

THE ALALITCOM

*Selected Works from the Alabama Writers' Conclave
2010
Literary Competition*



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ALALITCOM

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Editor

Marian Lewis

Cover Photo contributed by the Editor

~ INTRODUCTION ~

The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC) is pleased to present the **2010 ALALITCOM**, the official journal of the Conclave and the fifth online issue. The journal is comprised of the first through fourth place entries in each of the eight categories of the annual AWC Writing Contest. Winners whose works do not appear have placed their pieces elsewhere.

Reputedly the oldest continuous writers' group in the United States, the AWC was created in 1923 "to promote fellowship, to provide an opportunity for improvement of craft, and to support Alabama writers."¹ The Conclave not only embraces and promotes these goals for Alabama writers, but its nationally recognized and respected writing contest also provides opportunity for improvement of craft among the larger community of writers and raises the bar for excellence. Membership in the AWC is not required to enter the contest. This year's entries represent 23 states, two Canadian provinces, and include an entry from an American in Wales.

Each of the eight contest categories presents unique challenges and opportunities for the writer. For example, in his description of short fiction, Josh Russell, published writer and creative writing professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta, has stated: "Very short stories have many of the same characteristics of 'regular' stories: conflict, character development, and even plot. If they're successful, they do the same things that full-sized stories do, but they do them faster. [This] . . . demands certain techniques. . . . that the language is precise and pure, the action 100-proof, and the pay-off as tasty and hot as a shot of really,

really good bourbon.” Check out “Same Initials as Jesse James” in this issue as a case in point.

This year’s **ALALITCOM** presents an engaging array of topics including dramatic encounters with snakes, images of softly falling snow, antics of wives and lovers, a runner’s spiritual evolution, a medical murder mystery, slap-stick and subtle humor, heartstring tugs, and villains and victors. The **2010 ALALITCOM** is a page turner.

Congratulations to those whose writing appears within. As always, each entry in 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 enjoy the **2010 ALALITCOM**.

Marian Lewis
Editor

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

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# Poetry Everywhere, Many Lines from Pros and Others

**Carol Dee Meeks**

If Bards in April say “Its Sonnet Time,”  
will lines of eight and six unfold a tale?  
Octets, sestets, combine, refine a rhyme  
then make us want to leap from winter’s jail.  
The meter flows in lines as themes intrigue  
while stanza groups define the quatrains’ verse.  
When polished, they are mental minds’ fatigue  
in schemes of plots and plans with message terse.  
Yet Sonnet master changes human lives  
when poetry is everywhere you look.  
Some husbands read their muse to kids and wives  
as poets share a new poetic book.

The craft of poetry sustains the soul  
and warms the heart like shoulders in a stole.

Do rhymers scrawl on days of summer school  
or winter nights until their muse grows cold?  
Did Shakespeare’s book of sonnets shape the rule  
or William Yeats from Ireland cast a mold?  
The pen of Poe spreads ink across the page  
while England’s Keats, tint parchments brushed as oils.  
The epoch works of Donne survive his age  
and Browning drafts finesse, perfects his toils.  
Yet youth today prefer unstructured trends,

the nouns, the verbs, the beat of formal forms.  
Instructors train our teens to write with friends;  
then share and polish lines in college dorms.

Walt Whitman's craft sends wrinkles through my mind  
if Bards in April say "Its Sonnet Time."

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**Carol Dee Meeks** *is winner of the 2009 Oklahoma and 2004, 2005 and 2007 New Mexico Senior Poet Laureate Poetry Competition sponsored by the Amy Kitchener's Angels Without Wings Foundation. Her poems are published in Writer's Digest top 100, Poet's Forum, Potpourri, Red Ink, and other magazines as well.*

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Fiction

Mojave

Shawn Jacobsen

Alan had captured many venomous snakes with nothing more than his hands and a couple of sticks, and he had done it again only to keep the practice familiar. Twice since he started graduate school he had removed a rattlesnake from a campground, and he hated when people killed snakes.

He held the snake's head inches from his own. The black, forked tongue slid in and out of its little, round opening as the tail vibrated. Trailing down its face were dark diagonal eye lines, and in front of those were the heat-sensing pits that enabled it to see its prey in complete darkness. Primitive as it might be, this animal could see things Alan could not. He peered into its slitted pupils. It was a rare privilege to gaze into the soul of such a perfectly designed creature.

As he turned it slowly in front of him the jaws stretched open to almost one hundred eighty degrees. Its body convulsed as it opened and closed its glistening, pink mouth, flexing its hinged fangs. It was possibly the largest viper Alan had ever held, and for a moment it looked like it might force a white fang past its jaw and into his finger.

Alan lowered the snake to the ground, and as he prepared to release, it produced a sudden thrash, levering its back against his left hand and twisting its neck sideways. He let go in time to avoid the fangs, but it had momentum and it brought its face back to the bare skin of his left forearm. He watched in horrifying detail the hypodermic needles embed all the way to the pink sheathes.

Alan forced his fingers under its upper jaw and pried it off. The fangs pulled out, centimeter by centimeter, and the snake fell to the desert gravel. Two streams of red trickled slowly down bare skin.

Every time he had taken his reptile collection to show school children, someone asked if he had ever been bitten. He always said yes, many times, but never by a venomous snake. He taught in schools and civic centers how snakes were shy and seldom aggressive and how fewer than ten people die every year in the United States from snakebite, and those are people who ask for it—people who try to kill snakes and people who handle them when they have no business doing so.

Now he was another stupid guy the smart guys make fun of. He was furious and he stayed that way for several minutes, stomping the ground and repeating damn, shit, and fuck, in every possible combination. It was nine a.m. and ninety degrees, and there were miles of desert between him and the nearest road. Most snakebite victims have a good chance of living even without medical attention, but this animal had been big, the bite had been deep, and it was a Mojave rattlesnake, the most toxic reptile north of Mexico. Knowing he would have to call for a helicopter made him curse even more. Being bitten was bad, but calling for help was the last word in humiliation.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and moved to take off his backpack. Then he remembered. The last time he had seen his cell phone, he had thrown it to the floor at his girlfriend's feet.

Alan's stomach felt sick, but the debilitating anger left him. He slid the heavy backpack off and surveyed three hundred and sixty degrees of Mojave Desert. A few feet away, a healthy creosote, dark, green, and waxy, stood tall. Its clones scattered to every horizon and amongst them on the desert pavement were the soft, yellow flowers of catclaw acacia, stiff, green Mormon tea, and bur sage with its dusting pollen and little wrinkled leaves. Far away, beyond where creosote merged into a blur of grey and green, was the small line of hills he had crossed just after leaving his car. They looked close, but Alan knew there were ten hot,

desert miles between himself and those hills. He glanced at his bare arm. Two minor puncture wounds bleeding slowly. It didn't even hurt.

He knelt beside his backpack and threw out everything but water and a day's worth of food. Two hundred dollar tent, eighty dollar stove, all his familiar and expensive equipment, left for the ringtails and foxes to sniff through. This was what he had read about. This was what only fools did. He shouldered his lightened pack and headed out.

If he had a cell phone, a medevac would already be on its way. Even if he didn't know where he was, they could find him with GSM localization. But then, if he still had his cell, he wouldn't be here at all because he only rushed out to his favorite wilderness to get away from the argument. It was because of her he was here, and it was because of her he could not call for help. It was probably because of her he got bitten. He was thinking of how fabricated and ridiculous her words had been when he spotted the snake, and it had been the argument that had made him mad and distracted.

He didn't remember what had been so important, but it didn't matter. It was her attitude that had sucked so much, and she was the one who said attitude was everything. She was the one who always preached about believing in yourself despite anything and despite what anyone said about you. She was working on that art degree, and she spent too much time with her classmates. He kicked the ground. He was losing her. He tightened the muscles in his arm acknowledging the first pain. Maybe he wouldn't lose her. Maybe she would lose him, and maybe it would be today.

Their words against each other were replaying when he came across a western diamondback resting under a small creosote bush. When he approached, it turned its unblinking eyes innocently, one way then the other, testing the air with its tongue. It moved its tail to rattle, as if unsure of what its dim vision told it. He remembered his anger and her patience. When he looked from the snake to the sweat-soaked lines

of blood on his arm, some kind of lesson, some kind of irony tried to surface in his mind and he had to hurry away.

Alan had become a snake advocate after starting graduate school, and one of his messages was to not let appearances sway opinions. He preached the rights of the unattractive and the misunderstood. The Mojave had bit him only because it had been provoked. He had demanded it do something it was not designed to tolerate. There was no one but himself to blame.

At first he walked quickly, his heart pumping hard and his mind alternating between his girlfriend and what it will be like to die—what it would be like to die. But after the first mile he managed to calm himself. Mojave rattlesnakes have a greater percentage of neurotoxin than any other North American viper, and sometime soon he would begin to lose his judgment. Perhaps he already had. He memorized the outline of the hills and told himself that whatever happened, he should remember that picture. As long as he could walk and walk straight, there was hope.

There was a small amount of discoloration and the pain was slight but constant. His lips tingled, his legs felt weak, his mind was sleepy. Fear came and he forced it away.

Two days ago she had changed his computer's startup sound to a buzzing rattlesnake. That was the day he found her plucking her eyebrows in the mirror and crying. She turned on him and screamed that she was ugly and he knew it and to go away, which is what he did. He walked through her living room, past her Salvador Dali-esque paintings of ugly, contemplative people, and stopped beneath the one she was creating for him; a collage of ten western snakes, each of them coiled peacefully under a desert shrub.

He stopped in the shade of a Joshua tree to drink. A week ago he had taken out a bag of garbage and found one of her paintings on the bottom of the trash bin. It was the one of the happy little girl comforting an angel. Taped to it was a scathing note from one of her professors.

Alan rescued it and begged her to keep it. She said it didn't matter how hard she tried or how much of her soul she poured onto the canvas. All that mattered was what they wanted. And why was it professors always stared at her when there are twenty other students in the classroom? He didn't know the answer, but he did get permission to keep the painting.

When he stood, the sun had moved and he was no longer in the Joshua tree's shadow. The desert pavement crunched under his feet. It was a pleasant feeling, like the crackling of crusted snow. The air was filled with the clean, resin scent of creosote. Brittlebush, massed in radial yellow flowers and purple-fringed ratany passed by as cicadas called from scattered shrubs. They were the only sound beside the occasional *tee, tee* of a canyon wren. The hills looked blurry and it bothered him that something might be wrong with his eyes, so he kept his gaze on the passing ground.

When he came to the base of the hills, he thought the timing was good. His arm had started to swell, and a dull purple covered it from wrist to elbow, but he could still move his fingers and there was no nausea or dizziness. And most importantly, he still had the strength to drive a car.

But when he got to the top of the hill, there was no road, no parking lot, and no car. In the far distance was another set of hills that looked more familiar. The wind picked up, blowing sand against his legs and bur sage pollen into his eyes. He blinked and shook his head, but the spiked particles stayed where they were. He dropped to his knees and took out his contact lenses, letting both of them blow away across the sand.

He stayed there a long time, knees sunk in gravel, bare hands burning on the ground. The wind howled and dead leaves blew past. He glanced at his arm and had to look away. *Walk, don't think. Just walk.* If he could keep his reason, he could do this. He had read of worse.

The sun turned his skin red. He knew to stop and drink frequently and he thought he did. He knew to wear a hat, and he thought he felt its shadow on his eyes.

He had come home to find her in his love seat wearing pink pajamas and his thirty-pound, white python. She was delighted to see him, and they made love while the python crawled away to coil around a beam of sunlight by the window. Later that day, as she coaxed the snake to crawl through paint and onto canvas, she told him everyone had a purpose and hers was to create something no one else ever had. She knew that was her purpose because she said so.

The snake that bit him was a female. He knew that because its tail was short and thick. She was a beautiful specimen, greenish scales broken by dark diamonds. If he had been close to his car, he would have taken her home. He wouldn't have kept her long. He only wanted to remind himself he had the ability to control such a creature.

He went into the desert no matter how hot it got, but she hated hot days. She overheated quickly and always retreated to the shade. She would grow angry because she wanted only to be where she was comfortable.

He no longer heard cicadas, only ringing coming from somewhere. When he looked for the hills, there was nothing but a blurred horizon, a barely distinguishable line between burnt, blue sky and gray desert. It panicked him that something had happened to his eyes.

He had deserved to be bitten. He thought of forgiving her, but there wasn't anything to forgive. He still loved her. She amazed him because she could see things he could not.

He heard a rattlesnake behind him and turned toward it. It stopped and then started again. No matter which way he turned, it stayed behind him. Something deep in his consciousness said he might still make it. If he lived, he would regain his mind. He walked away, followed by the snake's rattle.

Once again he heard a rattle, and every time he turned, it stopped and then started again behind him. He took deep breaths and searched the desert, hoping for a reference to justify believing in sanity, but there was nothing but blurred green silhouettes and the high-pitched ringing in his ears. When the rattle sounded again, he felt the last threads of sanity stretch. He put a hand over his face and cried. *Stop it. Please, just stop it.*

The next time he sat down, he had no will to get back up. The pain was from his fingers all the way to his shoulder. It hurt to move any part of his arm, and he didn't want to put his pack back on. When he finally talked himself into trying, his legs were too weak, his stomach was sick, and he had no balance.

The buzz of another snake came from the other side of his backpack. When he hooked his foot on the strap and pulled it out of the way, the sound repeated itself coming straight from the pack. It was impossible for a snake to be in his backpack, but the only thing he wanted was to feel in his last moments he had not gone crazy. So he pulled it close and opened it. Below the water bottles and packages of food, was nothing but brightly lit emptiness. At the bottom was a blue, plastic flap and below that was a rectangular, black object. Something in the form of a thought, wordless and disassociated, filtered into his consciousness. Cell phone.

