is gone. As soon as he arrives, I snatch the bag he hands to me, rip it open, and try to make myself eat slowly to savor every morsel. I don't know when I will get to eat again. I don't know when I will get paid. It's only Wednesday.

He watches me and he knows I'm hungry. He walks to the soda machine and purchases a cold drink that he hands to me.

"Haven't had much to eat for while, have you, Ellen?"

"No, but now that I'm working, I will survive."

Linda Hudson Hoagland *has worked in various jobs from bartending to clerical duties in large cities and "the small town I love." She earned three Associate Degrees from Southwest Virginia Community College, is mother of two sons and has been employed for the past twenty years as a Purchase Order Clerk for Tazewell County Public Schools in Virginia.*

~~~~~

# The Surgeons

**Jane Sasser**

Once, as a child, I skipped onto the pier  
my father loved to frequent, catching fish.  
Outside since dawn, he smiled and watched me lean  
across pier's end, against the worn gray boards,  
lulled by the line where sky and sea converged.  
One ear half-tuned, I heard an old man curse,  
and, turning, watched him cut the tautened line—  
a writhing disc fell at his feet: a ray.  
One ancient, comprehending eye met mine.  
Heart pounding, I watched as that eye grew dim,  
I watched the silent gasps till he lay still.  
The old man took a rusted, briny knife  
and slashed him into strips. He threw him back,  
between the rails, into the foaming sea.

Today, I'm watching pictures on a screen,  
these blurs and shadows of my own bad news.  
The surgeon's metal blade will pare away  
these useless things my organs have become,  
and no one seems to comprehend these tears,  
no shoulders here on which to cry this grief,  
no beating heart who'd understand this loss.

---

*North Carolina native Jane Sasser is a lifelong lover of stories. Her poetry has appeared in The Sun, The Atlanta Review, The North American Review, Appalachian Heritage, and other anthologies and publications. Her poetry chapbook, "Recollecting the Snow," was published in 2008. She lives in Oak Ridge, TN.*

## Learn to Ski—After Fifty?

**Judy Walker**

"Learn to ski, New Mexico," challenged the television announcer in Albuquerque. It was the beginning of ski season and New Mexico, known for its hot, dry deserts filled with cactus, sage brush and tumbleweeds, prided itself for having many of the southwest's finest ski resorts. Pamphlets for Taos, Angel Fire, Ski Apache, Sandia Crest, and Red River could be found in any tourist shop. The campaign each year to promote the state's ski areas offered a day's lessons—including ski rental and lift tickets—to first time skiers for only \$15.00.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," my husband, David, chided as he turned off the TV and came out to the patio. With a nod of acknowledgment to his presence, if not his words, I brushed the sweat from my brow and continued to weed the flower bed.

"Sure," I thought. We'd been over this before. "At fifty-five years old I'm gonna race down a mountainside at eighty miles an hour with boards strapped to my feet, watching the trees and boulders flying toward me at the same speed." I'd watched skiing on television before. And the cold! If the sun went behind a cloud in late spring, I put on long sleeves. Southerners have thin blood and we were transplants to New Mexico and its snow-covered mountains.

In January, almost everyone had begun to feel the winter doldrums after the holidays. Friends asked us to join them and another couple for a weekend in Red River, famous for its Alpine skiing. Each year, the two couples reserved a chalet at some resort they'd read about or heard had great skiing conditions. During the day the husbands—both expert skiers—lived on the slopes while the wives hit the village shops or relaxed in the hot tub. I could already feel the swirling, jetting water warming my bones. We set a date and got directions on where and when to meet.

Since moving to New Mexico, David and I had talked about spending a few days at a ski resort to see what it was really like. The image of being in a not-quite-primitive lodge with a lobby full of people wearing ski outfits and casts, sitting in front of a roaring fire and

drinking hot rum while the snow swirled and danced outside the window, seemed romantic in the movies. To actually ski never entered this daydream.

After David's gentle badgering during the next week, I finally agreed to buy a ticket for a first-time skiing lesson.

"You know I'd love to do it myself," he declared, "but with my bad knees . . ."

We got brochures to study, and learned about the altitudes of Mt. Wheeler to the south and the Latir Peaks to the north. One brochure listed Red River's forty-nine "exhilarating ski runs," and informed us about activities ranging from river rafting, dogsled races, and snowmobiling in the winter; to boat races, tug-o-wars, horseshoe pitching, and "Red River's specialty: square dancing," in the summer.

We learned how Red River began, not as a skiing village, but as a mining town because of the gold strikes in the late 1800's. Thousands rushed there to "find their fortunes" but only a handful were left by the time World War I threatened to become a reality. The community was discovered by tourists in the 1930's, but it was the early 1960's before the ski area was developed. One brochure proclaimed in bold headlines "Visit us. You'll love it!"

We drove north from Albuquerque past Santa Fe, through Espanola, then Taos with its beautifully painted houses, each with colorful flowers on pastel backgrounds, painted leaves and ivy entwined around windows and doors. With each mile north we encountered more and more snow. The brochures had not prepared me for the visual impact as we drove onto streets that became mere creases in the snow-covered mountains; mountains that seemed to loom over me and to enfold me in giant white arms, rising up from behind and cutting off sight of the world I had just left. I had to remind myself to breathe.

After meeting our friends at the chalet, unpacking, and drawing straws to see who got the bedroom with the king-sized bed, we went out to look over the ski area. I was anxious to see what I had gotten myself into. Each ski run was named a color for the level of difficulty: death-defying Black Diamonds, average-sloped Blue runs, and chicken-hearted Green slopes.

We watched laughing, rosy-checked skiers swing up the mountains in the lifts, also named different colors to denote which slopes they serviced—the Blue chair for beginners, and if you survived the lessons, you could take the Yellow chair up Gold Rush Hill, a longer, more tilted slope but still part of the Green run. My lesson was scheduled for Sunday, so we



checked out the beginners' slope. It looked reasonably level, *therefore, safe*. The chairlift looked like a porch swing on a sky-hook. This wouldn't be difficult after all.

We found a quaint little steakhouse with a speciality of battered-and deep-fried corn on the cob and black-eyed peas. Ah! Comfort food. Steaming cups of cappuccino and agreements not to talk about work rounded out the evening.

Saturday morning was free time. Dan and Jim went skiing, getting up before day-break to fix breakfast. David relaxed in the heated pool while Dede, Arlene, and I checked out the village shops. We got back a little before noon, had a lunch of hot dogs and potato salad with the guys. We rested for an hour or so before changing back into our woollies and heading out to explore the shops we'd missed on the other side of the street.

Sunday. Ski Day! This "chance of a lifetime" was becoming reality. All night, my mind raced with reasons to back out. *Now that it's here, I can't go through with it.* I grabbed my robe and made my way to the kitchen.

"I don't feel well," I announced to the room in general.

David handed me a cup of coffee. A feeble attempt to hide a smirk was not quite successful. My buddies, Dede and Arlene, laughed nervously. They had not been persuaded to buy tickets for skiing lessons this trip—they swore they would consider it next time if I came through this one unscathed. I could almost see relief dance across their faces. If I backed out, they didn't have to worry about next time.

Accepting no excuses, David insisted on helping me zip and button and squeeze into my new ski outfit. The guys had gathered up their gear and were stamping around outside, eager to get on the slopes. We trudged up the snow-covered path to the main ski lodge. My stomach felt as if yesterday's delicious hot dogs were rebelling.

I reluctantly followed David up the steps to the rental shop, but hesitated when I got to the door. Inside at the counter were several kids and young adults, laughing as they chose skis and boots and poles. I knew if I went out on the course with those eager, slim adolescents, they would laugh even harder when I fell down and couldn't get up. I would make a fool of myself—an old lady trying to compete with youngsters. I felt hot tears welling up and my throat closing tightly in self-pity.

After minutes of coaxing and assuring me that all those people waiting for the instructor were not twenty-something youngsters, David pushed me through the door. He later described it to friends like a cartoon of Sylvester the Cat: spread-eagled, with claws

dug into the door frame to keep from going through. He handed the ticket over the counter and retrieved a set of skis from the rack. Fitting myself with boots was only slightly easier, but now, I was beyond the point of backing out.

On the slope, the beginners' group consisted of four teenagers, two preteens, a thirty-ish couple, and three over-fifties. I was not the only one with gray hair sticking out of my cap! After finding I could actually stand by myself and move into place before our instructor, I felt a rush of confidence. Learning how to form a "wedge" with my skis and "squatting" to slow down or stop, without falling once, assured me even more. The next lessons were how to turn by bearing down on the "near" ski and letting the "far" ski glide around, and how to use the pole to release the ski if I did fall. Watching several of the students having more difficulties than I, my ego went soaring. I was ready to tackle the ski lift!

I moved into position, as instructed, waiting for the lift to swing around and take me up the hill. As the seat approached, I was to watch over my shoulder, grab the bar with my left hand and sit down. At the top, as the lift turned on its way back down, I would step off onto the mound of snow and glide down to the actual slope. Simple.

Being a person of short stature, however, the swing struck me mid-thigh. My bottom met only the edge of the seat and it tipped forward, dumping me face first into the snow. The instructor yelled at me to keep my head down until the swing cleared the space above me. Okay, maybe it wasn't that simple, but how to you stand tip-toe on skis? I was determined to get up that hill if I had to grab the seat and let it drag me up. After being helped to my feet and knowing what to expect, this time I managed to grab the bar and pull myself into position. David told me later that he, Dede, and Arlene were watching from the deck of the lodge, but couldn't figure out what happened. They saw me waiting for the lift, but an empty chair swung up the hill. They were astonished to see me appear a couple of chairs behind. My dismount and glide to the slope were flawless.

By afternoon, I had to be persuaded off the slopes so we could pack up and head for home. I was exhilarated. My hands and toes were chilled, but I was warmed by the knowledge that, even though I never got off the Bunny slope, I had learned to ski. After getting back into my regular clothes, I realized I was exhausted. That fifteen-dollar ticket had opened new worlds for me. Watch out Dede and Arlene. We're coming back next year!

---

**Judy Walker** is a native of Birmingham. She retired from the Social Security Administration in 2001 after working in Albuquerque, NM and Oklahoma City, OK. She transferred back home in 1998. Writing, photography, and gardening are her favorite activities.



*Free Verse Poem*

# I Will Watch You Through The Middle Of The Night

*After Johanna Klink*

**Patrick Cabello Hansel**

I will watch you through the middle of the night,  
The stars revolving around the sky, your fever  
Rising and falling and rising again. I will check  
Your breathing, hold your little hand in mine,  
Brush the invisible dark things from your back.  
I will try to comfort you. I will take note  
Of the dogs barking, and the old woman  
Rummaging the neighbor's trash  
At 3:00 am, looking for cans to sell. I will walk  
The hallway outside your room, and whisper  
To the walls that lean in there. I will be alone  
For you, I will tell you how you will feel better soon,  
I will tell God why we chose your name,  
And plead his mercy upon your shivering. I will  
Repent for sins you have not yet committed.  
I will watch you through the middle of the night,  
Kneel by your breathing and your eyes.  
I will look for the dawn, scratch for it, sing it  
As fierce as I am able, my little voice like wings  
Beating against the fullness of redemption.

---

**Patrick Cabello Hansel**, a Lutheran pastor, serves a bilingual parish in Minneapolis, and is a poet in the Mentor Series of the Loft Literary Center. His story "You Can Say" won honorable mention at the 2008 AWC. He has published poems in *Sojourners*, *Fire Ring Voices*, and *Main Channel Voices*.

# Royal Street

**Suzanne Johnson**

*Friday, August 26, 2005*

*“Early forecasts project Tropical Storm Katrina to turn north  
and land on the Florida Panhandle by Monday afternoon.”*

*—The Washington Post*

When I met the pirate Jean Lafitte for a rendezvous near Delacroix, Louisiana, late Friday afternoon, I had no clue my world was about to end, and end badly. The small tropical storm churning in the Gulf of Mexico barely registered on my mental radar. After all, I’m a wizard—not a witch, not a psychic, and certainly not a weather forecaster—and wizards don’t do natural disasters. Just really unnatural ones.

Lafitte definitely had potential as an unnatural disaster. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had dark blue eyes and danger written all over his face as he poured generous splashes of rum into two glasses. He’d arrived at this secluded cabin in the swamp to enjoy a couple of the world’s most timeless pursuits: sex and money. I had a different motive. As a sentinel, it’s my job to police the borders between the modern world of humans and the vast Beyond, where undead pirates rub shoulders with vampires, abandoned gods, and other creatures not fit for polite human company. I needed to send Lafitte back where he came from.

He handed me a glass and tipped his own in my direction before taking a sip. “To Mademoiselle Drusilla Jaco, the most beautiful sentinel New Orleans has ever had.” Lafitte’s accent held the French overtones of early nineteenth-century Louisiana, where he’d been a rogue hero who fought ruthlessly, understood the finer points of a business deal, and knew how to keep a woman happy.

Ruffles fluttered from his cuffs and down the front of the white linen shirt he wore tucked into black pants. A sash of red silk set off a narrow waist. I could see why he’d been famous as a lover as well as a fighter. Thick black hair bordered a clean-shaven face with strong cheekbones and full lips, and the eyes that met mine were intense and intelligent. His refined manners didn’t quite wipe out that bad boy aura no woman can resist, no mat-