On the shiny screen was a black and white king snake, an animal incapable of rattling. In the middle of the screen were the words, "New Txt Message." He pushed the silver button.

Like your new ring tone? Still love you.

Shawn Jacobsen is the author of thirty short stories, and he recently completed his second novel, a young adult science fiction called SOUTH SIDE. He is an instructor at Auburn University where he teaches Ecology, field biology, and scientific writing. He has one daughter and currently resides in Auburn, Alabama.

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# **The Night the Bed Broke**

**Dick Michener**

My wife and I recently took up the carpet in most of our home. We love the look of wood, but we can hear the patter of paws on it. They remind me of the night the bed broke, a comic drama which achieved legendary status in my childhood family. These were its leading characters: a venerable but wobbly bed; two loving but skittish relatives; and a smart but sneaky dog.

Mom was the eldest of six miner's daughters and the only one to leave their home in the mountains. Dad was a farm boy. We lived in a southern port city. My parents had differing attitudes about dogs. Dad regarded them as valued animals which were kept outside or in the barn. Mom considered them as family members who were given the run of the house. A compromise was reached. We would have a dog, but it should be confined to our back yard, our kitchen, or our basement.

Mom had undergone major surgery requiring a long recuperation, so her mother and one of her sisters had come to stay with us. Sleeping arrangements had to be altered because the only bathroom was located on the second story along with three bedrooms. Mom was placed in the guest bed; our two visitors took over my parents' heirloom bed; dad squeezed into my single bed; and I was exiled to the living room couch.

Our visitors were my maternal grandmother and one of my mother's sisters, both named Mary. They had more in common than their names. Both were energetic and robust. Both were caring and helpful. Both were religious and superstitious, a combination often prevalent in immigrant communities at that time. They were obsessed, for example, with invisible but troublesome extra-terrestrials roaming their native culture. No English word could precisely define these beings, but



“thingies” was chosen for an approximate translation. As a boy, I thought of them as gremlins.

These two ladies arrived shortly before mom was released from the hospital. Bringing her home and setting her up was stressful for everyone. Far into a hot and moonless night, we finally lay down, worn out but wide awake.

My parents and I had forgotten to inform our visitors what would happen with our dog, Mike, at bedtime. First, he would be banished to the basement with his head and his tail down. Next, waiting until he thought that everyone was asleep, he would climb the stairs, stand up, turn the door knob with his paws, and enter the kitchen. Then, he would slink through the house and creep up into my parents’ bedroom.

As Mike began his customary journey, the two Mary’s were startled but said nothing as they lay back to back with bulging eyeballs. Hearing a turning doorknob and an opening door kindled frightening images of home invasions which they imagined were common in urban areas. Because of his breed and his age, Mike was a heavy breather, especially in summer.

He slid noisily across wood floors. As he lumbered up toward the bedrooms, he stopped at each creaking step to take a breath. At the top of the stairs, he stood still in the hallway by the master bedroom. Without warning, he raced through its doorway and leapt onto the bed normally occupied by my parents.

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As the two Mary’s saw an indistinct but hairy figure falling down on them, they shrieked and sat upright. The combined force broke the bed frame and brought the box springs, the mattress, and all three creatures crashing to the floor.

Luckily, my mother was so exhausted that she slept through the commotion. My dad rushed into the fray, shoed Mike back to the first floor, and made sure that the two Mary’s were okay. They decided to

remain just where they were until dawn. Mike scooted past me with an expression somewhere between dismay and disgust. For the first time in his life, he was glad to return to the basement, where at least he could rest in peace and quiet.

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**Dick Michener** has published many brief fiction and nonfiction pieces in the United States, Canada, Australia, and England. Several have been included in anthologies: Lights In The Mountains; and Echoes Across The Blue Ridge. His column appears in each issue of the Tennessee Writer. He welcomes reader feedback to: [dick\\_michener@yahoo.com](mailto:dick_michener@yahoo.com).

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Catalpa Worm Wettin' and Caterpillar Crawl

Carol Robbins Hull

Not just every town is named after a worm. The blue-haired ladies whose ancestors had been the founders of Catalpa like to think it was named for the lovely trees with sizable clusters of white flowers and large heart shaped leaves that grow all over town. But if flowering trees had been the reason for naming the town it could just have well been named Dogwood, Magnolia, or Mimosa. The men of the town, especially the dedicated fishermen, appreciate that the worms that feed on the leaves of the tree are hard to beat when fishing for catfish and bream or setting a trot line and have no problems with the idea that their forebears might have named Catalpa after fish bait.

Although many of the trees have a relatively short life of about seventy years, as natives to the area those along the river manage to replace themselves naturally, and long before some of the older trees die younger ones reach a nice size. None has managed to approach the record of the oldest catalpa tree in the state, a prize specimen of the *Catalpa bignonioides* in Clay County that was certified a few years ago as having reached an impressive circumference of two hundred inches at the ripe old age of two hundred and twelve years. The Catalpa Chamber of Commerce brochure, in addition to the usual information about the town, features beautiful photographs of the trees, of broadly smiling fishermen displaying their strings of fish, and of the colorful yellow caterpillar or “worm” with its distinctive black stripe, spots, and curved black horn near the end. However, it does not mention that Clay County, rather than Leighton County, has the champion tree. Nor does it mention

that the Native American tribe who gave the tree its name smoked the long bean pods for their hallucinogenic effect.

A little over a decade ago the mayor and the city council members realized that the town of Catalpa simply was not getting its due. Spring, summer, and fall festivals had cropped up all over the state like kudzu, the invasive vine that covers everything in its path. You can find hardly a weekend or a locale without something going on. Bayou la Batre has the Blessing of the Fleet, Opp has the Rattlesnake Rodeo, Loachapoka has the Syrup Sop, Burkeville has the Okra Festival, Union Springs has Chunneuggee Fair, and on and on. The women of Catalpa suggested an arts and crafts festival, but the men held out for a fishing tournament. In an effort to please everyone in town and draw a more diverse crowd, the mayor proposed a weekend event that featured both. Even the name of the festival was a compromise. The librarian insisted on setting the record straight—since the “worm” is not a worm at all, but rather the caterpillar of the Catalpa Sphinx moth, the name should say so. But no one says they are “goin’ to wet a caterpillar.” The local expression for going fishing is “goin’ to wet a worm.”

When a *Name the Festival* contest produced the name *Catalpa Worm Wettin’ and Caterpillar Crawl* not everyone took to it at first, but it stuck. After all, in a state where the professional baseball team in the capital city is named the Biscuits, quirky names are more the rule than the exception. The local art teacher, Libba Grey, pointed out that the name does make for endless possibilities in the logo department. The festival has become more popular each year with the fishing tournament, the *Worm Wettin,’* being the big draw in some years, the arts and crafts section, the *Caterpillar Crawl*, in other years.

The growth of the event has created almost more work than the festival office can handle. Actually to call it the festival office is a bit pretentious when it is really just a desk with a phone in a corner of the

room that serves as the office for Leighton House. Most of the work seems to fall to a group of volunteers locally known as the Ladybugs: Libba Grey, Sunny Jackson, Reid Thomas, Celia Williams, Gwen Hammond, and Ellen Chandler. Although the mayor appoints a chairman for the festival, no provision is made for a staff. This year the main problem so far seems to be the chairman, Wayne Shelton. He has the reputation of being a good businessman, well that is, if you didn't have to actually work with him. More than one person has at one time or the other said under his or her breath "I'm going to kill that son of a bitch if it's the last thing I do."

"Why is it that Pearlene is never around when I need her?" Libba said, laughing quietly to herself as she ground the coffee beans. Pearlene had been the main cook for the restaurant that Libba inherited along with the rest of the Leighton property. Like many of the large old houses on the street, Leighton House found new life when the area was rezoned for business. Libba's parents renovated the kitchen, moved a few walls, hired Pearlene, and opened the restaurant, Lagnaippe. When they decided to retire Libba left her job as art teacher at Catalpa Middle School to run the restaurant. It turned out to be much more work and not nearly as much fun as Libba thought it would be, so it had not been a hard decision to close it, especially when Pearlene announced that she thought it was time to move in with her daughter who lived in Detroit.

Talking aloud to herself today was not in the least out of the ordinary. Libba developed the habit almost as soon as she could talk, and had never seen any reason to discontinue the one-sided conversations. It wasn't unusual that she would also talk to Pearlene as though she were there. She'd solved many problems by saying to the air "Pearlene, what would you do?" Somehow she could hear in her head just what Pearlene would say, and the advice was often just what she needed. Little did she know that the events of the next few hours were

going to make her wish for Pearlene's sage advice even more than usual. Sometimes Libba wasn't sure what she missed the most, Pearlene's advice, her cooking, or the excellent strong coffee that no one else has been able to match. A coffee maker and little refrigerator had been moved to the office upstairs after Pearlene insisted, saying "How am I supposed to cook with all you girls traipsing in and out of my kitchen for coffee? Now shoo on upstairs and do all that sipping and talking up there."

"Enough reminiscing, Libba, get the coffee going before the rest of the Ladybugs arrive. We have a lot of festival work to do today, not to mention our own businesses to run." As a child Libba thought it funny that her grandmother called a group of her friends "the Ladybugs." In talking about them Gram often paused to say "Sweetie, you can have all the beaus you want and you can marry your true love, but none of them will take the place of your girlfriends. Always treat them well, because they will be there for you when no one else is." As usual, Gram had been right. Bill was the love of her life, but this close-knit group was special in a way that not even he would fully understand. It was especially fitting that the six of them had officially taken the name Ladybugs since what had once been Gram's house was now the home for their business ventures, or adventures as their husbands and friends often called them.

For most of the time the former dining rooms were rented as meeting rooms for garden clubs, book clubs, the League of Women Voters, and the local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. During the festival none of the groups had time to meet, which was just as well, because the Ladybugs put almost every bit of their energy, not to mention the facilities at Leighton House, into use. Even though the restaurant was no longer in operation on a regular basis, the kitchen was kept up to code. By hiring a few helpers and a caterer the Ladybugs could still manage special events, even fairly large ones. On the evening before the festival opened there was a large reception welcoming the

vendors, tournament officials, and various local dignitaries. On the Sunday morning after the festival there was a brunch. By then most of the food vendors had packed up and moved out, but some of the artists and many of the out of town visitors still in Catalpa loved spending a leisurely morning at Leighton House, preferably on the porch.

Although the Ladybugs swear every year they will not do the brunch the next time around, it is just too good for business not to. The tables set up on the porch that wraps around three sides of the house fill with people wanting to enjoy the pleasant weather. Those who arrive a little later are seated inside the dining rooms, but never seem to mind. Since the brunch is always served buffet style, everyone has to pass through the large front entry hall to serve their plates, regardless of where they are seated. With its tall ceilings, the wide hall makes a perfect location for a small gallery. The Ladybugs chose the name Prism for the gallery because the morning sun shining through the beveled leaded glass in the panels around the large double front doors sends rainbows skittering across the floor. The name is doubly appropriate because the gallery is mostly used by Reid for her photographs which, as she says “Have a lot to do with light passing through a lens.” People going to the buffet often get side-tracked and stop to look in the gallery or the gift shop located just across from the dining rooms. Naturally, that is usually good for sales.

Even when they call a “command performance” meeting in the Leighton House office, things always start with coffee, cookies, and a little chatter before they get down to the real business at hand. Today the aroma of the coffee pulled them all in at once. Libba had just finished pouring a mug for herself when the rest of the Ladybugs except Reid came into the room. With so much to cover today, the conversation began as they fixed their coffee and settled into the chairs around the table in the center of the room.

“So far it looks as if there will be a bigger than usual turnout this year. More food vendors applied and some had to be turned away. The art and crafts section was fully booked long before the deadline, and we have some nationally known artisans coming for the first time,” Ellen said. Not only did Gwen, Celia, and Ellen keep the gift shop open, they managed the Leighton House office and did the lion’s share of the work of organizing the *Caterpillar Crawl* while Sunny handled the *Worm Wettin*.’

“More people than ever signed up for the fishing tournament, and if the predictions of the local fishermen are anything to go by – and they always are – the fishing may be the best in years. Judging from the number of egg deposits spotted on the underside of the leaves it is going to be a banner year for worms,” said Sunny. Thanks to her, the Ladybugs know a lot more about Catalpa worms than they ever wanted to know. The infestations are at best unpredictable. Scientists haven’t figured out why the Catalpa Sphinx moth prefers some trees over others, or why there may be a lot of caterpillars for several years in a row, then a scarcity for an indeterminate number of years. Much to the dismay of her mother, Sunny began selling Catalpa worms to local fishermen to make a little pocket change when she was a child. Now, after retiring from her career as a biochemist in an agricultural products company she has turned her youthful hobby into a very profitable business. With her typical slightly off-center sense of humor, Sunny named the company Green Bait. Some consider the frozen or “pickled” Catalpa worms that she supplies to devoted customers all over the country eco-friendly bait. Anyone who has ever dealt with the live worms knows that they don’t always like being messed with and respond by excreting a thick green goo that stains the fingers of the handler. Fortunately the fish find the sweet smelling bright fluorescent green goo just about the most enticing thing in the world.

Eager to get the meeting started, Libba asked “Where is Reid? We said we would help her hang the new exhibit in the gallery after the

meeting today. I expected Wayne Shelton to show up too. He was going to stop by for a report on plans for the festival—not that he actually does any of the work, but if he is going to take credit for all of ours he has to know what’s going on.”

“Sorry I’m late” called Reid from the hallway. When she entered the room with her camera bag slung over her shoulder it was apparent that she had not come from an ordinary photo shoot. As she slumped in the nearest chair she asked “Could someone get me some coffee?” Almost before she finished asking for the coffee Libba placed a mug of the strong brew with two sugars and a generous amount of cream on the table in front of her. Reid’s hands were shaking so much that she sloshed some of the coffee onto the front of her crisply starched white blouse when she tried to raise the mug to her lips.

“What in the world is wrong, Reid? You are as pale as a ghost,” Libba said.

“I’ve been taking photographs for the sheriff. Someone found Wayne Shelton, dead, near the river this morning.”

“Dead?” the rest of the women asked in unison

“Not that the festival can’t run as well without him, but this will really put a damper on things. If his body was found near the river, that may make vendors apprehensive about setting up in the area. It isn’t the publicity we had in mind at all.” Celia said.

“Reid, why were you called in to make photographs? I know the sheriff’s department doesn’t have its own photographer, but I thought they only called you in for crime scenes. Do they think he was murdered?” Ellen asked.

“Well, the sheriff said that from the looks of it he fell, hit his head on a rock, and just died. But since half the town would say Wayne was too mean to just die, and with the festival in just a few weeks the sheriff just wanted to get pictures before they moved the body.”

Putting her hand on Reid's shoulder, Libba said, "You're not telling us something, Reid. You're too upset for this to be routine."

"I know, Libba. I can't explain exactly what is bothering me. I've taken pictures of bodies for the sheriff before, but something didn't seem quite right this time. Maybe when I print the photographs I'll be able to put my finger on it. Sometimes the camera captures something that I don't see at first."

The group became quiet as each of them thought of how shaken the usually unflappable Reid was. Seconds later, as if acting on cue, each of them covered her mouth with her hand, as if to stifle a gasp as she recalled when and where she had recently said "That man just needs killing."

Carol Robbins Hull *resides in Montgomery when not visiting grandchildren, leading workshops, attending book or art related events, or traveling just for the fun of it. She currently serves as the president of Creative Writers of Montgomery and is a member of Press and Authors and the Wetumpka Writers.*

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# **A Blanket of Snow**

**Cindy Peavy**

The old woman had lived there for as long as anyone could remember—high atop the mountain near the tree line where the evergreens grew with twisted trunks, their roots like fingers clutching gray boulders. Her home was simple, an old-fashioned notched-log cabin with just one room, but she lived alone and found comfort in having everything within her reach.

In early autumn the snow came to her mountaintop and never melted, building layer upon layer until it wrapped her home in winter. As soon as the first snowflakes began to fall, she'd head to the village in the valley below to gather supplies for the long winter ahead. Every year, the villagers would say to her, "Stay with us for the winter. We will share the warmth of our hearths and enjoy the pleasure of your company."

The children who gathered around her would beg her to stay, just as their parents had begged the generation before. A smile would spread across her skin, still smooth as the surface of a frozen pond despite her years. After she hugged each child, she would raise her face to the slate-gray sky, letting the snowflakes catch her in lashes, and tell them, "Thank you. But I have much to do."

Though they wondered what the old lady could possibly need to do, snowbound for months alone on a mountain, they never asked. Somehow they knew from the joy on her face and the magic that seemed to sparkle in her eyes that she would never tell. And so they would carry her supplies to the cabin and wait for spring when they would see her again.

Once alone, the old woman would set her loom by the window and busy herself as the snowdrifts began to build. She would gather the

empty buckets, oil her loom, and check all the moving parts. Everything was ready. But each day, she would look out at the falling flakes and announce, “Not yet.”

As the weeks passed, the drifts grew deeper until one day when she looked out, she saw nothing but snow and knew the time was right.

With a step remarkably spry for one so old, she twirled around the cabin like a snowflake dancing in the breeze. Opening a window, she filled the buckets with snow and set them beside her loom. She settled herself on a stool, her white hair sparkling like ice crystals in the sun. Silently, reverently, she held her hand over a bucket of snow, as if blessing the gift. And then an amazing thing happened.

She reached into the bucket and pulled out a delicate white thread made of snowflakes linked like a chain of paper dolls. She began to weave together the snowflakes, her hands moving so fast that the snow didn't even melt. Instead, a soft, snow-white piece of fabric began to form. Within minutes, it was complete, a blanket just the right size for a child.

Again she opened her window. This time she pulled an icicle from her eaves. And somehow, using the magic in her hands and the warmth of the sunlight trapped in the ice, she stretched the icicle around the blanket's edge, trimming it in smooth satin.

By the time that spring arrived and she could once again see out her window, the old woman had filled her home with blankets of snow trimmed in icicles. She gathered them to her, holding them close, and spoke these words:

*Each of you is special, for millions of snowflakes formed you, no two alike. Because you were given love—and a little magic—you can now bring warmth to someone else though you were woven from the cold. Search for children and warm their hearts.*

Hugging each blanket one more time, she opened the windows wide to let in the warm, fresh air, and the blankets of snow began to float out on wisps of wind. From the village below, the blankets looked like clouds as they sailed along streams of air.

They drifted for days across the countryside before the first blanket slowed and began to swirl toward Earth like a magic carpet. It entered an open window, gently landing on a sleeping boy.

When he awoke in the morning, the boy was surprised but delighted to discover the white blanket. His parents found him snuggling in its warmth, rubbing the satiny trim against his cheek, and never questioned where it had come from; they knew it belonged to him. That day and for years afterward, the blanket never left his side.

Oh how the boy and the blanket played together! Sometimes the blanket became a cape tied around his shoulders. On those days, the boy—now a superhero—zoomed around the house faster than a speeding bullet.

Other times, the boy wrapped his most valuable possessions in the blanket—a white Teddy bear named Stuart, a wooden airplane carved by his grandfather, and a silly green sea serpent puppet that had been his mother's. He'd put on his cowboy hat and boots, tie the blanket with his treasures to the saddle of his rocking horse, and ride off on an adventure.

And every night when the boy went to bed, he snuggled with the blanket.

After years of being loved, the blanket became full of holes as the magic began to wear off. The boy's mother tried to mend it, but of course she didn't have the old woman's magic touch. So the blanket continued to wear away as the snow that had formed it melted snowflake by snowflake.

One spring morning, when the boy opened the window to feel the warm, fresh air, the blanket felt the old magic stirring. Snuggling one last time with the boy, it caught a wisp of wind and floated through the open window and up into the sky.

The boy watched as it was joined by other blankets that had also been loved. Their worn-out fabric formed lacy clouds that drifted toward a certain home, high atop a mountain near the tree line where the evergreens grew with twisted trunks.

The journey was long, slowed by the holes that couldn't hold the wind like a sail. Years passed, but finally, the blankets returned to the old woman.

She welcomed them home, gathering them into her arms and holding them close. She admired their tatters, for she knew they had been much loved, and together, they waited for the snow to fall.

When drifts had piled around her cabin, she filled her buckets and sat down at her loom with the worn-out blankets. She began to weave together the snow, her hands moving so fast that it didn't even melt. Before long, she had repaired every blanket, complete with new icicle trim.

In the spring, she opened her window, spoke her words of love to the blankets, and watched them leave on a wisp of wind. They drifted like clouds across the countryside, and before long the first blanket slowed and began to swirl toward earth like a magic carpet.

Standing at an open window to enjoy the warm, fresh air, the boy—who had grown into a man—smiled as he watched the blanket float in and gently cover his son.

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**Cindy Tanquary Peavy** has taught writing to elementary students for eleven years and promotes excellence in writing instruction through her work with the UAB Red Mountain Writing Project. *A Blanket of Snow* is a family tale first woven with her son, Marcus, to tell the history of his white blanket.

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Fiction

The Yellow Glove

Steve Scott

It was still early that Saturday morning but more than the usual bunch had already converged on Joe's Bar and Nite Spot. All but one anyway. Lefty Hymer had rammed his Harley through the guardrail over at North Fork Bridge sometime after midnight last night. The County Sheriff told Todd Boon, Joe's night cook, that Lefty's body was still hiding—probably floating around down there under about ten feet of water. “More than likely,” the sheriff said, “hung up in a nasty clump of cottonwood roots.”

Most of that daybreak crowd huddled around Joe's Franklin wood-burner at the far end of the bar close to a row of booths. The men stood with their backs to the potbelly stove, squeezing hot coffee mugs, looking down at each other's boots. They talked in low voices. Occasionally, when conversation stalled, one of the men would cross over to the jukebox and punch in “Oh Lonesome Me” or the new Hank Williams, then hurry back and hunch his back up closer to the stove. They sipped on steamy coffee-royals, rubbed their knuckles.

They remembered Lefty.

“Seemed okay to me when he walked out of here,” Joe said.

“You call practically dead drunk okay?”

“Dead drunk's normal for Lefty.”

“He wasn't in here that long,” Joe said.

“Musta went to see somebody else after he left here 'cause that bridge was okay when I crossed over about midnight.”

The soft conversation continued. “Sad thing about old Lefty—a real nice guy too, a loner. A Jim Beam man. The sheriff said they'd hunt for

Lefty's body sometime this afternoon after it warmed up a little. Like a posse.”

But Mel Perry wasn't listening. The girl in the corner booth next to the jukebox was giving him the eye. Cute little thing. Young.

Mel told the bartender to give her a beer. A Coors draft. While Lobo Sanchez was sliding the thick mug across the table toward her, the girl waved at Mel, then held up her right thumb and forefinger about one inch apart. Mel caught the bartender's eye. “Hey Lobo, can't you see that little gal wants a shot of whisky to give that beer some flavor?”

It was damp in Joe's Bar and Nite Spot and the girl still had on a pair of yellow leather gloves and a moss-colored Eisenhower. She'd buttoned the jacket clear up to her chin. Mel watched her slide her hand down her leg and pull at the black jeans stuffed down in white cowboy boots. On the table, folded tight and looking weary as the girl, a squeeze-box seemed to be resting after a hard night's work. The chipped keys had yellowed, and rust-colored stains crawled up and down the sad keyboard. Periodically, with her little finger, the girl reached out to caress a particular key as though it had just played its heart out.

On his way over to the booth, Mel, watched her yellow finger tapping the keys to a silent melody. The girl stared at his face all the time he was sliding in across from her. She's older, Mel thought, but still not bad.

“Did you know him?” she asked.

“The drowned man?”

“Mr. Hymer. His name is Mr. Edward Hymer.”

“I've seen him in here,” Mel said.

She reached out and rubbed one of the soiled keys. “People talk about his eyes,” she said. “They say one had extra white in it.”

He nodded at the accordion. “Was that his?”

The girl told Mel to call her Angie. “I started calling myself Angie the minute they let me go to work.” She told him she got in town

sometime after midnight last night and to save herself a few bucks she'd slept in her van out in back of Joe's. "And God, was it cold out there in that alley. I'll probably live with chills the rest of my life."

Mel watched her face, a mole barely to the left of her mouth wiggled when she talked. Lips, red as a spring rose, not pouty and greased up with lipstick.

She looked at him. "I love that man." She leaned her head back and with a quick flip of her glove, downed the whiskey in one hard swallow.

"I'm sorry," Mel said.

"I was sent down here to fetch him," she said.

"Was he a relative?"

The girl looked past him at the potbellied stove while she tongued the rim of her shot glass.

Mel said, "I'm sure they'll find him this afternoon. And they'll pull his body out of there in good shape. Even if he is tangled up in cottonwood roots."

He watched the men still huddled around the stove. He remembered seeing a few coffee royals suspended in mid air when he left his place in the circle and headed toward the booth. Just his luck to hit on the dead man's girlfriend. "How about another round?" But he didn't wait for her answer. "Hey Buddy," he yelled at Lobo, "how about a little service over in this end!"

"Loving's my job," the girl said.

Mel wasn't exactly sure he heard that just right. He took a quick survey of the coffee drinkers crowded around the Ben Franklin. Probably nobody heard. "Must be a hell of a good job," he said, "all that loving."

More customers walked in: shaky loners, a few couples, but mostly just late night regulars who got up early to get the straight scoop on Lefty. Mel watched Lobo Sanchez size up each strange face. He'd barely got past the door this morning when the bartender grabbed his arm and

told him there'd be death freaks flocking in here by the carloads. "Just a bunch of damn thrill seekers hoping to search the eyes of a drowned man." Then Lobo Sanchez had pointed out the skinny girl back there in the booth.

This time when Lobo brought over the drinks he leaned over the table to polish the empty ashtray. He tightened his eyes and searched up and down the front of the Eisenhower. When he tried to dust the accordion, the girl jerked the rag out of his hand. "Touch my music and I'll break your thumbs." Lobo stuck his hands in his pockets and relaxed his eyes. "I was just trying to keep things a little tidy around here." Lobo Sanchez claimed he could x-ray the thickest bra in town when he squinted with his eyes crossed. Mel also knew Lobo thought all whores had green eyes and a hairless mole.

Mel folded his arms and watched the girl finger the soiled keyboard with her left hand while she sipped bourbon with the other. She had grabbed the nearest shot glass as if it leaked, but she took dainty sips. She stopped licking on the thick rim and winked at Mel. "You want something real good?"

"Depends."

She reached under the table and grabbed Mel's knee, then started her hand up the inside of his leg. "Now that's more like it," he said. "Touch that tiger and he might spit at you." She stiffened her arms out over the table and started peeling back her left glove but she was studying his eyes. Mel's squint followed each quick jerk, considered each yellow-tipped caress. His left eye twitched every time she skinned back a naked finger.

Then she unbuttoned her jacket. Underneath the Eisenhower a pink T-shirt stenciled "ANGEL LOVE" stretched across her breasts. And swinging below the bumpy words, corkscrew cupids dangled from the bottom of each curved letter.

The girl stood up. "Got any powder-room change?"

“You won't need any in that one. It's a free ride.”

The girl pushed the accordion in front of Mel. “Not everything's free,” she said as she peeled off the other glove and laid it on top of the accordion. She ran a finger across the bottom keys. “Keep your eye out for thieves,” she said, “this little jewel's worth big bucks.”