ter how much we pretend we want a nice, safe guy to come home to. Too bad this bad boy had been dead two hundred years.

I decided then and there: I deserve hazard pay for this. If Lafitte touches me, I'm demanding a raise from the wizards' Congress of Elders. Double if it involves lips.

"I should be the most beautiful, Captain Lafitte, since I'm the only *female* sentinel New Orleans ever had." I smiled and tried to look alluring as I gazed up at him.

I don't have a flirting gene in my entire body, but I wanted to keep the pirate interested a while longer. I'd even worn a skirt, a momentous occasion itself. I'd chosen a flippy black number, short enough to show off my legs but not short enough to offend Lafitte's nineteenth-century sensibilities.

It must have worked, because he was giving me that head-to-toe appraisal guys do by instinct. It can't be something they learn growing up, because every man does it the same way, like he's assessing a juicy slab of beef and deciding whether he wants to savor it slowly or just gnaw it up and move on. I'm guessing God gave Adam a shot of ocular testosterone that had him eyeing Eve the same way after their little rendezvous with the serpent.

"You are beautiful, little one," Lafitte said with a soft caress in his voice that sent a shiver down my back. He stepped closer, within touching distance, and I fought the urge to step away.

I'm not beautiful, not really, although by Beyond standards I'm okay—at least I have a pulse. I'm too short, for one thing. Women who don't clear five-foot-four are cute, sweet, delicate, or perky. We're never beautiful. My shoulder-length blonde hair is a nice honey color, but it's thick and likes to curl when I don't want it to. Most of the time, like today, I keep it in a French braid. If you can't tame something, I say, just tie it in knots and be done with it. My aqua eyes are my best asset, and if I really want to impress a guy I wear something purple or teal to play them up. Usually, I don't bother, which could explain why I was finding a dead guy so appealing. Maybe I needed to get out more.

Lafitte continued to ramble about our budding partnership. "You are also the first sentinel to realize how beneficial a relationship with me could be. I've approached your mentor before when I was summoned to the modern world, but he was never receptive to a business arrangement. Modern goods would be worth a fortune in the Beyond. Now I'm

glad he didn't cooperate, of course, because working with you I can combine business and pleasure."

He regarded me with a slow smile. I found myself smiling back. My damned eyes were probably twinkling.

Good grief. I know better than to lock gazes with the undead. Vampires aren't the only undead who can enthrall a human; the Historical Undead like Lafitte are just as capable of bewitching unwitting humans for nefarious purposes. I began an internal litany: *He's a dead guy, DJ. He's not sexy; he's deceased. Your love life might be slow right now but you aren't desperate enough for a walking corpse.*

As Lafitte hoisted a toast to our partnership, his arm brushed against my breast; with his other hand he lifted a stray curl off my cheek and tucked it gently behind my ear. His breath warmed my neck as he leaned over and swept a soft kiss just below my jaw.

I ground my teeth but managed to refrain from smacking him as I took a step back. Flirting was one thing, touching another entirely, and the dreaded lip factor had come into play. The Elders didn't know it yet, but my standard of living was about to improve.

I clinked my glass against his, and offered the vaguest toast I could. "To our mutual satisfaction."

Lafitte drained his glass. I pretended to take a sip, letting only the tiniest trace of bitter liquid burn its way down my throat. I should have sprung for something better than the cheapest rum on Winn-Dixie's shelves, but the Elders are tightwads when it comes to reimbursable expenses.

I poured him another drink and looked off the porch of this ramshackle cabin on the edge of Bayou Terre aux Boeufs, a semi-wilderness outside New Orleans. Lafitte hoped to establish his headquarters here once we consummated our partnership, so to speak. Many of his old stomping grounds in the marshes of Barataria had disappeared courtesy of coastal erosion. The orange-gold sunset illuminated a pair of white egrets splashing around the murky water. The place had a fierce, wild beauty to it.

A few miles down the road here in St. Bernard Parish, the one-lane asphalt fizzles out at a sign warning travelers they've reached the "End of the World." The real "End of the World" was a bar that closed down a few years back, but the name fits this desolate place where solid ground gradually drowns in the patchwork of wetlands and swamps seeping toward the Gulf of Mexico. Here, surrounded by marshes and alligators, nostrils burning

with the tang rising off the brackish water, one could forget metro New Orleans lay just a few miles away.

“Our alliance is difficult for me, you know,” I said softly, playing for time. I’d flirted with the pirate, or “privateer,” as he preferred to call himself, since approaching him in New Orleans a few hours earlier. He’d been summoned from the Beyond by a Tulane University student with slightly more untrained magical ability than brains, what we in the magical world call a “sixth-senser.” Lafitte had such confidence in his manly charms I’d had no problems convincing him I’d not only hop in his pirate’s bunk but would look the other way as he smuggled goods between modern New Orleans and the Beyond.

He smiled indulgently and sat in one of the old wooden chairs on the porch. “I know you don’t want to betray your mentor, *belle-fille*, but—”

Lafitte clutched at his throat, gasping, and stared at me in outrage. “You. . .You. . .”

I think a word rhyming with “witch” was about to roll off his tongue, but he froze mid-sentence, eyes rolling in panic. He could move his eyeballs, but nothing else.

About damned time. Note to self: Next time you make an immobilization potion, add an accelerant.

I grimaced and stood up, tugging on the skirt and retrieving my silver dagger from its ankle sheath inside my boot. Lafitte’s eyes turned cold and hard. I decided not to look at him too much.

“I have to admit you make a tempting case for yourself, Captain Lafitte, but I’m a licensed Red Congress wizard just like the male sentinels, and I’ve trained under Gerald St. Simon—my mentor, as you call him—since childhood. I’d never betray him, even for someone with your undeniable charm.”

As I talked, I cleared the area around Lafitte’s chair, kicking aside branches and leaves to ensure a good clearance on all sides. I gently prodded a tiny brown lizard back into the swamp with the toe of my boot. Better for him to stay here in Delacroix, munching on mosquitoes.

From the bag I’d used to bring the rum and glasses, I retrieved a small syringe of mercury and a half-pint Mason jar filled with sea salt. “You know, I wish pirates hadn’t gotten popular again,” I told Lafitte, glancing around to see if he was still listening. Anger had turned his eyes from blue to black. “Seems like every half-baked idiot with magical talent has been trying to summon you the last few years. I guess it’s inevitable some would suc-



ceed. They think they're going to reach into the Beyond and pluck out this loveable Jack Sparrow cartoon pirate. Then you show up and either scare the hell out of them or charm the pants off them."

Gerry had volunteered to alter the memory of the kid who'd summoned Lafitte while I did pirate seduction duty. He was also cleaning up the trail Lafitte had torn through New Orleans before we found him. Usually, the undead stay close to where they're summoned. If all goes right, we're able to snag them and send them back to the Beyond before they get their bearings and wander off. Lafitte had knocked the kid unconscious, rolled his wallet for a wad of cash, taken the streetcar downtown, and zeroed in on a Canal Street pawn shop willing to trade an unmarked handgun and ammo for the kid's stolen iPod.

When he'd laid the gun on the table after arriving for our rendezvous, Lafitte also pulled out a pack of Fantasy Paradise condoms, assorted flavors, size extra large. The man knew his way around the twenty-first century far too well. I paused briefly in my magical preparations to ponder whether Lafitte needed the extra large or was just optimistic.

I used pinches of salt to form a triangle of white crystals around Lafitte's chair, leaving a gap of about six inches. I glanced again at the pirate, whose cold eyes followed my every movement. My potion might be slow to work, but it would last a long time. Good thing. If looks could kill, I'd be gator bait.

"Temper, temper, Captain. I could send you to parts of the Beyond you don't want to visit. You don't have to be sent back to Old Orleans, you know. I'm sure the vampires would enjoy a nice pirate flambé, after they played with you a while, of course. Or you could be sent to the elves." The Beyond is the world's vast metaphysical attic where all the things people once believed in continue to live on, kept from re-entering the modern world by the wizarding gatekeepers. The possibilities of places to send Lafitte were endless.

His eyes blinked at the mention of elves, and he shifted his gaze back toward the swamp. He didn't even look at me when I retrieved the handgun from the table and stuck it in my bag. I tossed the condoms in the water.

His reaction to the mention of elves stirred my curiosity. I had elven ancestors, though I'd never been able to do what Gerry called "old magic," whatever that might be. Elves were secretive, elusive and hadn't been seen in centuries, but their effect on Lafitte made me wonder how fluid the borders were between Old Orleans and the more exotic parts of the Beyond.

“Okay, no elves,” I told him, making a mental note to ask Gerry about them again. “But don’t come back to New Orleans, Captain Lafitte. Your time here has long passed.”

I extracted a syringe from my bag and released a small bead of mercury next to Lafitte’s feet, drew a triangle in the air over the pirate’s head with my dagger, and used more salt to close the triangle around his chair. The air shimmered as I directed energy toward the salt triangle to ship Lafitte back to Old Orleans, the Beyond’s mirror version of the modern city.

I stepped back and focused more energy toward the ruby-studded gold band on my right forefinger, and the red stone began to glow. I drew energy from the ruby bracelets on both wrists, and ruby strands around each ankle, and channeled them into the ring. As the energy grew, I raised my hand, pointed at the opening I had drawn in the fabric of the temporal world and said quietly, “Go.”

The power flowed from me in an invisible rush, and with a final glare in my direction Jean Lafitte disappeared into the shimmering air.

On the porch outside the triangle lay a gold doubloon Lafitte must have dropped. I picked it up and decided to keep it for Gerry. He might get a kick out of adding it to his antiques collection, and God knows he didn’t seem to be getting a kick out of much else these days. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what was wrong.

I should know Gerry better than anybody. He’d raised me since I was a kid, raised me to be a sentinel like him. But he’d seemed preoccupied lately. New Orleans is one of the most active preternatural hotspots in the world, but Gerry had been pulling back. He’d take the high-danger gigs like vampire infestations or split duties with me when we got a live-wire like Jean Lafitte, but everything else fell to me. I didn’t mind the extra work, but it worried me.

“Yo-ho-ho,” I muttered, using the toe of my boot to scratch open the triangle and break the energy field. The air solidified, and I stood alone in the darkening swamp. My ring was hot to the touch, a side-effect of using it as an energy channeler. I took it off and stuck it in my bag as I retrieved my cell phone and punched in speed dial one.

“Ahoy, matey,” answered a cheerful British accent on the other end.

I smiled, picturing Gerry’s mane of silver hair and his habitual smirk. “Matey my ass, Gerry. All’s done on this end, and I’m on my way back to your place.”

“No problems with the dispatch?” Only recently had the Elders begun recommending the triangle for dispatching, circle for summoning, and an interlocked circle and triangle for open portals, and Gerry and I had been experimenting with mercury instead of silver nitrate as a dispatching medium. Silver has too many side effects.

“It was a textbook dispatch,” I assured him. “Couldn’t have gone smoother.”

“Good job. Meet me at Sid-Mar’s and we’ll have dinner. Oh, and pick up some bottled water on your way, DJ. I think there’s a little hurricane headed our way in a day or two and you know how fast water sells out.” In Gerry’s accent the word sounded like “herrikin.” He’d been in New Orleans for more than twenty years but he’d never lose that accent.

I tried to remember what I’d heard on the morning news. “It’s not supposed to come here, is it? This morning, the weather guy said it was headed for Florida and we wouldn’t get anything.” New Orleans was still cleaning up limbs from a category one storm named Cindy that had barreled through last month.

I loaded my bag in the back of my dusty red Pathfinder, phone tucked between shoulder and chin, and paused before climbing in. The storm hadn’t been very big this morning. Could it have grown and changed paths that fast? “What is this thing called, anyway? Kitty? Koko? Kiki?”

“Just as bad,” Gerry said, laughing. “It’s Katrina. Not exactly the name of a killer storm, is it?”

---

*A nationally award-winning feature writer, **Suzanne Johnson** is associate editor of Auburn Magazine at Auburn University. A Hurricane Katrina survivor and longtime New Orleans resident, she returned to her native Alabama in 2007. "Royal Street," an urban fantasy, is her first novel.*



# No More Sky Diving

Laura LeHew

one minute he is atop the dryer  
trying to jump catawampus  
into the exploding laundry chute  
the next there is only silence & you have not  
screeched out *God Damn It Dorian*  
*Don't* (fill in the blank) once this afternoon  
which is odd  
so you go in search of the little guy  
who is peacefully sleeping on his heated bed  
mid-day—in reasonable weather  
which is very odd  
& since he must be faking lethargy  
you break out the beloved salmon snacks  
cat nip, a can of cat food, a can of real  
tuna & picking him up nets you a growl  
& a nip which is how you know you *are* going  
to the vet tomorrow & that you are no  
longer going out for New Year's Eve celebrations  
& you are glad you didn't buy those new shoes;—  
STAT work-ups, fluids, pain medication(s)  
tech time, vet time buys you a 105° fever-fighting-off-infection  
diagnosis  
he's home & two days later he's still  
not eating & oh so bitey & you're off  
to the ER with your sharp crabby kitty  
who turns out to have broken his sternum  
& you give him all the salmon snacks & spendy stinky

mackerel & sardines he can consume  
as you conjure a stalking the crow-on-the-roof-top jump—chase  
the brazen squirrel to-the-crown-of-the-black-oak fall—  
vicious buck, pregnant doe hoof—hell hound paw—  
manimal steel toed boot—the resounding  
concussion—the splinter  
of the long flat bone that joins ribs to cartilage  
to safeguard his teenage heart

---

**Laura LeHew** is an award winning poet whose work appears in a myriad of national and international journals and anthologies. Her chapbook, *Beauty*, was just released. She received her MFA in writing from CCA, a residency from Soapstone, interned for *CALYX Journal* and was nominated for a Pushcart.

~~~~

She

Laura Hunter

She leaves Carter standing on the platform, the little wooden casket tucked under his arm like rolled up newspaper, leaves him waiting by himself for a going somewhere train. Going somewhere else. To lay their baby, her Henry T, in the hard cold ground.

If She'd carried the coffin, She would have carried it before her bosom, cradled in her arms, a treasured silver tray crowded with fine blown crystal She'd seen once in a Birmingham store window. Beautiful glass that makes its own color when it can't hold the sun.

Unable to face the on-coming train, She leaves Carter. Her shoes drag over boards oiled smooth against the dirt. In the distance, smoke from the underground mine fire drops a haze over tree tops. She's going that way.

Walking between split fence rails, She imagines Carter on the train, sitting alone in the box car, probably on an overturned carton. The baby rests on his knees as he rubs his hand over rough boards, trying to remember the gentleness of Henry T's face already leathering in the dark. Carter cries. First he puckers his lips, then the cry moves across his face like hot summer wind. Agony overpowers him so completely he drops his forehead into calloused hands. When the train gets out of town, knowing him, he'll brace the coffin against his body so train-rocking won't nudge his son. Carter'll keep the baby safe. He promised her so.

Before Henry T's birthing here in this new place, She'd been lost. She sorted time between Ona, who at two waddled underfoot, waiting to be stepped on, and Carter Junior, CJ, a lanky nine-year-old, already angry at life trapped by coal dirt and clapboard shacks.

Hopelessness settled on her when Doc gave up on restoring Henry T less than a year after he was born. It bends her body and drags her soul out before her in a long flat shadow. She knows loss that had only hinted at existence before Jessup men came, before her Henry T died.

She left CJ this morning with word to watch Ona while She went with Carter and, if necessary, to tuck Ona's dress under the bedpost to keep her inside.

“Go back with me,” Carter’d said before leaving for the train. “We’ll start over some place else.”

Pride refused to let hate cast her out. “Ain’t done nothing wrong. Henry T done no more an die, and he done that quiet. They’s nothing to be afraid of. Here’s your work. And it’s good work and true. So I stay till you get the baby in the ground on your family’s own plot. We’ll weather this. Superstition won’t run me off.”

“It’s hating us they ain’t,” Carter argued. “They’s scared. And fear weighs heavier on the heart than any hate.”

But She wouldn’t hear of leaving.

She believes Henry T would’ve probably made it, as least for a time more, if old Midwife Parsons hadn’t left him unattended. She would’ve been willing to lie in her own blood to have him just a while longer. But Midwife, who Carter paid better than most camp fathers, grabbed Henry T’s stiff legs and pulled him out, feet first.

“Reckon he’s stillborn,” Parsons said, while She bellowed in pain and bled, split open like a butchered cow. Parsons laid him aside, unswaddled, blue and slick, and packed her tight to stave off the loss. When Carter finally caught her at the commissary, Parsons claimed her craft true and mumbled, “Shame the little one weren’t born dead, seeing as how he is and all.”

“Should’ve killed Parsons ‘fore she got out of the house,” She told him this morning. “Should’ve shot her or rung her neck like a worn-out fighting cock. Stopped her ‘fore she spread her poison against Henry T.”

“Leave it be,” Carter told her. “Can’t undo what’s been done.”

Late August sun burns her scalp. She lifts wet hair off her neck and drops it, splat, against her skin. Ahead, privet hedge, wilted from a week of days near a hundred and nights not much better, marks the road to the Lovett place. She starts up the rise.

Razor, Lovett’s blue tick hound, meets her as She comes within sight of the house and trots up the road with her. She calls out, “Hallow the house. Can I draw me a drink a well water?”

Ruth Lovett, barely six, shrieks as she runs from the side yard, "She's in our yard." An arm appears and yanks Ruth through the door.

Inside, a latch falls. A sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun slides out the window, pointed directly at where She stands.

"Get off my place. We don't got no water for you," Pa Lovett calls. "Don't need you poisoning my well or hexing my woman. Go back the way you come."

"I'm just asking for a sip of water, Pa Lovell. You know me. Carter's woman. It's a hot walk back to the house. My throat's awful dry."

"You ain't welcome here."

"Is She a witch, Ma? Is Razor hexed?" It's Ruth inside. "She petted him. I seen her do it."

The door cracks and a tomato, too ripe for slicing, hits her on the shoulder and drops into the dust. She picks it up, wipes the dirt away and bites. On the main road, She sucks juice and seed from the fruit.

CJ'll be hungry by now. Breakfast biscuits and cold sweet potatoes don't seem to hold him no more. She'll fry up some bacon and make thicknin' gravy to pay him for watching Ona. When She left, he'd said, "Paw coming back?"

She said, "Not today."

He asked her, "You coming back?"

"Fore dark," She answered.

The first wave of men folk had come just after dark. Henry T, a few days old, was old enough for old Midwife Parsons to get her word out. Carter met them on the porch. "Stay inside," Carter had said. "It'll be men talk. You don't need to know it."

When Mine #3 shaft shut down for a fire in the hole, men were back. She lay abed listening through the open window.

"Carter," Superintendent Oakes said, "we ain't knowed you and yourn long, but you seem to reason. Now what we've been hearing makes us wonder if you're what you set us up to believe."

"Don't know what you're saying, Super," Carter answered.

"Hard worker, we give you that," another said.

"As Superintendent, I give you the canary to tote in against fumes," said Oakes.

"I reckon so. Weren't no fumes when . . .," Carter answered.

Oakes interrupted. "It's this here baby She birthed. It's said he ain't got no strength in his legs and he's got, well, to put it blunt, a place for. . . ." Oakes stopped.

"Go on."

She could tell by his voice Carter was riled.

Nobody answered.

"Say what you come to say. Or get off my land," Carter demanded. "Job or no."

A new voice, younger than the others, spoke up in a rush. "Midwife Parsons says his head's big as a watermelon and he's got a tail place, raw and swoll up, covered up with hair for to hide it. Word has it he might be. . . ." Like Oakes before him, the boy stopped.

"What?" Carter threatened, his voice lower than She'd ever heard. "Be what? Answer me, Kid. 'Fore I come off this here porch."

"Old lady Parson said it," he stammered. "Not me."

"What'd she say?" Carter demanded.

Carter's boots moved across the porch. She visioned him near the edge.

"It's a devil's child. Ain't never seen nothing like it in all her midwifing." The ump had vanished, but he kept up his story. "Said She didn't die. Any other woman would've. And now with the mine afire, it seems to reckon. . . ."

Carter stopped him. "You Oakes's boy, right? Doc don't think he's no devil child. Says he's got a 'condition.' His tailbone ain't right's all. Ain't closed up proper. If anybody's a demon, it's Old lady Parsons. She nigh on to killed my wife. Look to that devil woman, if you want somebody to charge." He stalked into the house, slamming the door.

"Carter?"

He didn't answer.

She spits the tomato core into the ditch. Grit on the tomato twists her stomach; she bends over and vomits. Wiping hands across her mouth, She hurries toward Simpson's Creek bridge, the last mark before She'll be home. The bridge, with its planks cool on her feet, lies just ahead.

Doc stayed Henry T's final day and night, not doing no doctoring. He set out front smoking with Carter, pitched ball with CJ, swung Ona when she whimpered. Said his hands

was tied. Nothing he could do but wait it out. Said he had to go on living in Jessup. "All of Jessup's not superstitious. Some things you just can't change," Doc said.

Her grief didn't want him there, but Carter said seeing as how town felt like it felt, they needed a level head about.

After Henry T passed, Carter told her about finding hex signs scratched on the mailbox. He told her about Old Tom hung in a tree, when before he'd told the kids some dog killed the cat, seeing as how he'd got so rickety.

"This ain't nothing more'n a witch hunt," She argued. "What can they do to us?"

"It's Henry T, not us. Doc says Oakes' boy aims to burn the baby and spread his ash so's his poison'll be gone. Doc's Doc. He's thinking he might talk down a mob. Soon as Henry T passes, we need to get him out 'fore they know to come back."

She refused to take it in. She held her baby's swollen head to her bosom, though he'd not suckle. Later that night his head drooped, and She knew he was dead. She felt him crumble like dried out plaster under her hands, and She folded up inside. For the first time, She saw his ashy skin and understood that Carter had to take him away.

"Not have my baby throwed on no bonfire 'fore little-minded people. While Carter's gone with the burying, I'll make ready to go." Her resolution quieted her for a time.

Carter and Doc hammered out a little wooden box in the dark. She bathed the baby, dressed him, and, denying the heat, wrapped him in a flannel blanket. While they worked, She recollected the birthing of CJ and Ona. Holding her deformed son against her chest, her breasts throbbed with pent-up milk. Yet her loins hardened against birthing for such a wicked world. After a long rocking-time, She and Carter walked together to the train station. They left Doc, with her two children, behind.

Burning through her shoes, it's like the ground itself is afire, and She welcomes the bridge's coolness. The plank bridge sits a good twenty feet above the creek. Below, between cracks left to make for flexible crossing, water settles, forming a broad pool. She looks between the cracks, then sits on the edge, her feet high over the water. Dusty shoes dangle off her toes.

Distance tricks her eyes. Water appears to rise, right under her feet. She feels She can step out on the water and walk across blue-silver catfish gliding under her, the bank no

more than a black line separating the real world from its reverse. Alone on the bridge, her head floats.

The voice of Henry T, now aged with wisdom, calls her mind. "Step out," it says. "You'll hover butterfly-like above this overturned world, in freedom you haven't known since I first stirred in your belly. You'll drift with the water. Away from mine roofs that collapse. Away from ghost smoke that burns your eyes. Away from smoke that boils up from cracks, smoke the odor of the milky gas of old men. Away from poison that smothers, day and night."