Mel yelled for Lobo to bring two Coors and more whiskey. He'd have to admit she's got one hell of a routine. Strange little thing though. Could be vice. That squeezebox reminded him of some tobacco-toothed dope fiend. He'd bet money she couldn't even play a decent waltz.

She slid in on Mel's side, facing the bar. She looked better, too—she'd put on lipstick, dabbed on a flowery perfume and she'd clipped her hair back in a ponytail. Perfume always made a big difference, Mel thought.

“Is Lefty someone special?” he asked. “I mean, was he?”

“I said it's my job,” she said. “I play this accordion. That's my job, too.”

Mel watched her hand stroking the decayed keys. She leaned forward and started thumping out some kind of silent rhythm.

“Like with a band?”

“Like I do funerals.”

Mel glanced at the men now breaking up the circle around the Franklin, sipping their coffee-royals, keeping warm, minding their own business.

“You're the undertaker?”

“Actually,” she said, “I'm an angel.”

Mel's mouth flipped open. He leaned close. “Why don't we just get out of here,” he said. “Go over to my place.”

“More specific,” she said, “I'm his angel. You know, Lefty's custodian—like a watch-dog.” She stopped and slid a glove towards him. “I mean if he qualifies.”

“I've got a real nice place.”

“Like I'm assigned to him—his very own guiding light.”

“Oh shit.”

“I got picked out of a work-pool. The night shift.”

“Okay,” Mel said, “you want kinky, we'll do kinky—but not in here. Over at my place you can be anything you want. I even got a three-speed vibrator.”

The girl said, “We got rules, you know. He's got to be eligible.”

“Look, my little Angel Love, Lefty's hanging out down below ten feet of water.”

“Like suicide's the number one no-no up there,” she said. Then, as if remembering some specific instruction, the girl reached inside the Eisenhower and pulled out a lined-paper pad with a pencil clipped to it. She drew wavy lines down the sheet of paper, then blocked in certain squares.

“Now what are you doing?”

“Checking off demerits,” she said. “Ten little brown ones and he's out on his ass. And drunk drivin's a fiver.” Across the top of the pad she spelled out as she wrote: Caucasian male. “How old was Mr. Hymer?”

“How the hell should I know? I didn't even know him.”

“Listen hon, could you tell that clammy little bartender to fetch me another boiler maker.” She winked and pinched him on the leg. “All they ever give us is name, location, time of death, and, if it's early in the month, a metal clip for the ear. And they told me this one had a crazy eye. He was white, wasn't he?”

“Yes. That I know for sure.”

“You don't suppose somebody killed him?” she asked. “I just love a good murder. But then they'd reassign Mr. Hymer. The head office up there doesn't want us love angels messing around with homicide. Gets us too revved up.” She smiled. “All we ever do is bring 'em back dead.” The girl closed the note pad. “I couldn't finish this report right now even if I wanted to. I still got to examine the body. That's a requirement.” She'd

wait awhile, though, she told Mel, no way was she diving down in that ice water and freeze her ass off just to check out Lefty.

She tapped two black keys. "I'm good at funerals," she said, "I can make this baby stretch out and moan if the crowd works with me."

"Listen," Mel said. "Let's just get out of here. We'll play dead man and undertaker over at my place."

"People hide things," she said. "Then at the funeral they sniff around that coffin like it's a basket full of mildewed carp." The girl leaned toward Mel. "But it's all the same anyway, because all the time they're pissing and moaning, dabbing that smelling-salt bag up their noses, they're also thanking the good Lord that it was that awful old Aunt Bessie instead of someone they really liked."

Mel watched Lobo Sanchez saunter toward the potbelly stove holding a coffee mug in each hand. Now, the bartender hadn't actually seen the girl walk into Joe's place. First thing he noticed, Lobo told Mel, was a pair of yellow hands wrapped around a squeezebox. "That booth got real spooky," he'd whispered. But with that crazy Lobo telling it, she could have floated in through the transom.

"How about lending me a few bucks, I'm on a tight budget?"

"How much is few?"

"Fifty."

"Fifty. Hey lady, I hardly know you."

"You'd like my style."

"I'll give you twenty."

"Thirty-five."

"Thirty." Mel figured he had her. But he could tell she was foxy, tapping her fingers along those broken teeth like she was queuing them up for a spiritual.

"I ought a scream for the cops," she said. "Tell the owner you're a sweet talkin' pervert and you took fifty bucks off me while I was in the can."

“The owner of this place watches hardcore porno while he eats his lunch.”

Mel knew every dumbo-eared bastard backing his ass up to Joe's pot-bellied stove had tuned in. And every one of them would remember a different story. The girl pushed the yellow glove in front of him. And Mel was waiting. With one hand trying to hide it, he stuck a wadded-up ten and a twenty as far down in the glove as he could.

She pulled back the glove. “You know they don't pay us much up there.”

“Up where?”

“You know, where a virgin lives with the unholy ghost—a sweet Jesus and a bunch of fucking saints.”

“That's heathenish.”

“It's my job, for Chrissakes. Everybody works.”

The girl pulled the accordion towards her. She looked at Mel and started to stretch it out. “What's your favorite ballad?”

“Don't you dare unwind that thing.” Mel stood up in front of the booth, stretched, then sized-up the ring of men, a few now leaning on the jukebox. “I'm going back to the can,” he told her. “Soon as I get back we're heading out of here.”

When he got back to the booth the girl was gone; she'd walked out of Joe's Bar and Nite Spot with her squeezebox. Mel wasn't much surprised, though. Now he'd join the posse this afternoon and hunt for old Lefty.

And she'd left him a yellow glove. But it was the empty one.

Steve Scott was born in Vernal, Utah. He studied fashion design at Parsons in New York City and Choinards in Los Angeles. He has written three novels, the first, ECHO PARK, became an LA Times bestseller, and many short stories. He now lives in Palm Springs, California.

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*Traditional Poem (Terza Rima Sonnet)*

## Nocturne

**Joseph L. Whitten**

Three things that pleasure me like old refrains,  
when in the night I wake from shallow sleep:  
my sleeping wife, the antique clock, and trains.

The trains' low calls, melodious and deep,  
recall those long steam-engine days that lace  
my childhood years with memories I keep.

And on the mantel in its polished case  
the antique clock ticks darkness into light—  
insistent measure—balanced time and space.

These soothing sounds I listen for, but quite  
the dearest melody of all, is she  
whose gentle breathing calms the restless night.

The trains, the clock, my wife's tranquility  
enfold my wakefulness with harmony.

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**Joseph L. Whitten** is a retired educator living in Odenville, AL, with his wife Gail. Joe's poems have appeared in publications such as *Lyric*, *Harp-Strings Poetry Journal*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and *Poets' Forum magazine*. He is a member of the *Alabama State Poetry Society*, the *Pennsylvania Poetry Society*, and *AWC*.

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The Circle

Jo Middlebrooks

He sat slump shouldered behind the wheel of his Expedition, multi-colored sweet gum leaves gathering on the shiny black hood. Robert “Red” Applewhite, Jr. pulled into the yard of the Circle Village Community House these days to dump the stress of his day into the Chattahoochee, the river of his childhood.

The bank rose twenty feet above the water in this spot. Its edge was landscaped and lighted along the new river walk; but to him it was the steep, muddy climb or descent made by barefoot ten year old boys who knew just which water oak limb or rock outcropping to grab for next. It was nothing like the concrete and plaster walls his grandchildren climbed at the mall in their hundred dollar Nikes, no bungee cord to catch you as a missed step sent you sliding through red clay and blackberry bushes. If a boy was smart enough to have a rabbit’s foot in the pocket of his overalls, his luck saved him with the hammer loop catching on something on the way down. There was nothing like the real thing, the need to watch for moccasins and wasp nests as you stuck your hand into a mix of pine straw and leaves to grab hold, or wonder if the varmints had been caught off guard, and - in the confusion - would find your bare toes digging into the clay for their venom.

He sat motionless, looking across to the Alabama side of the river. His thoughts were empty. That happened more often lately, not only when he stopped by the village to unwind on his way home. Red Applewhite was no longer making a connection to the past, the simpler time and honest time he had spent on earth. In no way had his childhood been the easiest part of his life; but he longed for the straight forward way problems were solved back then, a time when a whole village

of mill workers were able to live on the little they realized from the spinning and weaving of the South's king crop, cotton.

As the afternoon sun glistened on the river and began its descent beyond the Alabama bank, Red turned the key to his Expedition and made his way through the narrow, curving streets of the village past the white shotgun houses of his youth. He would be home in less than twenty minutes, pulling into the circular drive of his upriver estate. It was Friday afternoon. Stephanie and the grandchildren would be at the mall; and Simone, the undocumented Cuban maid, would be pulling out of the drive in her yellow Volkswagen convertible, top down, salsa blaring from the radio.

Red made his way through the mudroom and pulled a freshly ironed shirt from the rack in the laundry area. He would not change anything but his shirt before leaving for the River Club to meet the group from Toronto. He hated the whole business entertaining game, especially when Stephanie was not there to keep the evening moving. Tonight he would be on his own with the Canadians. The people had been at corporate headquarters since the merger announcement on Wednesday. They were expecting an evening of pampered delight for their efforts before heading back to Altamonte Financial, their pockets lined with wealth, to begin the agreed-to cuts in labor force. Red was accustomed to the drill. The South System Bank had gobbled up enough financial institutions to hold a place in the top twenty companies in the world. Who would have thought it, a small South Georgia bank growing into an international entity in just a few short years after its first acquisition?

Years of cutbacks and the inevitable closing of the Circle Mill had happened quietly. The textile industry that fed the folks in Circle City Mill Village since the 1920s closed in the 1990s, replaced, a few miles south on the Chattahoochee, by a glass and brass giant where spinning and weaving was now done in electronic transactions for an international market. Children of dolphers and carders were now processing the

plastic transactions that kept the economy moving. BMWs, Hondas, and SUVs parked each day in the multi-storied parking garage whose architecture copied the one-hundred-year-old towel mill demolished to make room for it. The old system of mill town patronage was alive and well inside the corporate structure with a movie theater, barbershop, beauty shop, restaurants, drug store, and gym. Across the way, an elementary school, and daycare center serve the children of the new mill hands. The good old boys had done themselves proud. They had provided their small Georgia city with a new mill.

Red Applewhite grabbed a couple of celery sticks stuffed with pimento cheese from the veggie tray Simone left for the family on the kitchen counter and headed out the door. He hoped his evening at the club would not be a drawn-out affair. There was work waiting for him on his laptop to complete before an early breakfast meeting in the executive dining room to brainstorm the details of yet another acquisition.

Red rolled to a stop under the River Club's portico, as a uniformed valet moved quickly toward the vehicle to open his door.

“Evenin' Mr. Red. Some gents are on the deck waitin' on you . . . five of 'um,” said Sockie Freeman, as he opened the door of the Expedition. Socrates “Sockie” Freeman was the youngest of Ickybud Freeman’s twelve children, now approaching the age his daddy was when Red’s family moved to the Circle Mill Village. Sockie worked his years in the mill, just as Icky had, until it closed in 1996. He had worked as a valet at the River Club since then.

“I told you, Sockie, to drop the 'Mister' when you call my name. We are the same two people we were setting out trotlines a few years back. The only Misters on that river were the ones your daddy talked to when he would set out a line . . . what was it. . . Oh, ‘Evenin', Mister channel cat. Here’s you a big ol' chunk 'a chicken liver to grab a holt to.”

“I got to keep up 'pearances, Red,” Sockie said straightening his red-cropped jacket. The club don’t pay me to just park rich folks' fine

automobiles. I'm part of the deecor. Before Mr. Ford put all them horses under yore hood, my folks was greetin' yore folks as Massah somebody, not Mister somebody. Lawn Jockey work pays real good these days. They could hire some trash-smokin' white boy to greet you as 'dude' and save some money. Deecor, Massah Red, deecor."

"Damn, Sockie Freeman, don't you sound just like your daddy?"

"How you keep gas in this thing?" asked Sockie, as he pulled his scrawny frame into the driver's seat. "It's like drivin' a bus."

"Truth be told, I'm able to steal enough of other folks' money to keep both tanks full."

"Aw, Red, I know better 'n that. You ain't never stole nothin' from nobody."

"Don't know about that, Sockie. There's stealing and there's stealing." Thoughts of some of the deals he had been part of swirled in his brain, including the one he was here to celebrate with the Altamonte group. "Them that's got gets," he said smiling.

"Yeah, and them that ain't cain't," Sockie completed the old Circle Mill Village saying.

The conversation fell silent for a few seconds. Red and Sockie had made a connection to their past, when surviving every day was what folks did to make the best that could be made of lives lived owing the company store.

"I'm going in here to eat a big juicy steak with some folks who have to go home tomorrow and steal three-hundred jobs so they can get more of what they already have." That was the crux of the matter, the stealing. If not outright theft, Red considered it theft by cause and effect precipitated by the haves in the name of progress, its motivation born in principled or unprincipled desire to acquire wealth. Red was a boss, a boss who had no stomach for the process of progress. His share of the sweet cream skimmed off the top had begun to sour in his gut. His peers would say that Red had lost his edge, and, in a sense, they would be

right. Red Applewhite teetered on the edge of the circle his thoughts traveled between his past and his future, the anxiety of the present no longer an option.

Randy Alford, lanky Altamonte Vice-President, raised his glass of wine.

"Applewhite, I, for one, will miss you next week. To the detail man, gentlemen, the work horse that has pulled all the logs onto the bank, lined 'em up and loaded 'em onto the wagon, eh?"

"To Randy, the organization man, who has to unload the wagon and build the cabin," Red replied with a raised glass, cringing at the metaphorical crap coming out of his mouth.

These men would never know him. He was having trouble remembering himself, trying hard to connect the barefoot, red-haired, freckled-faced boy and the other world, the other time in his life.