An almost-smile of what her child could have been cuts across her face and forces out a whimper. With it comes the first release since her baby uttered his initial tinny cry. She sobs.

After a weeping time, She rests. Below her, a gar slits the water. He gulps minnows before him as they dart past a bank outcropping of coal. Before the river's ridges reach the bank, their rippling circlets break.

From the direction of her house, there's coughing, coughing common nowadays to Jessup's people. She glances toward her house, toward CJ and Ona. Just beyond the trees, smoke, a fat dingy column, rises. Wood smoke, not coal smoke.

Dropping her shoes, She runs barefoot, blind up the road. A half-grown boy stops before her. "There She is, Pa. Let's get her."

As She tries to pass, Oakes' son raises an arm to strike.

Behind them, CJ, bare feet dancing against leftover midday ground heat, tugs Ona, rumbling along in his self-made wagon.

"Ma?" he shouts. "Doc's gone. Barn's afire."

Eyes darting back and forth, the gangling boy steps off the road. Beneath him, the ground crackles.

CJ calls out in gulps. "Where you been, Ma?"

His hair, too golden to take in the sun, glistens. Remembering the Birmingham glass, She's blinded by CJ's fairness. Love for her son surges through her milk-laden breasts, and She realizes that what's lovely don't need no sun. It gives off light of its own.

Lymon Oakes' spit, splattering dust on his already covered shoes, draws her back. "Run on, woman. Don't you leave nothing behind but tracks in the dirt."

Mouth set, She stares into his eyes, their coldness enough to chill her insides. She glares till he gives way and drops his head.

Behind Oakes, his boy's weight sends weeds, dirt, rocks into the orange belly of the mine. Heat boils up and singes her face. Oakes' son grabs a pine sapling to stop his drop, his scream echoing off the creek behind her.

Oakes runs to draw him out, but She gets there first. She strips off her blouse and loops it around his wrists, a handle for pulling. Bare-breasted, She tugs against the burden. The boy inches into the hole. With no foot hold, he loads her down. She braces herself as red rip-rock cuts into her heels.

Oakes steps tenderly over crumbling ground, takes the blouse and pulls his son out. The boy sits on the road, his soles blistered, tears cooling his face.

Oakes offers her blouse and mumbles, "I can't say nothing . . ."

"I know you, Lymon Oakes You talk big in the dark." Straight as iron, She speaks without flinching. "My name's 'Justine.' It ain't 'Woman.' And you tell your boy it ain't 'She'."

Naming herself aloud warms her inside, relieving the hardness in her breasts. Dampness emerges on her blouse. Justine pulls on the blouse and lifts her head. She strides forward to greet her children.

Laura Hunter, Northport, AL, has received honors nationally and internationally for fiction and poetry. In addition to magazines, Hunter's work appears in several anthologies: *Beyond Doggerel*, *Ordinary and Sacred*, *As Blood*, *Belles' Letters*, and *Climbing Mt. Cheaha*. She and her husband spend their free time entertaining grandchildren on Lake Tuscaloosa.



Changing the Combination

Sherry Kughn

Last week, right before lunch period, I missed my new Hannah Montana powder compact. I remembered placing it on the edge of my locker shelf first thing that morning. I had waited until after classes to powder my nose. I wanted to look cool during lunch period because watching me all week had been a cute, red-haired guy. I felt sure he would sit down and talk to me any day.

I looked in my locker mirror at my shiny nose. Yuck! I blotted my skin with a tissue as I thought about the person I knew had stolen my compact, my best friend, Anna. I walked toward the lunchroom and the smell of French fries, fish sticks, and yeast bread. My appetite disappeared because my mind had focused on my problem with Anna's habit of stealing.

A week earlier, Anna had taken a book from my locker that she needed for her class. Because of the theft, I had no book to use. On our paper, we both got a "D," me for having no book to study, her for not reading the book after she stole it. Still, I continued to share my locker with her.

What can I say? She's my best friend. We've been together since the first grade. Now that we're both in the seventh grade and have different schedules, we don't see each other much. After school, though, Anna usually comes home with me. She has to. Her old man is always drunk. I feel sorry for her. Besides, if she doesn't come home with me, she would go home with the crack-heads and the tenth-grade guys. Heck, she sometimes hangs out with them even when I tell her not to.

Anna is funny, different from my other friends. Many of them are nerdy. Anna is cool. She likes "outrage," her word for doing crazy things. I am too scared to walk down back alleys, to jump out of her bedroom window onto the sidewalk, or to lift candy from stores. I admire some of her skills, though, like spinning on top of the escalators at the mall. She is so good at it, lying down on the rails and going round and round on her butt as one rail goes up and the other goes down. I would never try it, but I laugh hard at Anna doing it. I'm too shy for my own good, or at least that's what Anna tells me.

Of all times for the red-haired guy to sit down next to me, it was the day my nose shined, the day I was hurt with Anna for taking my compact. The guy walked up beside me with his lunch tray

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Ray. May I sit down?”

“Sure,” I said, praying he did not notice my freckles. Thank goodness I had on my rosette-red lip gloss. Maybe he would notice my lips and not my nose. I smiled at him. Then to show him I was somewhat adventuresome, I leaned down and sipped from a caffeine drink hidden in my purse. It was one Anna had slipped into it the day before. Such drinks were banned from school, but I had to admit they kept me awake during math class. Anna always drank hers without hiding them. The teachers looked the other way: I could tell they got tired of dealing with her antics.

Ray asked my name.

“I’m Madison,” I said, as my faced turned hot.

“Why aren’t you eating?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Worried about a test or something?”

“Something,” I said, as I sipped the drink.

“Want to talk about it?”

I almost said yes, but I didn’t know Ray that well. He’d probably be like my mom and tell me to leave Anna alone. Mom doesn’t understand, though. Anna is familiar to me, and the rest of these girls in this school seem snooty. Mom told me to invite some of the girls over, but our apartment is so tiny. Also, our apartment is run-down. I’d hate for them to see it. Anna doesn’t care that our apartment smells like mildew. She’s just glad to have a place to go besides her own.

As if Ray guessed what I was thinking, he pointed to Anna, who was headed toward the restroom.

“You know her?” he asked. “I saw you talking to her yesterday.”

“She’s my best friend.”

“Oh.”

The way he said it made me wonder if he knew something about Anna he was not saying. Lately, she had gotten more interested in boys, and she liked to flirt, especially with older guys. Lordy, I hoped she was not sleeping around. Mom told me girls that did that

might get a disease. I don't quite understand how married people do not get a disease, but I didn't ask Mom that.

A bell rang.

"I'll see you later," said Ray.

I was glad he had to go. I followed Anna into the restroom. She stood there holding my compact.

"You should've asked if you wanted to borrow my new powder," I said, as I looked up at the compact's tiny black brush Anna held in the air.

She blinked slowly and looked down her nose at me.

"I was going to ask you to loan it to me, but I couldn't find you this morning."

"So you took it?"

Anna powdered her nose one more time, replaced the brush, and then snapped the compact's lid shut.

"Here," she said, handing it back to me.

I was glad to see my compact in one piece. Without thinking, I opened it and noticed the compressed powder had a deep depression in it, as if Anna had used it every five minutes. I glanced up to see Anna watching me.

She cleared her throat.

"I saved eleven ninety-five to buy this," I said, "and I wanted it to last awhile."

"Be that way, then," she said. "I don't want your old compact."

Anna turned toward the mirror and spiked her hair upward with her fingers, her black nail polish half gone from her ragged fingernails.

I knew from years of experience that she would now turn against me, making out that this was my problem. As always, I caved.

"I'm sorry, Anna," I said, pushing the compact back toward her. "Here, use it today but put it back in my locker tomorrow."

Anna turned toward me, cocked her head, and pouted. She knew how to work me as if I were a cell phone.

She took the compact and opened it again. She pulled out the brush and drew it across the powder. Sometimes I hated myself for putting up with Anna's crap. I wanted her to be my friend, though. I needed her to be my friend.

"Come over today?" I asked.

“How does this look?” she asked, putting on another layer of powder.

“Great, Anna,” I said. “You look great.”

Anna put my compact in her purse.

“I’ll meet you at the curb this afternoon,” she said. “Do you have any ice cream at your house?”

I nodded; then I turned to go to my last class. I left Anna still looking at herself in the mirror.

Near my classroom, I almost bumped into Ray.

“Wanna walk over and get a hamburger after school?” he asked.

I shook my head no. “I got plans.”

“Okay.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Anna’s coming over to my house,” I said.

He nodded, but a frown swept over his face.

During math, I half-listened to the teacher. I worried about myself. Why was I willing to give up everything for Anna’s friendship? Surely, if I tried, I could make some new friends. Later, by the time I met Anna at the curb, I was wishing I had instead gone for a hamburger with Ray.

Also, the next day I asked the nerdy-looking kid with the locker next to mine how to change a combination. He showed me. I plan to change my combination soon. First, though, I have to tell Anna. It wouldn’t be right to change the combination without telling her. We’ve been friends too long for me to mistreat her. I can tell we’re both changing, though, and Anna’s ready for a new set of friends. If my locker were hers, she would’ve already called me aside to tell me she had changed the combination.

At least, I think she would have told me.

Anniston native and lifelong resident Sherry Kughn is the author of a series of inspirational books for mature mothers called Heart Tree Books. The third book in the series, God's Bouquet for Empty Nesters was released May 26. Sherry has a long career in journalism and magazine writing. Visit www.hearttreebooks.com.



Remember

Suzanne Coker

he died of forgetting.

There was a sense to things
that wasn't sense, but feeling
only, not thought, following rules
forgotten first.

Once he knew how
to find the river,
follow it out
from the woods into town.

Now the river runs sideways,
or in crazy eights. The whole
world is plowed and receding
or maybe his arms
are getting shorter.

A full glass of juice
in the cabinet. Speech
become a clown's act,
unicycle ridden down
a tightrope.

Growth gone
backwards.
Lists everywhere,
things should remember

when anyone ask.

Not quite upright,
shuffle and grin
of a monkey, dressed
carefully and taken out.
Content to wait,
to chew and swallow
when reminded.

Spooked by the light
become dark, what is
ticking, unfix it,
clock pulled again and again
from the wall, every time
first, every

message from lostland
scrambled, dentures
centered under the chair
in a room made
cryptic wreckage,

acts flung sideways.
Stripped, shaved, fed,
fallen, sheets, straps, floor,

forgotten own body,
the rest of us, our fears

forgotten in the rescue of him
over and over from angels

and demons he could no longer name.

Suzanne Coker *currently lives in Helena, Alabama. Her work has appeared in Birmingham Arts Journal, Mote's Books collection Motif: Writing by Ear, the Limestone Dust Poetry Anthology, and the Big Table Poets collections Poems from the Big Table and Einstein at the Odeon Café.*



Reading Shame

Jessica McCaughey

I bought Jessica Cutler's *Washingtonienne* in hardcover the week it was released. The badly written novel is loosely based on the true story of a skanky 26-year old Senatorial assistant who was fired for blogging about her sexual escapades. (Note: I read the blog as well.) The cover of the book featured a close-up shot of a woman's breasts in a pink lace bra with a silver charm of the U.S. capitol building dangling between them. Hardcover. That means I spent \$26 on this book. I read it in a day and a half and then placed it—hidden—spine to the wall, behind *Leaves of Grass*. I don't even know why I kept it. If anyone ever picked it up, I'd say something like, "Oh, right. I've been wondering where that trash came from. Did you leave it here? No? Can you believe that someone bought that in hardcover?"

This is reading shame.

For some people, it's vampire literature. For others, it's celebrity gossip magazines in the vein of *US Weekly*. My reading shame is varied, but began when I was ten years old with *The Babysitter's Club*. My grandfather and I would sit on the couch together reading and periodically I'd casually mention the other books I'd read that week—important books, I thought. Impressive books.

"So I'm just reading this to wind down," I'd tell him, embarrassed, holding up number 54 in *The Babysitter's Club* series, "Mallory and the Dream Horse" or maybe number 26, the particularly poignant "Claudia and the Sad Good-bye."

The Babysitter's Club was lowbrow, beneath me, but I couldn't give it up. It was the childhood equivalent of the four-season television show *Felicity*, which I watched in full on DVD last year. Of course I could be spending my time more productively, but instead I'll just hide my shame behind this Ken Burns documentary and pull it out after everyone goes to sleep.

A few years post-*Babysitter's Club*, I somehow got my hands on Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* and read it half a dozen times, terrified every moment it was in my hands that my mother would see me reading it and die of a filth-induced stroke upon picking it up. Then there was last year's obsession with Mormonism escape literature. It's a whole genre cov-

ering the gamut from pedophilia to religious fanaticism to late-night getaways with twenty bonnet-clad children. I read these books one after the other, all the while commuting 30 minutes on the Metro each day. And what was I reading on the train? Some literary journal. Barbara Ehrenreich. *Harper's*. Shame isn't authentic unless you're really working to hide it, which I also do with extremely popular books and any publication Oprah publicly claims to have read and loved. This became clear a few months back as I tried to keep my hand over the front cover of *Eat, Pray, Love* when running into an old coworker, or the time a friend insisted that I read and discuss *Tuesdays With Morrie* with him. Sure, I'll read it, but I don't need to shout about it from the rooftop.

I also own some books that I'm not necessarily embarrassed to exhibit on an individual basis, but that, in their simple berth, show me in a light I'd rather not be seen publicly. The beat literature shelves at my house are a part of this collection. No one needs four copies of *The Dharma Bums* and yet, during my last big book reorganization, this is exactly what I discovered. Even if you didn't know me in high school, this shelf tells you I wore a lot of black and that I smoked cloves and that I spent some time writing bad, bad confessional poetry. If I tell you this in conversation, it's kind of funny. If you inevitably picture it while flipping through my worn copy of *Desolation Angels*, marked with "so true" and teardrops in the margins, it's just humiliating. To negate this risk, after reorganizing I donated three copies of *The Dharma Bums* to the library, along with a chick-lit novel featuring a pink cover with a sparkling engagement ring in the center. Although I found it quirky and cute as I was reading it, I'd rather be shot dead than keep it on my shelf.

All of these versions of reading shame, however, pale in comparison to the humiliation that self-help books bring upon their readers. After a particularly bad breakup in my early twenties, a friend sent me a copy of *Exorcising Your Ex: How to Get Rid of the Demons of Relationships Past*. I was firmly against self-help books (and this one sounded particularly pathetic), but my friend claimed it was worthwhile, and tongue-in-cheek, and that she'd used it for a period in place of therapy, so I gave it a go. Hiding in my bed, I read it straight through in one night. And then I read it again, focusing on a chapter titled, "He Called While I was Thinking about Him. Therefore, We are Meant to Be." Predictably, a few years later, I read it yet again. It genuinely gave me solace and some humor in between the crying bouts. And I continue to take comfort knowing that, if I should need to reference it, I can pull it out from where it sits, face-down in the bottom of a crate in my closet.

Even if I never planned to have company over again, *Exorcising Your Ex* would never make it onto the big dark bookshelf that spans the length of one wall in my bedroom. Broken into square cubbies, the big shelf makes organizing and compartmentalizing one's library straightforward and soothing. In the adjoining storage room, out of public view on cement floors, under fluorescent lights, sit the lower-class bookshelves—four mismatched pieces from Target, random garage sales and, in once case, the dumpster down the street.

Cormac McCarthy is on the big shelf in my room. Jonathan Franzen is, too. And George Orwell. A.M. Homes. John McPhee. Wolfe. Yes, these books say, *look at how very literary I am. And eclectic!* This is not to say I didn't enjoy these books. Nothing makes it onto the big shelf unless I actually loved it. But in addition to loving it, I also have to think it's valid in some way. So, yes, I loved *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, and it sits prominently on the top left cubbie of the big shelf. But I also loved *Bridget Jones' Diary*, and the less-known follow-up novel, *The Edge of Reason* and they're stuffed in the very back of the dumpster-rescued shelf of the storage room. The position of these books seems to say, "Oh, I know, right? Someone left them here once. Who reads this trash?"

Jessica McCaughey studies and teaches writing at George Mason University, just outside of Washington, DC. She's also a freelance writer and editor and has previously published in flash-quake. You can contact her at jessica@jessicamccaughey.com.

~~~~~

# Polish Cento I: Mother

*after Charles Olson*

**Ryder Collins**

Read the patchwork pattern, devise the needle's strain  
*if you would know what woman is, what*  
chores and heavings she raised you with. But why look back –  
*Where there is altogether too much remembrance?*  
My mother knew some Polish but never all the words.  
*That it is simple, what the difference is –*  
Warsaw's memory ripples in her stories  
*as even the snowflakes waver in the light's eye.*  
I never think my ancestry – the countess, the horse thief, the Mongols –  
*is this universe, this flow, this woman, these eyes.*  
But my eyes slant and in my dreams Genghis Khan whispers how  
*handsome blood is, how, because it is unseen.*  
He would gladly claim me if I renounce the Slav  
*(who is as certain as morning is,*  
whose DNA is entwined with his). A caduceus of war.  
*That men killed, do kill, woman kills*  
manifests itself in my mother's chicken soup:  
*these black and silvered knivings –*  
the chicken picked clean. Her prayers to the wishbone,  
*to her tender-taken bones, is what illumines.*  
She wants me to forget my leanings, be demure –  
*something to be wrought, to be shaped, to be carved, for use, for*  
domesticity. But really she is no different than me –  
*can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,*  
where Genghis dances drunk on yak's milk. She too once said,  
*I can die now I just begun to live.*

---

**Ryder Collins** *has work published in The Southeast Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, Diagram, and Rhino, among others. She's currently working on a collection of short stories set in a small town in Alabama.*





# Lisa

## Jane Sasser

The year Annie and I started eighth grade, a new girl moved into a house not far from Annie's. We met her on the first day of school. In a place like Colby, anybody new is going to be interesting, although in eighth grade, you have to be careful who your friends are. Annie and I were not in the cool group but also not in the social rejects (no, that would come later, my senior year in high school, when I came home from South Carolina pregnant and got kicked out of the National Honor Society). We had to be especially careful. We watched the new girl, Lisa, and tried to make up our minds about her.

Lisa removed all suspense by sitting down beside Annie in the cafeteria on the third day of school. "Hey," she said. "This pizza is disgusting." She poked at the greasy school pizza on her plate with her fork.

Annie and I had always sort of looked forward to pizza days. They definitely beat the pinto beans and collard greens days. Now Annie looked at the grease pooling on top of the cheese and pepperoni. "Yeah," she said.

I could see I was going to be hungry that afternoon. I couldn't exactly eat the pizza now, after all of that criticism, and all that left was my apple and my carton of milk. I bit into the apple.

"So, I'm Lisa," she said, like everybody in seventh grade didn't already know. "I'm from Raleigh." She smiled at us. She had braces. "And you're Annie, and—" she looked at me. Obviously I hadn't been interesting enough for her to learn my name.

I swallowed a bite of apple. "Emma," I said.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "Emma *Justine*." The way she said it, my name sounded like Thelma Sue or Bertha Lurleen.

"You can call me Emma," I said. I sounded surly.

She didn't call me anything. Instead, she launched into a conversation with Annie, while I sat there across the table chomping on my apple, probably making slurping sounds with my milk carton. "So, what do you like to do, Annie?"

Annie shrugged. "Watch TV. Read."

Lisa leaned on her elbow towards Annie. “So, who do you think are the cutest boys?”

“On TV?” said Annie.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Here,” she said, pointing vaguely over her shoulder.

“Oh,” said Annie, looking around the cafeteria. I knew what she was thinking. It wasn’t that Annie didn’t think any of the boys were cute. As a matter of fact, she had a list in her desk at home of the boys in seventh grade, listed in order of cuteness. Just the day before, we had made adjustments based on changes they had made over the summer. Some boys had moved up because of good hair; a couple had moved down because of the eruption of terminal acne. Oh, I knew what Annie was thinking: *do I want to tell this perfect stranger what I think about boys? Is she going to use it against me? On the other hand, if I don’t tell her anything, is she going to think I’m a complete loser?* “David Williams,” she said carefully. This was a safe move, because you could just walk into the Colby Elementary School cafeteria and look around and get smacked in the face by the cool waves coming off David Williams.

“Yeah,” said Lisa, looking in the direction of David. “So, do you want to go out with him?”

*Go out with him?* Who was she kidding? One, we were still thirteen years old, and two, if a miracle occurred and Annie’s mother agreed to drive them somewhere—fat chance of that one—David never even threw a spare glance in our direction.

“No,” said Annie.

“Good,” said Lisa. “Because I’m going to go after him.”

“Amy Alton might have something to say about that,” I said. “She’s his girlfriend. She’s a *cheerleader*.”

Lisa shrugged. “So, what TV shows do you like?”

Annie knew better than to admit she watched *The Brady Bunch*. “I don’t know,” she said. “What about you?”

“TV’s kind of boring,” said Lisa. “I’d rather go to the movies.”

“Yeah,” said Annie.

I was just sitting there, not saying a word, watching my best friend get stolen right out from under my nose. Speaking of movies, I felt like *Bride of Frankenstein* or something. I forced myself to make an effort. “So why did you move here from Raleigh?” I asked.

Lisa glanced at me. "Oh, my dad got a job in Charlotte. He said he wanted to try living in the country." She looked around the cafeteria.

"So how do you like it?" asked Annie.

"It stinks," said Lisa. "Literally. It smells like the chicken house across the road. How do you stand it?"

I hated the smell of chicken houses, too, but now I found myself in the position of defending them. "You get used to it," I said.

"It's an acquired smell," said Annie, and smiled at me. I felt relief flood through me. My best friend wasn't going to be so easily stolen after all.

"Well, if you can stand the stench, maybe you'd like to come over to my house. We just had a pool put in. I'm thinking about throwing myself a 'welcome to the neighborhood' pool party this Saturday," said Lisa.

"You have a pool? That is the coolest thing ever," said Annie.

Lisa glanced across the table. "You, too."

I didn't really want to go. The last thing I wanted was to have to expose my body to any of my peers. Not only was I as flat as a board, I was biologically incapable of getting a tan. And I couldn't even swim. I could picture how this was going to look: all of the other girls were going to be diving into the pool with their Barbie doll bodies, and I was going to be Skipper, sitting stiff-legged in a chair.

And besides, I didn't even have a bathing suit.

"I'm going to go ask David," said Lisa. She stood up and walked over to the table where he was sitting with Amy and his friends. She leaned over toward him. Annie and I sat there at our table, staring. Probably with our mouths hanging open.

"I don't believe her," I said.

"I can't wait to see her pool," said Annie.

Lisa was smiling. She pulled a pen out of her purse and leaned over to write something on David's napkin. David was smiling back at her. Amy Alton didn't look quite so happy. Lisa straightened back up, waved at the entire table, and flounced back over to us.

"They're all coming," she said. "Lots of boys to choose from, ladies."

"In a pool," said Annie. You could just tell that it was her wildest dream come true.

"Saturday at two," said Lisa. "Be there or be square."

"You are not going to a pool party with boys," said Daddy. "That's final."

"But, Daddy," I protested, for the sake of form.

"I have nothing more to say about this," he said. He got up and walked out of the house. From the kitchen window I could see him walking out toward the pasture.

I called Annie on the phone. "I can't go to the pool party on Saturday," I said. "Daddy won't let me." I was secretly hoping that she wouldn't go, either, in an act of solidarity. But really I knew better.

"I'll call you afterwards and tell you all about it," she said.

She must have walked right through her front door and picked up the phone. "You won't believe what all happened," she said.

"So tell me," I said.

"Well, first of all, you should have seen what Lisa was wearing. She had on a black string bikini. My mother would not have let me out of the house in that outfit."

"Did she look good?"

"Heck, yes," said Annie. "Everybody was looking at her, and she was eating it up. And the first thing she did was to push David right into the pool."

"Was he mad?"

"He pretended to be," she said. "When he came up for air, he grabbed her by the legs and pulled her in. And then Amy got mad and went over and sat down at the picnic table and cried."

"What did David do?"

"He *ignored* her," she said. "He just went on playing around in the pool with Lisa. And so Amy got mad and went into the house and called her mother, and she came and picked up Amy and her friends."

"Whoa," I said.

"And after they left, Lisa took David into the pool house. And then her mother came out looking for her, and caught them in the pool house, and she yelled at Lisa and sent her to her room. So then it was just me and the boys."

I laughed. "It was your dream come true, right?"

"It was *awful*," said Annie. "They were having farting contests."

"So who won?" I asked.

“Ugh,” said Annie. “I called my mother to come pick me up, too.”

Lisa told us that her mother wouldn’t let her have boys over for pool parties anymore. And since she had pretty much alienated all of the girls except Annie and me, it didn’t look like there would be any pool parties in the future, period.

“My mother is trying to ruin my life,” she said. She popped a greasy cafeteria french fry into her mouth.

“It’s not that bad,” I said. I was thinking that there was actually some justice in the world, after all.

Lisa looked around the cafeteria. David was sitting beside Amy again. Amy shot Lisa a dirty look. “Where do you buy clothes in this town?” said Lisa. “I absolutely can’t find a store I even want to go into.”

“You could go to Charlotte,” Annie suggested.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “Charlotte doesn’t even have a Thalheimer’s.”

*A what?* I looked at Annie. I could tell she didn’t know, either.

Lisa sighed. “But it’s better than this town. I guess I’ll just have to get used to it.” She was wearing lavender plaid seersucker pants. When she first moved into Colby, she was the only girl wearing seersucker. A month later, it had worked its way into all of our wardrobes. I’d even talked Aunt Lou into getting me some seersucker pants.

“You can’t wear seersucker after Labor Day,” she said.

“I don’t care,” I said.

“If you want to waste your daddy’s money that way,” she said, shaking her head.

Now Lisa dipped a french fry into ketchup. “Want to come over to my house for a sleepover?” she said. “No boys this time, Emma Justine. Will your daddy let you?”

I felt my face grow hot. “I’ll have to ask,” I said.

Lisa’s mother was picking us up on Friday afternoon after school. I was so excited I couldn’t sit still. Inez was also waiting for her ride to pick her up. We were both standing at the living room window.

“Who is this Lisa you always talking about these days?” said Inez.

“She’s a new girl,” I said. “She’s from Raleigh.”

“Huh,” said Inez, like she knew something about girls from Raleigh I didn’t know. I doubted it.

“She has a pool,” I said.

“A pond’s good enough for the likes of you,” said Inez. Her ride pulled into the driveway. “Now you behave yourself.” She went out the door and down the steps to the car. As she was backing into the front seat, Lisa’s mother drove in behind the Chevrolet.

Lisa’s mother took us to Charlotte to a mall, where we went into the Merle Norman’s and had makeovers. A tired looking woman did all four of us, one at a time. I couldn’t stop looking at the stranger in the mirror with the mascara eyes and pink lipstick. I looked really pretty—but also at least ten years older. So did Annie and Lisa. Lisa’s mother bought us each a lipstick. I could tell from the tight-lipped expression on the clerk’s face that she thought this was cheap, after all of her work.

Then Lisa’s mother dropped us off at Pizza Hut while she ran an errand. Lisa ordered us a medium Canadian bacon pizza, which was cut into eight slices. After we each had two slices, there were two left. “You two eat them. I couldn’t possibly,” said Lisa. After Annie and I had picked up the slices and taken a bite, she added, “I don’t want to get *fat*.” I sat there chewing my pizza, feeling like one of Daddy’s cows. One of Daddy’s cows wearing mascara and pink lipstick. I probably looked like Elsie, the Borden cow, on our milk cartons at school.

Later that night, after we had talked about just about every single girl and boy in eighth grade, Lisa looked at Annie and laughed. “You don’t have pierced ears.”

Annie shook her head. “No.”

“Let me do them,” said Lisa.

“Okay,” said Annie, shrugging.

Lisa got a needle, a bottle of alcohol, an eraser, and an ice cube. She held the ice cube to Annie’s earlobe. Annie made a face. “Just get it over with,” she said.

“You asked for it,” said Lisa. She picked up the needle and stuck it into Annie’s earlobe. I watched the skin stretch. Annie screamed. I felt sweat bead on my forehead and had to look away. “There,” said Lisa. I glanced up. The needle was through Annie’s ear and stuck into the eraser behind it. Lisa pulled the needle back out, skin stretching, and popped a gold earring into the small red hole in Annie’s earlobe. She picked up the needle again.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” said Annie.

“Don’t be a baby,” said Lisa. She jabbed the needle into Annie’s earlobe. “See? It’s all over.” She marched Annie over to the vanity to look into the mirror.

Annie turned her head and looked at her ears, each now sporting a new gold earring of Lisa’s. Her eyes were red. “That looks great,” she said.

Lisa turned to me. “What about you, Emma Justine? Are you up for it? Wait—I guess you have to ask your *daddy*.”

“That’s right,” I said. I hated her. And, of course, at the same time I was fascinated by her, like one of the snakes we would sometimes find coiled underneath the green bean bushes in Daddy’s garden.

---

*North Carolina native **Jane Sasser** is a lifelong lover of stories. Her poetry has appeared in The Sun, The Atlanta Review, The North American Review, Appalachian Heritage, and other anthologies and publications. Her poetry chapbook, "Recollecting the Snow," was published in 2008. She lives in Oak Ridge, TN.*