The early morning meeting went well. The detail man was well prepared as usual with the metaphorical logs sized and stacked perfectly in his laptop. Red responded to questions about the viability of the project, presenting requested particulars systematically without referring to the lap top screen. "This time, gentleman," he said ending his presentation, "we will benefit from the value of the acquisition's employees. Work force can be managed by attrition."

"Damn, Applewhite," the chairman smirked. "Now don't you sound like the proverbial do-gooder." A wave of suddenly somber faces focused on Red. They waited for his response to what they knew to be a serious boardroom event, a quasi-joking question from their chairman.

"If you will take a look at the figures on page eight of the project report," Red suggested, "you will find the information you need to determine for yourselves whether or not our investment in their human capital will do gooder for our bottom line."

Red closed his laptop and stood. The questioning faces shifted their focus to the project reports before them. "If you will excuse me," he said, "I have an important phone call to make." No one was more surprised than Red at his abrupt withdrawal from the meeting. As he closed the boardroom door behind him, he knew the meeting of overblown egos around the table would morph into a game of marbles. The guys on their knees would purposely miss the shots so the guy who owned the bag of marbles could win. The reality of the project would be ignored for weeks in lieu of perverted self-serving versions that would be batted around until all the egos were satisfied. The bottom line would control the mayhem in the end, but this ridiculous, inefficient exercise was what he could not stomach.

"Cindy," he said to his secretary, "get me the phone number of Max Morris. It's in the book. The listing may be M.J. or Maxwell J. Morris. I will dial it myself."

"Good morning, Mr. Applewhite," she said primly. "Is the meeting over so soon?"

"I'm sorry, Cindy, and, good morning to you. They're not done in there, but I am."

"Would that be M.J. Morris on Park Place?" She asked, scribbling on a post-a-note.

"It would, thanks," he said, taking the post-a-note from her hand. "I'll be gone for the rest of the day, but you can reach me on the cell phone if you need me."

Red went into his office and closed the door, loosening his tie as he dialed the phone.

"Yep", a gravelly voice answered, "go ahead."

"Max, old boy, this is Red."

"Well, damn if it ain't. Didn't I see you bustin' it up the Expressway in that big black booger you drive 'bout six o'clock this mornin'?"

"Probably did. I had an early meeting with the heavies. You didn't see me run over anybody did you?"

"If I had, I'd of called the cops and hung around to tell 'um what a good man you are, but that you've seemed a bit preoccupied for several years now."

"I'm working on that, Max. In fact, how about meeting me on Sister Street. I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure. I've got to go by Miss Alice Pate's old place to make sure them concrete boys don't miss the mark. I'm gettin' too old for jack hammerin'."

"I'm going on over there now. You do still own that property, right?"

"Yep, two of the Sisters is done, and I'm just startin' on the middle one. She ain't locked so you can look around 'til I get there if you're a mind to."

The men sat on the top step of the old house. Red leaned against the corner post of the banister and Max laid back on the porch with his legs stretched out down the steps.

Sprawled out and leaning against the banister in the posture of boys, the two aging men sat in silence. Their thoughts traveled back to a time when they lay on the cool porch boards, listening to crickets and tree frogs sing their evening chorus. It was a time when watching the front yard become dark before the back yard was worth the wait. Catching the sun's final slip behind the Alabama side of the river became an art form for the boys. Meeting Max there on that porch was the first contact Red had made with himself in years. He was once again 'Little Red', only child of Bob and Kathleen Applewhite who moved to Circle City, Georgia, in 1946. His friend, Max Morris, was still there to help him figure out stuff. They both knew that, eventually, one of them would start the conversation that should have taken place a long time ago. Red broke the silence.

"I went off and got lost," he said tears welling in his eyes. "Living and working close to where I was raised, and I got lost."

"Yep, you did, Red."

"How long have you known I was lost? And, if you knew it, why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried to a couple of times, but you wuttin' listenin'," Max said as he sat upright on the top step and looked directly into Red's teary eyes. Stephanie asked me about you back when she was wantin' to open that tearoom in the Village."

"What did you tell her?"

"Told her I thought you wuttin' ready to have where you was now meetin' up with where you used to be. That's what I thought then, and that's what I think now. Ain't nothin' wrong with that, but it don't leave a man nowhere to rest his soul at the end of the day."

"What did she say when you told her that?"

"I don't rightly remember all of it, but I could tell you hadn't told her about Miss Kathleen's hidin' from folks and you and yore daddy bringin' her back and forth to the State Hospital. When I realized that I didn't say much else."

"That was around the time Stephanie suggested I talk to somebody . . . you know . . . a professional."

"Well, Red, me and you both know you'd never do that, 'specially after Miss Kathleen's ordeal with them professionals up in Milledgeville."

"No, I wouldn't, but I am about to do something that will make folks swear that I'm crazy. I'm quitting my job."

Max stood and walked down the steps. He pulled at a dried sweet gum limb hung in the Azalea bush next to the steps and flung it toward the dumpster on the curb in front of the house. "Never knowed nobody to leave a fine job like you got, but I ain't never knowed nobody but you that had such a fine one to leave neither."

"You think I'm crazy, Max?"

"Naw," Max replied. "Who's to say what crazy is, anyway?"

Jo Middlebrooks began writing poetry and fiction in 1996. Former Resident Costumer, Georgia Historic State Theatre, Springer Opera House, Columbus, GA; founder and recently retired board and steering committee member of the Chattahoochee Valley Writers' Conference, Jo is completing two novels. Her poetry appears in *The Reach of Song* and *The Sampler*.

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# Last Call for the Fiddlers Three

**Douglas Campbell**

Dorwin read it again, the invitation from Cal and Betty Granger. A farewell party? Sure enough, next Saturday night. Why hadn't they mentioned their plans to him? Or had they?

*"WE'RE MOVING TO FLORIDA!!!"*

The capital letters and triple exclamation points made Dorwin heartsick, the phony enthusiasm used to suppress the hard truths of growing old. He called Cal.

"Florida's a foreign country," Dorwin said. "Palm trees, alligators. Mobs of tourists."

"But it's warm," Cal said.

"It's hot and sticky," Dorwin said. "What will you do there?"

"Play golf," Cal said.

"You've never played golf in your life."

"Time I got started then," Cal said.

Dorwin couldn't understand it. Wouldn't they miss the piercing green of bluegrass in the springtime? Soft summer evenings swimming with fireflies, forests of oak and maple painted in glorious autumn colors?

*"Last Call for The Fiddlers Three!"*

Cal had handwritten that on Dorwin's invitation, referring to their string band of earlier years: Cal on bass, Jim DeWitt, banjo, Clive Benson, fiddle, Dorwin on guitar. Four of them in The Fiddlers Three, their silly joke, fracturing the nursery rhyme, all part of the good times, playing dances, weddings, anywhere, for any reason. They'd come to know and trust each other in a musical kinship that had often led them into extended jams, their shared passion and inventiveness a source of

wonder and delight.

Ten years had passed since they'd played together. Dorwin wondered if Jim DeWitt would be at the party so soon after bypass surgery. Or was it Clive who'd had that?

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Dorwin lifted his guitar from its case, the vintage Martin, its spruce top spider-webbed with finish cracks. No matter. With fresh strings it would ring high and boom in the bass, hold its own with the other instruments.

But the bridge pins kept popping up, and he couldn't wrap the strings around the pegs, hold them, and turn the tuning knob all at once. The intricacy of it defeated him, his fingers no longer nimble enough. Someone at the party would have to do it, someone with younger hands.

Snow had fallen intermittently all day, but when he went downstairs Dorwin saw through the window that it was coming hard, the day and house grown nearly dark. The snow lay deep on the streets. Not a good idea to drive, down two steep hills, no weight in the back of his pickup. A two-mile walk, forty-five minutes probably, in the snow, carrying the guitar. No piece of cake at seventy-two, but he could do it.

He tugged his boots on and set out through a squall of fat, wet flakes spinning so thickly he could hardly see the houses along the street. But the party would be worth the effort. The Granger's parties had always been fun. A snapping blaze in the stone fireplace, a table loaded with smoked hams, wheels of cheese, salads, cakes, pies. Beer and whisky to leave a regiment staggering. A big living room with the carpet rolled away, leaving clear hardwood for dancers wheeling to The Fiddlers Three.

Dorwin struggled to recall the songs they'd played. *Soldier's Joy*, *Cripple Creek*. So many more. Surely he'd remember them once they started playing.

*Goin' up Cripple Creek, goin' in a whirl,  
Goin' up Cripple Creek to see my girl.*

He wouldn't see his girl tonight, or ever again, his hometown sweetheart, Sally Mollohan. Smart as could be, and so pretty: long black hair, brown eyes, pale cheeks always flushed with wind or joy. She'd wanted to marry him.

"Let's not wait forever," she said, when they went their separate ways, Sally bound for law school in Chicago, Dorwin for an accounting job in Massachusetts.

"We won't," Dorwin promised.

But over time and distance Sally's luster had faded, while Dorwin chased a dream of someone even smarter, prettier, sexier. Then he heard Sally had become engaged to a law school classmate. The mistake of his life, letting Sally get away. A man can be a fool at any age – but the biggest fools are young fools.

Wrapped in thought, his surroundings blurred by snow, Dorwin walked for what seemed a lifetime before he stopped. He recognized nothing in the neighborhood around him. He'd missed his turn, walked right past it. Where on earth was he? The Granger's house would be downhill, to his right, and the cross streets all plunged downhill, into a deeper darkness. He could go down – but then where? He didn't know the streets in this part of town.

Standing there, holding his unstrung guitar, fatigue weighted his limbs. Precious time and a happy evening had slipped away. He wouldn't make it to the party now. He'd miss his old band mates, the music and the fire, the ham and pie. But the party would go on without him. He looked in the direction from which he'd come and saw his tracks in the snow. He could retrace his steps and find his way home.

He'd stopped where the street rose to a peak. The lights of town glimmered down below and he could make out the hills to the west. The snow had nearly stopped. Above the distant ridgeline, a band of clear sky

and stars showed, the storm's end. A vaporous and wavery moon floated behind a thinning veil of clouds, touching the cold landscape around him with a pale, primal glow, the kind he imagined would light the world eons from now, with the sun dying, flickering toward final darkness.

So many mistakes he'd made! So many things forgotten. But there he stood. He reached out with his free arm, wishing he could grasp the solemn moonlight and hold it in his hand. He filled his lungs with cool, moist air. One thing he'd never forgotten, perhaps the only thing, in the end, worth remembering: That wherever he was at the moment, some chance or miracle had given him breath and brought him there, in a world beautiful even to be lost in.

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**Douglas Campbell's** *fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print, in publications such as Flash Me Magazine, Every Day Fiction, Slow Trains Literary Journal, and Jabberwocky. He can't seem to resist telling stories, and just tries to do that as best he can. Douglas lives in southwestern Pennsylvania.*

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It's the Little Things

Adrienne Y. Norton

She pushed open the door to the police station. "I need to talk to a policeman," she said. "I killed my husband."

The policeman looked at her with as much sympathy as a sixty-five year old man planning to retire in two months could muster. He sighed and placed his mug of coffee on the battered desk before pulling out a chair for her. "Sit down," he said gently. "Tell me how and why you killed your husband."

The policeman studied the woman as she sat almost primly in the wooden chair across from his desk. He noted that she wasn't carrying a weapon or even a purse. The woman had pale strawberry blonde hair and light blue eyes. She looked maybe fifty-five, thin and wiry, dressed in faded jeans and blue tee shirt. He thought she must have been pretty at one time. Now she looked tired, but he didn't think she looked crazy enough to be talking this way.

He studied her again as he pulled the Miranda rights from the drawer and began reading them to her before she could say another word.

When he stopped for breath she said, "I don't know why I did it." And she didn't. She had not planned to kill him, had not meant to hurt him, or even to be irritable that day so long ago.

A frown of pain crossed her face, and her eyes closed. She wondered why she was confessing now. She felt the exhaustion of having lived with this for over two years. She thought maybe the letter she received yesterday from the little boy, Jessie, had prompted her actions. In the letter written in his printed seven-year old scrawl, he had asked if

he could come spend the summer with his Granddaddy Jake in south Alabama.

It wasn't that she had actually heard voices telling her to confess, but she repeatedly experienced a nagging pressure inside her head. She was tired of the uninvited visits from her mother, Darlene. They came every night, interfering with her sleep and always after she finished the *Tonight Show* and the last bottle of wine, just when she was ready for peace and quiet. Her mother said hateful things on these visits like, "Your stubborn hard-headedness has always gotten you into trouble. Why didn't you just walk out on him, Missy?"

She was weary of the polite inquiries of the old widow McCuller from down the street. Every time she crossed her path in Winn-Dixie, as she did yesterday, she had to fabricate an answer about how that dear husband was getting along and when would he be well enough to accompany her to the store again. "That alligator man used to be so robust," old lady McCuller said.

That ole biddy would have died and gone straight to hell right then if she had said, "He's six feet under in the backyard just pushing up daisies, the Shasta kind. Instead, she paid for three bottles of wine and a loaf of bread and as she walked out the door, she called, "He's no better. He's not ever gonna be better."

It was true Jake had not been better for a long time. She realized now that they had been married ten years before he had gone to his Resting Place as she referred to his grave in the backyard in her conversations with Darlene.

Her mother had approved of Jake. "Marry that man, Maureen, before he gets away," she told her. Jake had been a strapping six foot two man. "He's as handsome as Burt Reynolds or Tom Selleck," Darlene said. Jake had come home, fresh from service in Vietnam. Maureen, who had been born with a head of red fuzz and named for the movie star,

Maureen O'Hara had listened to her mother. With Darlene by her side, Maureen and Jake had said their vows before a justice of the peace.