~~~~~

Murder Goes to the Dogs

Jan Martin Harris

The morning of the fire, I was out walking our cocker spaniel, Chipper, before the heat and humidity of an Alabama July became too intense. As we walked, the quiet of our neighborhood was disturbed by the sound of distant sirens. Normally, I pay no attention to sirens since our neighborhood adjoins the grounds of a busy hospital, but today the sirens were coming much closer, the mournful arpeggio raising the fine hairs on the back of my neck. As I rounded the curve leading back toward home, an acrid burning smell assaulted my nose, the smell of asphalt and insulation, plastic and wood, all burning. Panic kicked in and I began to run, dragging Chipper along with me. Had I left an eye burning on the stove? Had Jeremy left something cooking in his apartment kitchen? My heart hammered in my ears until I was directly in front of our house. Everything looked fine, our house serene and quiet under the shade of towering oak trees.

At the same time I saw the flames from a neighboring house, the fire engine raced up our street and squealed to a stop, its air brakes puffing and groaning. Men dressed head to toe in olive green fire gear with reflective stripes and yellow helmets jumped off the truck and began pulling down equipment. Angry yellow flames and black smoke sprouted from the roof of a house across the street and several doors down from us. I had passed pleasantries with these particular neighbors, the Majors, but that was the extent of our acquaintance.

Another fire engine pulled in behind the first, then a paramedic truck pulled in behind the second fire engine.

"Come on, Chipper," I said, pulling the good old dog along with me. He whined and laid his ears back. "I know, old boy. I'll take you back to your yard in a minute. Don't make me carry you."

Chipper hated to be carried. He was a medium big dog, so carrying him was not easy on either of us; I usually let my husband, Charlie, do the carrying. Chipper associated being carried with a bath or shots at the vet. He decided he would walk, maybe a few more steps.

The street in front of the house was filling up with neighbors coming to see what was going on. They appeared in shorts and sleepwear, hair-do's flattened and faces pillow-creased. Most of my neighbors were our age or older; most also were retired from the careers of their youth, as I was. There was anxious murmuring and I heard snatches of conversation.

I spotted Josephine Strickland with her elderly mother, Marie Lavoy. Josephine was an attractive older woman, always well-groomed and neat, but today, worry lines creased her bare face as she stood in the street, holding her mother's hand. They both wore house dresses and slippers. There wasn't an auburn hair out-of-place on Josephine's coiffed head, but Marie's hair streamed around her shoulders in a wild, gray tangle. Josephine shielded her eyes with her hand and searched frantically among the gathered neighbors. "Sam?" I heard her call. "Sam?"

As owner of Mary Beth's Pet Services, I wondered if Sam was the name of her dog or cat. On second thought, I remembered Sam was her husband's name, although I'd had little contact with him. The Stricklands lived in the house beyond the one that was burning. I had waved to him as he mowed his lawn or did his morning walk around the neighborhood, but we'd only spoken in passing. I worked my way toward Josephine.

"Josephine," I said, touching her arm, "is something wrong?"

"I can't find Sam," she said, frowning and continued to scan the crowd.

"Oh," I said. "I bet he's around here somewhere."

"I hope so," she said, not looking back at me and moving away, Marie in tow, calling for Sam.

The crowd grew on the streets around the burning house. Then I saw my elderly neighbor: Dorothy Blevins. Since the death of her husband, Dorothy had long periods of isolation due to fibromyalgia but thankfully also had her good days. She had been the neighbor who had introduced me to most of the rest, since she had been one of the first residents. I smiled and waved, glad to see her up and moving around.

"Dorothy! How are you!"

Dorothy smiled and reached for my hand. "I'm doing good today," she said. "So glad to see you! What do you think happened," she asked me, lowering her voice and looking toward the burning house.

"I haven't heard anyone say." The firemen were training their hoses on the burning roof. While we watched, a portion of the roof suddenly caved in with a shower of sparks and smoke. There was a collective gasp from the onlookers and we all stepped further away from the scene.

The street was filling with more emergency vehicles. A police car inched its way through and pulled into our driveway, blue lights flashing. A young officer stepped out. "Stand back, folks," he said, stepping into the street and motioning us back even further. I was glad to move further away. I was coughing from the acrid smoke and my eyes watered whenever the wind blew in our direction. Dorothy and I, along with a large group of bystanders, moved back into my yard and continued to watch. I guess we all could have pretended we weren't interested, but the fact of the matter was, we were. I mean, come on! Here's a house burning down in our neighborhood. Who's not going to take an interest in that?

Suddenly, I thought of Jeremy. Was he still asleep? Surely he'd heard all this noise. I looked toward the end of the driveway where he kept his conversion van. Gone. He must have left while I was walking Chipper. Since Charlie's Taurus was still in the driveway, I knew Jeremy and Charlie were out working an appraisal together. Now I vaguely remember Charlie telling me this as he had kissed me good-bye. That had been before my first cup of coffee. I can't be held accountable for what I'm told before my first cup of coffee.

I watched Josephine and Marie wandering through the crowd of neighbors. Apparently they still hadn't found Sam. I saw the ladies approach the policeman. "Officer," Josephine said, "I live next door to the house that's burning, and . . ."

"Oh, I think they've got it under control ma'am," the young, fresh-faced policeman interrupted.

"Oh, good, but, you see . . ."

"I think it would be okay for you to go home, if that's what you're worried about."

"No, officer, it's my husband, Sam. He wasn't at home when I got up this morning and I can't find him anywhere."

The young officer stood with his legs apart and arms crossed, staring toward the burning house. When Josephine spoke, he would twist to look at her, then turn back toward the house. I moved a little closer to see what was being said.

"Do you think he maybe went to the store or something?" The young officer sounded bored.

"Our cars are still in the driveway." Josephine was irritated. Her polite tone now sounded edgy.

"Maybe he's out for a walk," the officer said. "I'll bet he turns up soon."

Josephine stood her ground but I noticed the sudden sag in her shoulders.

"Josephine, I need to go to the bathroom," I heard Marie say.

"Mother, just a minute. I want to find Sam."

"Sam is no good. Don't even bother."

Now the daughter looked down at her small mother with annoyance plainly etched on her face. "Mother, why would you say that! Sam is my husband! He's been good to you!" She looked away and muttered to herself, "I can't believe some of the stuff that comes out of your mouth."

"Josephine, I gotta go to the bathroom! My blood pressure medicine is working and if you'd don't take me home, I'll pee down my leg!"

"All right, Mother. Hold your horses." With that Josephine began to pull her mother back down the street, all the while glancing nervously over her shoulder.

I looked at Dorothy and shrugged. She was chuckling in my direction.

Suddenly a shout went up from the house and I saw several of the firemen carrying a soot-stained body through the front door. The body was slender and nude, dark hair framing a white face with heavy lines of soot marking the nostrils. The firemen laid the body in the grass and paramedics ran over from their rig with medical tackle boxes and a defibrillator. "There's another one in there," I heard one of the firemen shout.

"Oh no, there were people at home," I said softly. Dorothy came to me and squeezed my arm. "There were people inside," I said, whispering to her.

"Awful, just awful," she said, standing close to me. We watched as four big firemen struggled to carry out another sooty body. This one was a man and also naked. No one worried about clothing as he was placed on the grass and resuscitation efforts begun.