They had been happy together, at least at first. Jake with his fishing trips and alligator hunting in Florida and Louisiana had left her home alone with plenty of time to read and watch old movies. Then her mother came to live with them. They had one good year when Jake would return from fishing trips with tales to entrance and delight her mother. Then, her mother experienced a fatal heart attack. Two months later, Jake lost his leg in an alligator hunt in the Everglades and things really went to pot. Maureen tried to explain this to her mother during the nightly visits, but Darlene never stopped saying, "Oh, Maureen, Jake is still a gorgeous Hunk."

Gorgeous is as gorgeous does Maureen thought. Jake had developed some lowbrow tastes during his years in Vietnam. His taste turned from wine to beer. Before long, he requested beer by the case. "Bring me another frosted one, Maureen," he'd yell from the couch on the porch, or the TV set in the bedroom, or the lounge under the pecan tree in the yard. Sometimes he hollered. "Bring me my smokes."

Lord, she got tired of that, him always sitting with that leg propped up like it was a trophy from the war or something. Then, he started counting her wine bottles as he hobbled peg leg out to the garbage can on Friday mornings. "My little pennies are not big enough to cover a wino," he'd said referring to his pension from the VA.

As the policeman made notes, Maureen remembered the red roses and the boat trips to Point Clear on each anniversary. She'd driven the boat while Jake pulled out the ukulele and sang to her along the way. "Dear God, those were the good times," she said aloud. The policeman looked up and Maureen was pulled back into the present. But she couldn't stay there.

She remembered the Friday night exactly four years ago. He'd pulled her close in an embrace. As she looked up at him, he whacked her across the head with his cane and said, "This is for flirting with Rodney and Lonnie at the poker game last night. You wore them high-heeled boots and that see through blouse on purpose. Remember," he said, "them things belong to just me, like you, you belong to just me."

She never liked the idea of belonging to someone. Once she turned eighteen she had a fight with Darlene, with the two of them screaming and pulling hair and running across the backyard. "You've just gotten too big for your britches, Missy," Darlene said. "You don't belong here anymore. You better hit the road."

Maureen had hit the road. She didn't speak to Darlene again for six months. These words about belonging to someone came back when Jake began talking and singing about Maureen belonging to him. She countered by singing to Jake. She changed the words and her song became *Hit the Road, Jake*. She sang it when he annoyed her. He laughed at her.

You belong to me suddenly became *See the alligators along the swamp*. By God, the man must be crazy talking about swamps and alligators. He'd see that she'd never get out in the boat with him again. She confided this to Darlene on her next visit. Darlene shrieked with laughter.

This was when she first thought about sending Jake to his Resting Place. Too bad they didn't live on a lagoon. Jake would have liked being on the water. She considered the cowardly methods of preparation for his eternal rest. Poisoning him with arsenic would take too long. She wondered if Jake's pension would be sufficient to provide for her needs. They weren't many. The note on the house had been paid off.

She confided to Darlene, "Those cigarettes and beer have turned a hunk into a wheezing old man. I think I could smother him with a pillow."

“Missy, Jake deserves more than a pillow placed over his head when he’s drunk.”

She sucked in her breath as she remembered that summer of constant storms, rain every day for a whole month. It was just like being in the tropics. That was when she conceived a new plan.

“Darlene, you should have been the one who married Jake,” she said to her mother whose visits had now become almost nightly. “I’ll just put Jake in a place where you can visit him under the stars and you can drool over him there instead of sitting on my pillow disturbing my peace.”

Darlene roared with laughter. “Missy, what Jake and I experienced together in this place while you were out nights choosing movies at the Blockbuster rentals is a romance you can only imagine.” Darlene laughed again. “What do you think caused my fatal heart attack?” Darlene’s laughter trailed Maureen as she exited the room and headed out to the sodden backyard.

“Come,” the woman said to the policeman. “I’ll take you to the place where I buried him.”

Adrienne Y. Norton is a retired speech pathologist living in Hoover, Alabama. She and her husband take creative writing courses together. Adrienne has written a book of short stories and a memoir, The Eleventh Voice, about growing up in a family of twelve children. She says, “*Help! Send suggestions for finding a publisher/agent.*”

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# Grandma's Violets

**Rose Nelson**

The sudden blare of a horn made me jump. I let go of the garbage bin and it rolled into the curb tipping over. Trash spewed all over the street. Melissa rolled down the window of her mother's Mini-Cooper and waved, cackling in hysterics. I stuck my tongue out at her as the car turned the corner.

I didn't laugh though. In fact I felt ready to cry. Bending down I picked up the mess, smelly piece by smelly piece. I tried not to envy Melissa who was on her way to ballet practice. Practice for the lead in next month's recital, practice for the part I was supposed to dance—until Mom forced me to quit.

Inside the house I passed my brother, Josh. The big, gangly lug was fumbling with the knobs on the laundry machine, mumbling curses under his breath. Ever since Grandma's stroke three months earlier we had extra chores. Clean this. Straighten that. Take out the trash. Wash the clothes. Now I knew how Cinderella felt.

"Brianna!" my mother called. I rolled my eyes. Reaching in front of Josh, I pulled the START button on the washer. Then I stepped into the kitchen. Mom, looking scrawny and worn-out, stood at the stove stirring soup. I could smell it was ham and split pea, Grandma's favorite.

"Yes?" I answered, dreading her response. Swiping a loose gray hair aside she said, "I need you to sit with Grandma while she eats this soup. I have to run to the drugstore for her prescription."

"You said I could go over to Megan's after my chores were done!" I whined as I rinsed my hands in the sink.

Mom's pallid face pinched up. "I'm sorry, honey, but your dad just called. His meeting is running late and Grandma needs her next dose. Maybe after supper . . ." She was already pulling the keys from her purse.

"Megan has swim lessons after supper," I muttered in self-pity. Mom didn't hear.

"Oh, and, Bri, sweetie, once Grandma's fed, her African violets need watering. Thanks!" If it weren't for Mom's weary expression, I would have detonated right then.

Still feeling grimy from the toxic waste spill, I rewashed in the bathroom. I glimpsed myself in the mirror and gasped. I looked as skinny and pale as Mom—even my eye color had faded from azure to gray. I ran my fingers through my tangled hair. I used to curl it every day, have time to curl it every day. Now yellow mop strings fringed my head.

Upstairs I wrapped Grandma's faded flower quilt around her bony shoulders. The snowy-haired woman was asleep, her eyelids twitching as she dreamed. Her skin was so translucent it had taken on the bluish hue of her veins.

I cleared away the soup bowl and glanced out the open window. The April breeze whispered my name, beckoning me outdoors. I sighed and collapsed on the window seat. Grandma's snores drowned out a whip-poor-will's twilight song. How awful to be old I thought. Nothing to look forward to—except wrinkles and sickness.

Of course thanks to Grandma's stroke, my 14-year old life had become an unbearable nothing. No ballet, no soccer, no television, no computer, no friends. Nothing but endless chores.

I scanned the dreary room. The ancient floral wallpaper was streaked rusty yellow from water damage. Mom had planned to paint the walls before Christmas. But then Grandma had the stroke. The oak floor was ruined too. Even a dozen hideous braided rugs couldn't cover all the deep scratches or loose boards.

The fragrance of lilacs wafted in from the garden. That reminded me. I still had to water the silly African violets. Grabbing the water pitcher, I creaked over to Grandma's mini-greenhouse. It was a lighted three-tiered shelf that kept her plants healthy year-round.

I was sprinkling the third fuzzy-leafed plant when Josh peeked in. "I'll be at Tyler's," my bushy-headed brother mumbled.

I frowned. "Hey, how come *you* get a break?"

Josh scowled back, his dark eyes narrowed. "I'm just going." He rattled the car keys to tease me and disappeared down the hall.

Why couldn't I be 16? I moped, paying no attention to what I was doing. Suddenly muddy water began spilling out of the pot, top and bottom. I knew little about plants except that too much water could harm the roots. Guilt shook me. I grabbed a torn robe from Grandma's laundry basket and sopped up the muddy mess with it. I asked God to please let the thing live.

All these plants were special to Grandma. Mom said Grandma even named them. I found that a little weird but I guess old folks earn that right—to be weird.

The next day Megan came home from school with me to study. We had just finished our snack of brownies and root beer when Mom knocked on the bedroom door. "Your mother called, Megan. Your cheerleading practice has been switched to today," she informed my best friend.

"Oh, I forgot! Thanks, Mrs. Smith!" Megan bolted out the door, her auburn ponytail flying, before I could say good-bye.

Alone again. I tried to study the Korean Conflict but I kept thinking about my meaningless life. Slamming my history book shut, I begged God to make Grandma well soon.

I guess my prayers came too late. The next day Grandma suffered another stroke. She had to go back to the hospital for a week. When she returned home, she could no longer move her left arm.

Even though Grandma had to stay in bed, she remained cheerful. She kept praising God for preserving her memory and keeping her right side functional.

“Thank you for taking such wonderful care of my African violets, Brianna,” she told me every day. To my relief, even the one I over-watered continued to thrive.

One afternoon after I finished with the plants, I found Grandma looking at me. I walked over to the bed and asked if I could get her anything. She asked me to bring her hope. Stunned, I couldn’t answer.

Then a smile pulled up the corners of her mouth. “Hope is my favorite African violet, Brianna. It’s the one with the deepest purple flowers.”

I gulped. Hope was the one I had almost drowned. With great care I set the plant on Grandma’s nightstand. She pointed to her lap. I transferred it there and she grasped the pot with her good hand.

Grandma sighed with contentment. “You know why I named her Hope?” I shook my head.

“Because, Brianna, I found her in a garbage can. Someone had just gotten tired of taking care of her.” Grandma’s faded blue eyes misted. “Whenever I get to feeling sorry for myself, I place Hope here on my lap. She reminds me that hope never dies.”

I didn’t completely understand Grandma, but tears formed in my eyes. “Where did you get all the others?” I asked.

“Well, my own grandma gave me the first, Ole’ Violet. She’s the one with the pinkish-purple blooms. Grannie gave it to me for my birthday, just weeks before she died.”

My mouth dropped open. “How long have you had it?” I asked.

Grandma chuckled, her blue eyes sparkling. “Well, let’s see—50, no 53 years now.”

“You’ve kept it alive 53 years? And the others?” I settled myself on the bed next to Grandma.

“Let’s see, my mother gave me Liza, named after her, when I went away to school. I was the first one in my family to attend college,” she said, pride amplifying her crackly voice.

“Your folks must have been pleased, Grandma. How about that little one with lavender flowers? What’s its name?”

“Oh, that’s Baby. Can you guess why I named her that?”

“Because it’s so small?”

She shook her long fluffy curls. “I got it when I had my first *baby*, your mama. My best friend, Betty, gave it to me.”

“Really? So Baby is 44 years old?”

“Must be. Another favorite of mine is Violette. Not Violet. Violette. I made her. I took a leaf from Ole’ Violet, watered her till she had roots, and planted her. Then voila! Violette came to be.”

Grandma told me the story of each of her 30 plants. Before I knew it Mom was calling me down to dinner.

“Do you have the stories of your plants written anywhere, Grandma?” I asked her, taking Hope from her.

“Just in my head, honey.” She yawned a deep yawn. I realized all the talking had worn her out.

I carried the African violets back to the plant shelf. Then I wrapped Grandma’s thread-bare quilt around her. I leaned over and kissed her creased cheek. She smiled and closed her eyes. I gazed at her a moment. Her complexion flushed pink with pleasure.

Heading downstairs, I got a wonderful idea for Grandma’s upcoming birthday. I would make her a violet book. I would photograph each of her potted plants and place the pictures in an album. Then I would label them and write down how each plant came to live with Grandma. Since I could draw well, I could sketch Hope and paste it to the cover.

I knew Grandma would love it. Best yet her life would always be remembered through her plants. For the first time in months I felt alive and full of hope.

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**Rose Nelson** is a former reading and English teacher. She has been writing stories and poems as a hobby since childhood. Several of her stories for middle graders have won top contest prizes. This includes the 2008 Alabama Writer's Conclave contest for her short story, "Secret Sisters." She has five children, ages 5-13, all avid readers.

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I Sure Did Hate to Kill Him

Bonnie Faye Dunn

It was especially dark tonight when we drove up to the old gray house at Toby's Crossing where we live. We had just left Mama Dunn and Grand Daddy's house where lights burned bright in every room and were still shining in our eyes. It was even light outside when they turned the corner porch light on. It was light enough for us to run and play 'Ain't no Boogers out tonight, Grandpa killt em all last night'. We ran barefoot and played on the cool lawn underneath the canopy of Pecan Trees. The grownups rocked in rocking chairs on the front porch and watched us play. They talked about the dry spell we are having and how the crops need rain. They talked about the good ole days when life was slower and everybody stayed on the farm—when nobody left their land for the promise of work in town.

We ate one of Mama Dunn's good suppers tonight. She cooked fried chicken, creamed corn, butterbeans and peas mixed with a few okra pods on top, sliced ripe tomatoes, cornbread and biscuits, potato salad, and Five Layer Spice Cake for dessert. When we first got to their house, before we ate supper, Grand Daddy sliced open the first big ripe watermelon of the summer. It was so ripe and juicy that when he stuck his butcher knife into the rind it just ripped wide open. He hardly had to cut it at all. Our mouths watered when we saw the shimmery red color of the watermelon and he made sure everybody's rasher had a piece of the heart on it. We saved our seeds and played shooting them at one another until the grownups called us to supper.

After supper Mama and Daddy loaded all five of us into the cab of Daddy's pickup truck for the short ride home. The headlights barely lit up the dirt road and the moon didn't help any as it was hiding behind a

cloud. Daddy slowed down at Toby's Crossing to make the sharp left turn onto our road and from the Crossing we could see the dark outline of our house against the sky. It sits on top of a hill next to the Big Oak Tree that we play under every day. When the moon is shining you notice the sagging roof and droopy front porch on our house. When it's dark the steps creak louder when you step on them. Branches from our Big Oak Tree scratch the glass on the window panes more as we walk to the front door.