"Uh oh," I heard a male neighbor say. "That's Sam Strickland. What's he doing in the Majors's house?"

I looked toward Dorothy in surprise. "Isn't that Josephine's husband?"

"No wonder she couldn't find him. He was in the house next door."

"I bet he went in there to save that woman when he saw the fire," I said.

"What a brave thing to do," Dorothy replied.

Then another idea occurred to me. "But that wouldn't explain why he was . . . why she was. . . "

"What?" Dorothy's face creased in an expression of perplexity.

"You know," I said, gesturing toward the grass where the paramedics worked.

"Naked."

"Oh," Dorothy said, nodding, her forehead still creased in thought. "Do you think, maybe, the fire burned their clothes right off?"

"I . . . wouldn't think so."

We watched anxiously as the paramedics worked over the victims. I saw one of them holding up a bag of IV fluids over the woman. It appeared they had intubated her and were bagging her through an ET tube. I saw thick, white tape securing it to her face. One young man pressed her chest while a young woman squeezed the ambu bag. Several other paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher and put her inside an ambulance, which quickly left the scene with sirens blaring. The pace of work over the man was frantic but he was also intubated and placed on a stretcher, loaded into a second ambulance, and taken away.

I approached the officer guarding the scene. "Officer," I said, "one of the neighbors thought he recognized the man brought out of the house as Sam Strickland. Josephine Strickland, the lady who just spoke to you was looking for her husband, Sam. Don't you want to alert her that the man they just took off with could be her husband?"

I could see the look of irritation behind his mirrored sunglasses. "Do you know for sure that the victim was her husband?"

"Officer, the lady is looking for her husband named Sam. A neighbor recognized the male victim as Sam who lives next door to the house that is burning. Josephine and Sam live next door to the house that is burning. Now, don't you think the man they pulled out is the same Sam she's been looking for?" Honestly, if he thinks I'm intimidated by a punk ass kid policeman, he's got another think coming. I rubbed shoulders all day with policemen in my other life as an Emergency Department Nurse and my cousin, Steve, was a homicide detective. The poor woman was looking for her husband and if this guy wasn't going to alert her to where he was, then I would! I had caught a glimpse of his name tag: Dougherty. Officer Dougherty.

"Oh, all right," he said, not sounding very enthused over the prospect of giving the lady this bit of information. He talked into the police radio on his shoulder and in a few

minutes, another car arrived. A stocky African-American guy got out and the officer told him to watch the scene while he went to the house next door.

"Dorothy, would you hang on to Chipper for a minute," I asked, handing Dorothy the leash.

"Why I'd be happy to," she said, and Chipper cozied up beside her. She reached down and stroked Chipper as I approached Officer Dougherty.

"Officer," I said, lightly touching his arm as he walked toward the Strickland's house. "I'm Josephine Strickland's neighbor and she might need some moral support when you tell her about her husband. Mind if I tag along?"

"Lady," he said, shaking his head, "would anything I say stop you?"

"I wouldn't want to get in your way," I said, walking along beside him.

"Right," he said.

I stood behind him as he knocked on the door. Josephine answered quickly, worry creasing her face.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but have you located your husband?" Officer Dougherty asked.

"Why, no! No I haven't. Have you seen him?"

I felt my stomach take a nose dive as Dougherty answered her. After my experience with the Lavender family several months ago, this feeling was getting all too common. Somehow, while recapturing a lost cockatiel in April, I had stumbled right onto the scene of a human murder, with the shocked wife appearing at her dead husband's side only moments after I had arrived.

"Ma'am, there was a gentleman identified by some of the neighbors as Sam Strickland."

"Yes, yes, that's my husband," she interrupted, nodding and smiling a trembly smile.

"Well ma'am, he was pulled from the house that was burning. He was taken away in the ambulance to St. Vincent's East."

Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes were wide and shocked. She staggered backward and leaned against a credenza in her foyer. I pushed around Dougherty and put my arm around her waist, guiding her to a chair in the living room. Here was where I came in.

I knelt beside her and patted her hand. "Josephine, can I get you anything? Would you like a glass of water?"

She stared at me and I could tell she hadn't heard a word I'd said. "Josephine," I repeated.

She still didn't answer me. I rose to my feet and went through the entry hallway into the next room, a den, with a kitchen off to the left. I opened cabinets until I found her glasses and filled one with tap water. I rummaged through drawers until I found dish towels. Taking one out, I wet it and returned to the living room.

Josephine was sitting where I'd left her and the policeman had shut the front door and was squatting beside her, talking softly.

"Here, Josephine, drink this," I said, handing her the water. She held it like a robot with dead batteries so I took her hand and brought it to her lips. She obediently sipped then pushed it away. I patted her face with the towel until she pushed that away as well.

"Would you like me to drive you to the hospital?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "Yes. The hospital. I need to go to the hospital." She jumped up from the chair and lurched sideways a little.

"Careful," Dougherty said.

"Mother," Josephine called as she almost ran toward the back part of her house. "Get dressed! We're going to the hospital!"

"The hospital?" I heard her say. "Why are we going to the hospital? I'm not sick!"

Jan Martin Harris *has been a registered nurse for thirty-four years and member of AWC since 1993. She is married with one son, Matthew. Currently, she is editing her first two novels, HUSH LITTLE BABY, and A MURDER FOR THE BIRDS, with a third, MURDER GOES TO THE DOGS, in progress.*



Country Death

Zach Vogelgesang

William stopped his car in front of the old, wooden house. He sat silently while the car sputtered and banged as the engine went dormant. The heat and humidity of an Alabama summer had given his body a patina of sweat that had been with him so long it felt like an oily second skin. He leaned back in his car seat and blankly gazed at the house for a while. He took his hat off and wiped his brow with his sleeve, checked his hair in the mirror and got out of the vehicle.

As he approached the house he noticed a pair of ghost-like children's faces staring at him through a dirty window. They were cold and expressionless and bore witness to his approach like the patron saints of dirt and poverty. He offered a slight smile, nodded his head and they quickly disappeared beyond the opaque glass.

He paused just before the rickety old staircase that led to the porch and listened to the quiet rustle of the country all around him. After a moment he began to slowly ascend the stairs—all six of them moaning and creaking in turn under the pressure of the intruder coming to the door. He finally crossed the porch and pulled open the screen. He gave the white wooden door behind it three loud raps with his fist and took a step back. He wiped his callused hands on his rough trousers.

Behind the door he heard a small commotion and the sound of urgently whispering voices. Finally it swung wide open. There in the doorway stood Jules Thornton—just as bigger than life as ever. Jules was still wearing his slacks from Sunday services but had stripped down to just an undershirt above the waist. He was also pointing his father's old rifle squarely at William's heart. He moved one lumbering foot just beyond the door, shifted his enormous weight outside and then brought the remaining foot onto the porch as well.

Jules looked William up and down with his sharp eyes. "William, what are you doing here? You best just go on home."

"Jules, I came to see Minnie."

Jules just stared back at William for a moment. "Now, you know that ain't going to happen. Why don't you just turn around, get back in your car and get yourself home?"

William shifted nervously on his feet but held his ground. "Just let me see her for a minute. I got something important I need to say. I drove all the way out here Jules; all I need is a minute."

"William, I'll say it again: you know there ain't no way I'm going to let that happen. It don't do nobody no good you being here."

A woman then stepped into view behind Jules. She was small and attractive but the set of her face made it difficult to perceive what, if any, emotion she kept hidden inside. She was holding a baby. William's eyes grew wide as he stared one moment at Minnie and the next at the baby.

"Minnie I got to talk to you." William stepped toward the door but Jules raised his rifle just enough to stop William where he stood. The rifle gave a threatening click as the hammer was pulled back into the cocked position.

William's eyes never left Minnie or the baby. "Minnie, I got something for you...", as he said this his hand began making its way toward his pocket.

"Keep your hand out of your pocket now, William," warned Jules. Jules now had the rifle shouldered. But William's hand kept creeping toward his pocket as though it had a mind of its own.

"Damn it Jules! I just want to show her something. This don't concern you." His fingertips had now crossed the threshold into the pocket. "Minnie, tell him it'll be alright if I just talk to you for a minute. I brought you something special."

"William, this is your last warning. Get your hand out of your pocket and get off my property." Jules' imposing body began to tense ever so slightly as the pitiless Sun continued to relentlessly bear down on all of God's fine creation. His sweaty finger cautiously pulled against the trigger until he felt a subtle hint of pressure being returned by the firing mechanism.

William smiled at Minnie and the baby as his hand sunk further and further into the depths of his pocket. The fingers lightly brushed against something and slowly started to enclose what waited there.

He heard the crack of the rifle. Then he felt himself being violently pulled off his feet and thrown down onto his back. The world twisted out of shape briefly before his unbelieving eyes. Images familiar and expected distorted into warped and strange versions of themselves and then faded into blackness.

Minnie watched silent and still as William lay on the front porch that hot and humid summer day. She watched as his lips moved noiselessly. Eventually the baby she was holding on her hip began fidgeting and making noises for attention. She gave the baby boy a long, inquisitive look and took him into the recesses of the house.

Jules leaned the rifle against the wall and sat down in one of his rocking chairs. He pulled a yellowed handkerchief out and began wiping the sweat from his face and neck. He felt eyes boring into him and noticed two familiar faces staring from behind a dirty window.

After a moment he noticed that the quiet rustle of the country had started again.

Zach Vogelgesang *lives, works and plays in Montgomery, AL.*



Peas and More Peas

Mahala Church

I grew up in the small town of Glance, Alabama, where baseball was the major social event from June to Labor Day. People gathered at the baseball fields three nights a week to cheer on their team and shell bushels of peas and beans for freezing and canning. Even though I could throw a baseball straight as an arrow and quick as lightning, girls weren't allowed to play in the Little League in 1958, so I was sentenced to shelling duty. However, my brother, David, who couldn't hang onto the ball while standing still, was on a team.

David had spent a year in the hospital with polio and had some growing to catch up on, and our father decided baseball would be just the ticket to build up his skinny muscles. My mother called David her miracle baby, and believe you me, he rode that gravy train in high style. Everyone in town knew he was the worst player in the history of the world, but my parents never missed a game.

It was so embarrassing when he wandered around the outfield, never getting near a ball. Daddy assured me that even a blind hog could find an acorn once in a while, but I never quit worrying. David's dimwitted behavior was close to taking me off the social map of ten-year-olds in Glance. "Momma, David's picking his nose in the outfield again," I whispered, hoping no one would hear.

"I'm watching that little angel head," Momma said, "and he can pick his nose all he wants. It's just a miracle he's here with us." The other ladies snickered, but no one said anything.

RaeJean Clark, sitting over in the stands with her clique of girlfriends, grinned at me while digging her finger up her nose. They thought they were so funny, giggling and carrying on. I relished the idea of going over and beating the snot out of RaeJean that night, but Momma and Daddy would then have beaten the snot out of me, so I just kept right on shelling my Crowder peas like I didn't know RaeJean existed. The game took a surprise direction shortly thereafter when a new county employee almost wiped out the baseball season.

It was a typical hot and sticky night in July. The men were gathered by their trucks, smoking or spitting tobacco juice. The smoke helped keep the mosquitoes away from them. Once in a while one yelled directives to a son or grandson. The women were settled in their webbed lawn chairs, a mosquito coil smoking under each one, as they shelled and gossiped.

“Momma, it’s embarrassing. David’s laying in the outfield counting ants,” I whined. “He doesn’t even know he’s supposed to stand up.” But Momma was staring at the street.

“Why in the world is that mosquito truck here this time of night?” She asked.

Usually they sprayed the fields before the game, but that night the sprayer cut loose right about the time Momma spoke. Layers of sticky mosquito poison began to settle over everything. People were coughing and trying to cover themselves and their vegetables.

But not my mother. When she saw that spray hit the air, she leaped up from her lawn chair, Crowder peas flying, and charged the field like a momma bear.

“Take cover, David! Momma’s coming,” she yelled.

As she vaulted over the fence, she shouted orders at me and Daddy. “Caroline, Tic, cover up the peas! Get our stuff!” David was so preoccupied counting ants, he didn’t notice the commotion until she scooped him up, threw her apron over his head, and took off running.

Daddy did his best to calm Momma down. “Ruth, I’m sure David’s fine. We just need to get cleaned up, and you might as well dump that bushel of peas. It won’t be fit for man nor beast.”

The town vet, Doc Fraiser, was Daddy’s good friend, and he offered to help. “I’m sure Tic’s right,” he said, “but if you want, I’ll be glad to check David.”

“My son will not be taken care of by a vet!” Momma shouted. “Tic, you either drive this car straight to the emergency room or get the hell out of my way!” We went straight to the emergency room.

Dr. Walters was our regular doctor, and he was used to my mother’s fretting. He examined David thoroughly and told her to take us home and scrub us briskly with Octagon soap.

“What if that DDT got in his brain or makes him blind?” Momma asked.

Not to be outdone, I interrupted, holding my eye shut with one finger. “Dr. Walters, I’m pretty sure I can’t see out of my right eye.”

“Let me see, Caroline,” he said. After pulling my eye up and down and sideways and peering into it with a flashlight, he pronounced, “I think you’ll be fine. Now Ruth, that DDT spray isn’t going to his brain, but you’re all going to have skin problems if you don’t get that goop washed off.”

That was all my mother needed to hear. We made a beeline home.

“Momma, I’m telling you that DDT stuff made me blind in my right eye. Everything looks blurry out of it,” I said. Momma always said I had a flair for the dramatic, and that night I was in fine form. I twitched and blinked the whole time I was being scrubbed.

“Caroline, quit showing off. There’s nothing wrong with you that a good scrubbing won’t cure,” she fussed.

As a child, I believed Momma lucked out when my eye worked the next morning. I remember lying in bed imagining how upset she’d be if I went blind during the night while she was riding on her high-horse and hovering over David.

I don’t know if it was fear for the safety of her family or one of my mother’s jaunts into experimenting with anything new, but a few days later, she surprised us at the supper table with what she called a new adventure.

“I’ve rented one of those new pea shellers for this weekend,” she revealed proudly. “It will help us race through those bushels of purple hulls that Ralph’s bringing.”

“You’ve rented a what?” Daddy asked, buttering his cornbread.

“The latest in kitchen technology—an electric pea sheller,” she said, brimming with knowledge.

“So where did you find this marvel of science?”

“Sullivan’s Hardware.”

“Uh huh, and how big is this miracle doo-dad?”

“Not too big. Just wait till ya’ll see what it can do. Joanne gave me a demonstration and it’s amazing.”

A pea sheller may not sound like much to you, but to a ten-year-old with a fragile social calendar, it sounded like my saving grace. I figured if it worked the way she said, my days as the laughing stock of the baseball world would be over. We could stay home and let David could do something else for his skinny legs.

"This is going to streamline things," said Momma while she helped Daddy heave the odd metal contraption into the kitchen. It covered most of our green Formica table with both its leaves up. "You fill this trough on top with peas and turn the sheller on," she explained. "The peas jiggle along the trough into the slicer, the empty hulls fall into the bucket, and the peas roll into this tray. Couldn't be easier."

"Everybody ready to see this miracle of engineering work?" Momma asked as she piled the big, purple-hull peas into the trough. She put a bushel basket on the floor to catch the empty hulls. Foo Foo, our black poodle, sat down by the table, hoping for a treat.

"Ruth, are you sure you can put that many peas in at one time?" Daddy asked. "What do the instructions say?"

"What instructions? It's a pea sheller not a PT boat. You put the peas in, and they come out sliced." She hit the ON switch, and for a few minutes we listened to the peaceful hum of peas being sliced as the hulls slid through the machine and dropped into the basket, and the peas rolled into the tray. But when those big-old purple hulls started to bunch up in the trough, Momma's glow of delight turned to a big scowl. The kitchen table began to shutter and shake, and peas fired from that marvel of science like BBs.

I ducked under the table and laughed up a storm watching David get whipped by pea bullets. He was frozen in place, staring bug-eyed as the peas attacked him. The table jumped and jiggled, the sheller growled and groaned, and the peas shot and smashed everywhere. Foo Foo responded in kind, throwing back her head and howling. The sheller made an awful grinding noise as the big hulls packed tighter and tighter into the slicing blade. Smoke began to seep out the front of the machine and then it poured out in big puffs.

"Turn it off, Ruth, before you set the whole house on fire!" yelled Daddy over the din.

"I'm trying!" Momma yelled, "but the switch's too hot to touch! Get a pot holder, and you turn it off!"

Daddy grabbed a pot holder and squeezed around the table, using the big lid from the canning pot as a shield. "Ruth! Pull the damn plug!"

"Don't you cuss at me!" Momma yelled from under the striped drying cloth she'd slung over her head.

Holding his pot-lid-shield high, Daddy gave Momma a shove with his hip so he could get past her to the plug. She slipped on some of the hulls and fell belly first across the elec-

trical cord, jerking it from the wall socket closest to me. Sparks flew all over me, and with visions of burning to death in my head, I smacked my clothes to put out the fires.

Suddenly everything stopped. Dead silence. We all stared at the pea sheller.

Then David squalled, Momma and Daddy yelled, Foo Foo barked, and I keeled over laughing.

Momma gave David a warm bath to calm him down and put him to bed. I went in search of Foo Foo, after getting paddled with a flyswatter for laughing at my brother's plight. I found her hiding under the den couch covered in peas. I drug her into the kitchen by her leash because she was completely shell-shocked and couldn't follow commands.

Momma took one look at her and shook her head. "Just leave her alone and go on to bed, Caroline. Your daddy and I will start scraping peas off the walls and cabinets. I'll tend to her later."

After a week of daily baths, Foo Foo still smelled like moldy peas. Her black curls held onto those purple hulls like hot tar on an August day. Momma bought some electric clippers at the barbershop, and she didn't read those instructions either. When she finished shaving her, there were moldy black curls all over the screened-in porch. Foo Foo was pure-tee bald and so mortified she refused to go out to do her business.

That dog is pitiful," said Daddy, coming in the screen door. Momma picked a black curl off of her cheek and gave him a look that could slay a dragon. The poor dog never was right after that. She only went out after dark the rest of her life.

"Campbell down at the filling station said the motor on the sheller melted together, and he can't pry it apart to work on it," my father told us. "I guess we'll have to buy Sullivan's a new one." Momma sat quietly and stared at him. She never said a word.

When my father and I went inside, he leaned down and whispered, "Then Sullivan's can rent it to some other crazy people. Most expensive peas anyone will ever eat. I figure they cost us about \$50.00 a quart."

Mahala Church *exercises her love of the South to flavor her writing. Her work has appeared in the Emerald Ladies Journal, Sandscript, The Single Mother, Cup of Comfort for Grandparents, and Christmas is a Season, 2008. A 2008 Pushcart nominee, she has a completed novel she's seeking to publish.*

2009 AWC Writing Competition Winners List

FICTION – 2500 WORDS

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1. Jane Sasser | Lisa | Oak Ridge, TN |
| 2. Frankie Tatum | New Shoes | Birmingham, AL |
| 3. Ruth Pettey Jones | Scars | Cookeville, TN |
| 4. Laura Hunter | She | Northport, AL |

Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

- | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Kaye Park Hinckley | The Easter Dinner | Dothan, AL |
| Sylvia D. Lynch | The Fellowship of the Styrofoam Cup | New Tazewell, TN |
| Lynn Veach Sadler | Spitting in Van Gogh's Eyes | Sanford, NC |
| Sylvia Woods | The Cairn | Oak Ridge, TN |

SHORT FICTION – 1000 WORDS

- | | | |
|--|---------------|-------------------|
| 1. Lynn Veach Sadler - The Book That Came in Hard Cover and Hardcore - Sanford, NC | | |
| 2. Chervis Isom | Broken Note | Birmingham, AL |
| 3. Elizabeth Bloom Albert | As She Ironed | Highland Park, IL |
| 4. Zach Vogelgesang | Country Death | Montgomery, AL |

Short Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

- | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Deborah Ann Cidboy | It's a Fine Day | Jefferson, GA |
| Jim Herod | Family Secret | Grove Hill, AL |
| Adrienne Y. Norton | The Make Over | Birmingham, AL |
| Larry Wilson | Los Perros de la Plaza | Wetumpka, AL |

HUMOR – 2000 WORDS

- | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Jessica McCaughey | Reading Shame | Arlington, VA |
| 2. Judy Walker | Learn to Ski-After Fifty? | Gardendale, AL |
| 3. Judy Lee Green | The Tampa Turquoise Flash | Murfreesboro, TN |
| 4. Mahala Church | Peas and More Peas | Mobile, AL |

Humor Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Marcus Cumbie | Not Cowboys nor Turkey Hunters | Grove Hill, AL |
| Sara Gipson | Tango | North Little Rock, AR |
| Linda Elin Hamner | Dirty Books | Philomath, OR |
| Jan Martin Harris | How to Find Almost Anything: A Loser's Guide | Birmingham, AL |

FREE VERSE POEM

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------|
| 1. Marian Kaplun Shapiro | What Would I Do Without You | Lexington, MA |
| 2. Suzanne Coker | Remember | Helena, AL |
| 3. Patrick Cabello Hansel | [I Will Watch You
Through the Middle of the Night] | Minneapolis, MN |
| 4. Laura LeHew | No More Sky Diving | Eugene, OR |

Free Verse Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

| | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Ramey Channell | Calling Up Magic | Leeds, AL |
| Deanne Charlton | All Alike | Montgomery, AL |
| Ryder Collins | Twinehearts of the Eternal Sous Chefs | Auburn, AL |
| Larry Wilson | The Tourist | Wetumpka, AL |

JUVENILE FICTION - 2500 WORDS

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|----------------|
| 1. Deborah Ann Cidboy | Beliefs | Jefferson, GA |
| 2. Randi Lynn Mrvos | When Sheep Won't Leap | Lexington, KY |
| 3. Sherry Kughn | Changing the Combinations | Anniston, AL |
| 4. Jan Sherbin | Anya Petunia and the Bear-y Surprising Berry Day | Cincinnati, OH |

Juvenile fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

| | | |
|------------------|--|-----------------|
| Ramey Channell | Uncle Early Batson and the Biscuit Angel | Leeds, AL |
| Sara McDaris | Trudie's Gift | Huntsville, AL |
| Vicki H. Moss | One for All and All for One | Chattanooga, TN |
| Barbara Ragsdale | Exercise Times Two | Germantown, TN |

NONFICTION – 2500 WORDS

| | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Kelly Hayes-Raitt | Double-Take | Santa Monica, CA |
| 2. Gladys Hodge Sherrer | By Invitation Only | Chelsea, AL |
| 3. Linda Hudson Hoagland | Four Large Eggs | North Tazewell, VA |
| 4. Elsie Schmied Knoke | Just Another Day | Oak Ridge, TN |

Nonfiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order))

| | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Debra H. Goldstein | Maybe, I Should Hug You | Hoover, AL |
| Bill Goodson | Turning Points | Huntsville, AL |
| Laura Hunter | Just Down the Road | Northport, AL |
| Reilly Maginn | Mothers | Daphne, AL |

TRADITIONAL POEM

| | | |
|------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Emma Bolden | Tongue | Georgetown, KY |
| 2. Ryder Collins | Polish Cento I: Mother | Auburn, AL |
| 3. Sylvia Woods | Upturned Button Box | Oak Ridge, TN |
| 4. Jane Sasser | The Surgeons | Oak Ridge, TN |

Traditional Poem Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| John Alexanderson | One Slant on Hunger | Doylestown, PA |
| Jan Martin Harris | Bad housekeeping | Birmingham, AL |
| Juleigh Howard-Hobson | Evening Clouds | Beaverton, OR |
| Catherine Moran | A few words about Babel | Little Rock, AR |

FIRST CHAPTER of a NOVEL

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Jan Martin Harris | Murder Goes to the Dogs | Birmingham, AL |
| 2. Suzanne Johnson | Royal Street | Auburn, AL |
| 3. Audrey RL Wyatt | Poles Apart | Chandler, AZ |
| 4. Deborah Ann Cidboy | Risen | Jefferson, GA |

First Ch. Novel Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Mahala Church
Ann Hagemann
Laura Loomis
Gladys Hodge Sherrer

A Few Degrees off Center
The Viagra Diary
Lost in Translation
Ballast Stone

Mobile, AL
Alexandria, VA
Pittsburg, CA
Chelsea, AL

~~~~~