Usually when we get home Ole Butch is sitting on the front porch by the door, guarding the house. That is if he stayed home like Daddy told him to do. Like Daddy always tells him to do. It is hard for Ole Butch not to come looking for us though. He knows where to usually find us and that is at Mama Dunn and Grand Daddy's house. To get to their house he has to first pass by Uncle Ellis and Aunt Kate's house where his mortal enemy Reuben lives. And there will be a fight. There is always a fight. They have hated each other from the very first minute they laid eyes on one another that day three years ago when Uncle Loot brought Butch down from Columbus, Georgia to be our dog and live with us.

Tonight when we got home we knew Ole Butch wouldn't be sitting on the front porch waiting for us because he had not stayed home. He had come looking for us. Maybe he was looking for Reuben, too, because they ended up fighting so hard underneath Mama Dunn's front porch that you would swear they were going to kill one another. It was a ferocious fight with terrifying sounds coming from them. Dust billowed out from underneath the house where they were tangled up fighting. We covered our ears because we couldn't bear to hear it anymore and cried for Daddy and Grand Daddy and Uncle Ellis to make them stop fighting

We all cried some more when they finally drug Butch and Reuben out from underneath the front porch. It was hard to tell that Reuben was white and that Butch was brown because they were both covered all over in bright red blood. Butch's eyes were beginning to swell shut, his ears

were torn and his tail was hanging low because my Daddy scolded him bad for following us and fighting. His leg was cut and he was limping bad but he took out walking slow towards home while Uncle Ellis held Reuben to keep him from going after Butch and fighting some more. Mama Dunn said one day for sure they're going to kill one another dead. She said, "Jest look at my flower bed next to the front porch. They tore everythang up, fighting so. It's pure ruint. All my zinnia an dahlia blooms gone. An' this comin' Sunday is my Sunday to put fresh flowers on the preacher's table at Enon Baptist Church an me with no zinnias or dahlias to speak of."

We knew Butch wouldn't be sleeping on the front porch when we got home that night but we looked for him anyway. Daddy said he'd be laid up resting in one of the old barns, cleaning his wounds. He said there was plenty of fresh water in his bucket to drink and that's all he'd want or need for the night. He said Ole Butch would be alright until morning and we'd see about him then.

If Butch had stayed home that night and watched the house he would've warned us that something was wrong. He would've barked and barked and pulled at Daddy's britchy legs to hold him back from going inside. But Ole Butch wasn't there to warn us. He'd been fighting instead.

Not that anything bad happened after all. But it surely could've been bad. Somebody could've been bitten and died. Except that big old snake turned his head. He lay stretched out long on the rafter above the bed where we sleep. His eyes glittered when my Daddy pulled that dirty string in the middle of the room and a pitiful amount of light flowed from the lone yellow light bulb hanging down low in the unsealed room. Hanging down between Mama's quilting frame that is raised up high out of the way.

It was a pitiful amount of yellow light alright but it was enough. Enough that the snake saw it and moved his head. It was enough light

that his old snake eyes glittered like the morning dew glitters when the sun first rises and shines bright on wet grass and my Daddy saw his eyes. Then he saw him flick his tongue in and out. He was a long snake. Fat around the middle On his back were black diamond-shaped designs. A Diamondback Rattler!

Like the lone yellow light bulb is bright enough anyway to brighten up much of the front room where we sit in straight chairs around the fireplace at night. Where we all sleep in two beds—me and Bobbie and Jean and Robert in one bed, Mama and Daddy and baby Riley in the other bed. Sometimes when we come in at night if there's dying embers in the fireplace from a fire that's nearly burned out Daddy won't turn the light on. And sometimes if there's enough moonlight streaming in through that side window looking out towards the Crossing he won't turn the light on either. But tonight the moon was hiding behind a cloud and it was dark. Real dark and he pulled that dirty string. That old Diamondback Rattlesnake never even rattled his rattles in warning. He had found a good place to sleep for the night. Up high where it was safe. Off the ground. He could've gotten in the house any number of ways because there are cracks everywhere and some of the floor planks are rotted at the ends. He could've slithered and slid up the steps at the back lean-to where we wash clothes in Mama's wringer washing machine and then crawled under the back door where it's warped and doesn't close good at the bottom.

He could've come in from underneath the house. We see plenty of snake tracks in the sand in our yard, mostly underneath the house, coming from Daddy's strawberry field and out the other side towards the mule barn. Underneath the house the sand hasn't been swept away by a hundred years of womenfolk sweeping with brush brooms down to the bare hard ground so that not one single blade of grass will grow in the yard. Grass in the yard means somebody has to hoe it and there's enough hoeing to be done in the cotton fields.

We see their tracks. Slicing through the sand in a zigzag fashion that sort of looks like the ric-rac Mama Dunn sews on the collars of our dresses that we wear to Sunday School. My Daddy can look at a snake track and know how big around the snake is and how long—where it's coming from and which way it's going. If it has a string of rattles on it or not.

That snake could've come up from underneath the house. He could've climbed up off the ground onto the field rocks that support the hand hewn beams the old gray house sits on. Rocks taken off the land by those who built this house and first farmed here. Rocks so big that when they're in the field they can break a plowshare and that costs time and money. Or a mule could stumble on a field rock and break his leg. Without a mule a farmer wouldn't have any way to farm and make a living. That snake could've crawled up the field rocks and then on through one of the cracks in the floor and once inside it was easy enough to climb up the rafter. To lie there and sleep until it was time to crawl on to someplace else.

Somebody could've been bitten. And they most likely would've died what with the size of that snake and the amount of poison in him. But my Daddy pulled that dirty string, turning on the lone yellow light bulb in the middle of the front room and it was enough light, pitiful amount that it was, to make the snake turn his head and his eyes glittered in the light and his tongue flicked in and out and my Daddy saw him lying there above our bed. His colors blended so well into the colors of the aged pine boards of our house that you almost didn't see him at all—dark gray and brown and some black and white.

We didn't know that snake was in the house so we just followed Daddy on through the front door like we always do. Daddy stopped dead in his tracks and told Mama to quick get us back outside into the cab of the pickup truck and to wait there with the windows rolled up tight. He couldn't shoot the snake with his shotgun even though it was loaded and

ready to shoot. It was hanging on the wall above the fireplace mantel where it always hangs but it was too close to the snake to risk getting it.

Daddy ran quick to the barn and grabbed a pitchfork and a grubbing hoe and went back inside. The snake hadn't moved. He was still stretched out long on the rafter looking at my Daddy. We could see through the front door because it was standing open and our eyes had adjusted to the dim light. Daddy stabbed him right behind the head with the pitchfork and pulled him down on the floor and chopped his head off with the hoe. We could see the snake writhing and twisting up on itself and coiling around the pitchfork. We could hear him rattling his hateful ole rattles because Mama cracked the window a little to hear what was going on.

Daddy brought the snake outside still stabbed on the pitchfork and threw pitchfork and all towards the strawberry patch. Even with his head cut off the snake continued to twist and turn around the handle of the pitchfork. Daddy looked mighty pale as he walked over to the truck and tried to open the door but his hands were shaking so bad Mama opened it for him. He said he sure did hate to kill that snake, but it ought not to have come into our house like it did. He said that snake just picked the wrong place to spend the night.

We were all so scared that Daddy said we could sleep at Mama Dunn and Grand Daddy's house and that's what we did. The next morning Daddy and Grand Daddy patched the hole in the floor where the snake crawled in. They could see his tracks in the sand underneath the house, next to the field rocks he'd crawled up to get inside.

After cutting off the Diamondback Rattlesnake's thirteen rattles with his pocket knife, Daddy laid him across the fence at the far end of the strawberry field so that everybody riding by on Enon Road could see him. Granny Lissie said a dead snake laying over a fence or clothesline brings rain and Daddy said his cotton surely does need some. We looked for rain clouds all morning long and late in the afternoon some

thunderheads rolled in. It rained a little but not enough to amount to much.

Daddy found Butch for us later that morning. He was sleeping in the hay in the back of Ole John's barn. He wouldn't eat anything but we put his bucket of fresh drawn well water close to where he was resting. His eyes are swollen shut and he didn't raise his head when we talked to him but he wagged his tail just a little when he heard our voices. Blood is dried hard on his fur but Daddy said in a few days he'll look good as new. Maybe he'll have a few more scars than before but that won't hurt anything. That for now we must just leave him alone and let him rest. He said Ole Butch knows how to clean his wounds and mother nature will take care of the rest.

Bonnie Faye Dunn *grew up in south Alabama where her family has lived and farmed for over two hundred years. She is currently writing a novel and a collection of short stories based on her childhood in the South. Bonnie resides in California and Hawaii and may be reached at bonniefayedunn@comcast.net.*

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# Harm

**Dianne Moffat**

The Judas kiss took the form of a phone call. Dr. Maggie McKeon expected treachery, but not at 12:04 AM, and not from the friend whose name showed in caller ID. Attempts to deflect blame for her patient's death would start later in the morning, after Seattle Mercy administrators arrived in their offices and learned that a stent, which had been implanted at the hospital, introduced the bizarre pathogen into Eugene Bjorn's coronary arteries.

She pushed the talk button on her cell phone. "Hey, Stuart, have you identified the organism?"

"It's eluding me. Listen, Mag, are you still in the hospital?"

"Having too much fun to leave." She sat on a bench in front of her locker, drained by eleven hours of surgery and thirty heartbreaking minutes with Bjorn's family, too tired to even change her shoes. "You need me to do something?"

"No, I just didn't want to bother you if you were at home."

That was usually a preface for bad news. "Okay, I've braced myself. What's wrong?"

"We've finished making slides and inoculating cultures," he said. "As soon as the tissue incinerator reaches temperature, Littlejohn will burn what's left of the heart and surgical specimens."

"No, he won't! He's still off the case. Bjorn's death changes nothing."

"Mag, he has legitimate concerns about infection control in the lab."

"Have both of you forgotten that CDC asked us to keep the heart and stent intact for them?"

“According to him, we talked to a low level idiot, and cultures and slides are all CDC needs to work with.”

“Dr. Chandrashakar, a respected Infectious Disease specialist, agreed with the *idiot* that the heart and stent were necessary for study of the pathogen, and that neither posed a threat as long as appropriate precautions were taken.”

She folded the spout on her empty milk carton and lobed it into the trashcan. “Have you considered that Littlejohn is covering for whoever contaminated the stent?”

“Saying that out loud will hurt you more than him.”

“He gave a bullshit excuse for not running DNA probes that might have identified the pathogen while Bjorn still had a chance. Now he wants to reduce the heart to ash. That doesn’t make you suspicious?”

“Mag, give him credit for his expertise in infectious diseases.”

“I would if Chandrashakar concurred with him.”

“Chandra is a turtle. If this comes to a fight, he’ll pull his head in.”

She’d give Chandrashakar the benefit of the doubt, but it was obvious Dr. Stuart Holkold had already opted out. “Thanks for the warning. I gotta go.”

She clipped her phone to the drawstring of her scrub pants and sprinted through the locker room to the hallway that connected with West. Since the last time she took the shortcut to Pathology, a *Do Not Enter* sign had been posted on the door into the derelict wing. She punched in the four digit code on the chance she’d get a break from Murphy’s Law. The lock clicked.

As the door swung opened, the old building exhaled in her face. The stink of mold and mildew got worse by the day.

Light fixtures had been removed. A string of dim bulbs now hung from skeletal ceiling grids. They provided enough illumination for her to run without tripping on piles of wire and pipe.



The salvage company had almost finished gutting West, but demolition couldn't go forward until Professor Emeritus Victor Littlejohn agreed to vacate his posh office in the basement. Didn't bother him that the hospital desperately needed the new building planned for this space. And it now appeared that obstructing study of Bjorn's organism and letting it kill more people didn't bother him.

At the far end of West, she yanked open the fire door and bombed down the stairs, pushing for speed, taking two steps with each stride. At the switchback between floors, she grabbed the railing and slung herself through the 180 degree turn. Her hair clip went flying. She left it where it landed, half-pleased at the prospect of her natural corkscrews standing out from her head like a burning bush. Littlejohn rarely missed an opportunity to imply she was a wild woman. If she looked the part, he might feel a twinge of genuine fear.

When she rounded the stair landing at street level, the rotten egg odor of sulfur broke through the pong of mildew. By the time she associated the increasingly acrid stench with distant memories of target practice, she had reached the next switchback. The half-wall along the open side of the stairs blocked her view of puddles until too late to stop. Her cross trainers hydroplaned. Her hand pulled loose from wet railing. Steel edged concrete came up at her. Even as she struggled to regain her balance, she noticed arterial spatter on pale grey walls.

Her full weight smacked down on her tailbone. Her head bounced.

For a second, she lay on the concrete, stunned and stupid with pain. In the next instant, fear of a bullet propelled her across the landing.

She crouched behind the stairs she had just descended, listening, hearing only the rumble of traffic on nearby Boren Avenue and someone's severely labored respirations. When she narrowed her focus to the sounds of a person sneaking, she heard no footsteps. No rustling fabric. No jewelry or guns tapping against hard surfaces.

She crept toward the rail and looked cautiously to the flight below. No gunman. No moving shadows. Only carnage. A man dressed in OR greens lay crumpled on the steps, face down in emesis, his neck twisted, his chest heaving. Two expanding circles of blood on his back were just now meeting. He must have been shot only moments ago. A second person sprawled on the basement landing, his face hidden in the shadow of the bottom step. No part of him moved.

She reached to her drawstring for her phone. Even if the skylight at the top of the stairwell had been boarded over, the signal should pass through. Her Blackberry came out of its case in pieces. One of the victims might have an operative phone. She started down the stairs.

The treads were slick with body fluids and bits of tissue. Afraid of falling again, she held the rail with both hands and planted one foot before lifting the other. With each step she descended, her angle of vision changed. Dimension and detail surfaced through shadows. The man struggling to breathe had wide shoulders. Long limbs. Dark chocolate hair. Recognition hit her with the force of a fist.

No, this wasn't Dan. Couldn't be. As soon as the OR team lost the battle for Eugene Bjorn's life, he excused himself to care for his sick baby.

But this man wore his watch on his right wrist. And the ropey keloid on his left forearm resulted from his ski accident at Whistler. Her chest imploded. "Dan!"

He made no response.

She pushed on the pressure point under his eyebrow. "Danny, answer me."

His eyes remained closed, his body motionless.

She slid her fingertips over wire-brush stubble to his carotid artery. His pulse was thready, his skin clammy. He was dying.

No. This couldn't happen. A gun couldn't have been brought into the hospital. At night, all but a few doors were locked, and security used

metal detectors to screen everyone who entered. Fatigue made her dream on her feet.

The mnemonic for basic life support surfaced through her panic. ABC. Airway, breathe, circulate. His airway was severely compromised, but he still moved air. His heart tried to compensate for diminishing blood volume by increasing its rate. Maggie rolled her scrub jacket and pants into tight balls and wedged them between Dan's anterior wounds and the steps to slow hemorrhage. She would have to straighten the twist in his neck to improve his respiratory volume, but that delicate maneuver was better delayed until after she called for help. She ran her hands around his waist and patted his pockets, finding only an empty phone case and a large package of his beloved Juicy Fruit gum.

His left hand was closed. She opened his fingers. Hidden in his wide palm was a blood smeared phone. He had tried to call for help. The terror he must have felt.

Indicator bars showed that his phone received a signal. She was too flustered to figure out his directory. Tremor in her hands made dialing the ten digit number for OR difficult.

While she waited for someone to answer, she picked her way down the stairs to the other victim. A dog had left a confusion of paw prints on the floor between him and the door that was supposed to seal off the wet area of the basement. A biohazard bag kept the door from closing. Alarms should have blared.

She kicked the bag aside, terrified that the gunman lurked in the darkness beyond. A blood-caked dissection basin and instruments clattered out through a rip in the plastic.

After she made sure the door latched securely, she squatted beside the second victim. His face was bloody meat, but she recognized his carefully shaped white beard and the fish emblem pinned to the lapel of his lab coat. He was Dr. Victor Littlejohn.

He had no pulse and made no respiratory effort. Most of his forehead was missing, his brain churned to pulp. CPR was pointless.

She scrambled up the stairs to Dan. His pulse had weakened. He needed help now.

She started to hang up and dial another number, but decided to wait. At night, staffing throughout the hospital was thin. The charge nurse in OR frequently had to work in rooms. She couldn't drop a patient to run to the phone.

When Jenny finally answered, her breathing rasped through the speaker.

"Dan Guidry and Victor Littlejohn have been shot," Maggie said. "I need help. Fire stairs on the east side of West, in the basement."

"I'm too busy for sick jokes."

"Jenny, please believe me. I'm Maggie McKeon." How could she prove her claim? "You came in early tonight to help with the Bjorn case, and you changed the battery pack in my biohazard suit."

"Ohmygod!" Jenny said. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. Send enough people to carry Dan off the stairs. He's heavier than he looks, around two-twenty. Bring plasma expanders and four units of unmatched O negative. Tell blood bank he'll need as much B negative as they can find. Notify Trauma Services and Dr. Boyle. Chest and flank wounds. Probable head and spinal cord injuries."

"What about Littlejohn?"

"Dead. Hurry, please."

"Got it. I'm sending help."

Maggie pulled off Dan's size fifteen running shoes, and then lifted and rotated his head by tiny increments, listening intently for popping or grinding between bones, acutely aware that a displaced vertebral fracture could paralyze him. When his neck reached neutral alignment, she propped his head with his shoes. Even after she opened his mouth and

raked out blood and emesis, his respiratory volume remained inadequate.

She laid her ear against his back. His right lung was congested, but air moved normally. Fluid bubbled in his left chest; his lung was torn and bleeding.

The clicking of his cardiac valves was barely perceptible. His jugular veins bulged. In the most likely scenario, a fragment of bullet or a splinter of bone had pierced his heart. High pressure inside the chambers forced blood into the inelastic pericardial sac faster than it could flow out. Second by second, the volume of trapped blood increased, crowding his heart, progressively restricting expansion and contraction needed to circulate what blood was left in his vascular system. He couldn't wait for OR. She had to relieve the pressure now.

She considered running to Pathology for a scalpel. But she could meet the gunman along the way. And even if she got back to Dan within a minute, she might be too late.

She grabbed the scalpel and Mayo scissors that had fallen out of the biohazard bag. A white label on the red plastic identified the specimen as Eugene Bjorn's heart. No heart was present, but she had to assume the instruments were contaminated with his blood.

The infection might kill Dan tomorrow or next week, but pericardial tamponade was killing him now. She cut away his shirt, used her body to hold his left arm away from his chest, scoured the scalpel with spit and the sleeve of her jacket, and sanitized it as best she could with four alcohol pads she found in her pockets.

"Danny, I have to hurt you. I'm so sorry."

He showed no sign of awareness, but unconsciousness did not protect him from pain. At the first touch of the knife, he reflexively tried to twist away. She straddled his hips and pinned him down with her weight, horrified by the cruelty of what she had to do.

His keening was animal-like, devoid of human phonation, a reproach composed from the lexicon of agony. When the incision was long enough, she forced two fingertips of each hand between his ribs and pulled in opposite directions. Her arms trembled from fighting spasm in his muscles. That was good. His oxygen saturation was still sufficient to maintain muscle tone.

After what felt like eternity, she was able to push most of her right hand into his chest. Air bubbled through an internal lake of blood. His pericardium was a tense, fluid-filled balloon, trilling with each strangled beat of his heart. She flew her fingertips over the fibrous sac in search of the hole.

But there was none.

Logic demanded a hole. It might be so tiny that clots and debris plugged it, but it was there. She just had to find it. Slow down. Don't think ahead to the next problem.

On the second pass, she detected a spongy spot the size of a baby pea. She poked. Hot fluid spurted around her finger. She extended the tear, releasing clots and a torrent of blood. Dan's heart expanded against her fingertips. Her own heart pulled out of a stall.

She swam two fingers upstream through jets of blood, trying to find a puncture in a heart that beat as fast as hummingbird wings. The rip in his left atrium was so small she plugged it with the tip of her finger, so large it alone could kill him.

When she stopped tunneling into him, his wails backed down to see-sawing moans. He needed morphine, blood, oxygen, a million things she didn't have. She had never felt so utterly helpless.

"Tiger, help will be here in a few seconds. You're strong enough to hold on. There is no other option unless you want me to kick your butt all the way to Tacoma.

"Remember when we were residents and the work was overwhelming and I took spells when I thought I couldn't face another

day? You'd be just as tired, but you'd throw off the covers and say, 'Red, haul your carcass into the shower. There is no other option unless you want me to kick your butt all the way to....' You always changed the destination. Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Pasadena, Texas. Slidell, Louisiana. The stinkiest cities in America. Sometimes I faked you just to hear your latest addition. I loved your crazy lists.

“During the divorce, I probably forgot to thank you for fourteen wonderful years. No one could have loved me better.”

And during the last four years of their marriage, no one could have hurt her worse.

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**Dianne Moffat** *lives in Madison, Alabama, with her husband. She is a retired registered nurse. HARM is her first novel*

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An Australian From Tokyo

Paul Amago

The whir of blinking neon
almost overwhelms us
as we dodge cars and bikes on a Tokyo street.

I hear the mountain
rain in your voice, and see
the raked gravel garden in your eyes.

The crisp folds of your *ukata*
floating serenely
as your movement tells me
how in monasteries bald monks move with unfettered
grace like children,
purposefully without pretense.

How you woke at five,
watching the black turn
through purple into clear light,
to take part in daily habit:
emptying the mind
(like rocks becoming transparent),
scrubbing wooden verandahs with sisal brush and water,
and laughing at jokes
told over the feeding of clucking chickens.

I know by your smile the sound of bare feet

on broad wooden floors
as the community stirs with daily life
deeply set in wet mountain green.

You say it will always last;
the people are strong yet pliant in custom.
Ahead, blinking Christmas lights
illuminate a shoulder-high neighborhood shrine
of moss covered stone and weathered wood;
like your blond hair and gray *ukata*,
somehow they go together.

Paul Amago is a writer, architect and painter. He has won awards from Cornell University, the American Institute of Architects, and has shown work at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans and the New Orleans Museum of Art. He is currently working on a book of short stories.

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# Threat

**Shawn Jacobsen**

Bobby was the other good quarterback in our school. We were teammates, so we were friends, but the casual way he snatched the ball out of the air when I returned it to him was pissing me off.

The pop of the football was loud, and I made a guess at five more throws before Dad came out.

It was three. “Damn it, Son, keep using that arm and it will never heal.”

As I looked at him, I could almost feel the pain, right there in the middle of my right shoulder.

Bobby watched me so I didn’t give Dad any sort of apologetic attitude, and he was all like, ‘What am I going to do with you?’

“I fell okay,” I said.

“Give it to me.” He barely finished the sentence before he held it.

“What if I throw with my left arm?”

“I obviously can’t trust you. That arm is going to pay for your college and you’re gonna be flipping burgers if you don’t take care of it.” He went inside, big knuckles strapped across the ball.

Bobby walked to me. He had that look we’re all good at. Parents. Who needs ‘em?

I shrugged.

“When are you back on the field?” he asked.

“At least four weeks. The ACL or whatever is still weak.”

“That’s not bad. You’ll be ready just in time for tryouts.”

“I’ll be out of practice.”

“You’re still a threat.”

“If you really think so, you better practice your ass off.”

Bobby laughed. He had thought me a threat before I told him I pulled the whatever ligament. Now he was my best buddy.

Dad came out again, ball in hand. I wondered if he had even put it down. Footballs were like teddy bears to him. “You gotta head out, Bobby. Justin has homework.”

Bobby didn’t argue. My dad wasn’t his football coach. He was worse. He was the athletic director. In thirty seconds Bobby’s truck was turning left at the stop sign.

Dad and I looked at each other, hard wisdom facing off defiant youth. Neither blinked, but neither frowned either. He tossed the ball in the air and caught it without looking. When the sound of Bobby’s engine had faded, Dad nodded sideways. It was the command to march straight to the back yard.

We walked in silence to the cleared place between the woods and the thick hedge. He stopped sixty feet away and I served him a right handed bullet—micro accuracy, burned to the center of his chest. The sound of the impact was almost as sweet as the look of approval on my dad’s face.

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**Shawn Jacobsen** is the author of thirty short stories, and he recently completed his second novel, a young adult science fiction called SOUTH SIDE. He is an instructor at Auburn University where he teaches Ecology, field biology, and scientific writing. He has one daughter and currently resides in Auburn, Alabama.

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Nonfiction

Olympic Champion Charlie Greene's Long Run to Faith

Robert B. Robeson

To many followers of the international track scene in the 1960s and early 1970s, Charlie Greene was arrogant, egotistical, and flippant. He was also a world-class, African-American sprinter who wore flashy clothes and was quick with a quip. His trademarks on the track were ever-present sunglasses and the “thumbs-up” gesture he often employed when crossing the finish line. But the most important factor in his favor, then, was the fact he could mash everyone else in the world for 60 to 100 meters.

Though born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas on March 21, 1944, Greene’s initial involvement in track began at Immaculate Elementary School in Seattle, Washington when he was in the fifth and sixth grades. Each year, all of the city’s Catholic schools competed in a Catholic version Junior Olympic Track Meet. He was entered in the 75- and 100-yard dashes. Each time he won both races. Three years elapsed before he ran again as a freshman at O’Dea High School, a 440-student, all-boy Catholic school. By then, he was the fastest kid in the Seattle Catholic school system.

Greene began to make a name for himself after whipping-off a 9.8 second 100-yard dash as a 125-pound, high school sophomore. He won the Washington State Track Meet 100-yard dash as a junior and the 100 and 200 as a senior. During his senior year, he earned a spot in the 1963 Golden West Invitational Track Meet near Sacramento, California. At this meet, some of the other runners told Greene he was too small (at 5-7) to win.

“I told them they were full of garbage,” Greene recalled.

As it turned out, this Greene teen ignited the track with a 9.4 clocking in the 100-yard dash final. He won going away and became the #1 high school sprinter in the nation. This cocky, gun slinging, rising sprint star also garnered second in the 220-yard dash. Not too shabby for a kinetic kid from Washington where there weren't supposed to be any good sprinters because it rained all the time.

Greene revealed part of the secret to his early track success.

"I was used to being under a lot of pressure to win under all conditions," Greene said. "This type of pressure generates a great deal of self-confidence in your ability because winning all the time is hard. You have to run when you don't feel good. You have to run when the odds are against you. You don't have a choice," he added. "People expect you to win and your ego demands that you win. So you develop the inner fiber and toughness that's required in order to excel."

He accepted a four-year track scholarship to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) at his mother's insistence. She'd raised him as a single mother until remarrying when Charlie was in middle school. She was concerned about the racial climate at colleges closer to home.

It would be mere months after Greene arrived at UNL before he competed against some of the most spectacular sprinters of all time. The list included guys like "Bullet" Bob Hayes, Tommie Smith, and Jim Hines. These were speedsters whose names would forever be linked (like Jesse Owens and his four gold medals that infuriated Adolph Hitler at the 1936 Berlin Olympics¹) in a long and glorious history of black track superstars and world records. Guys like Charles Edward Greene.

In his freshman year, the world record in the 60-yard dash—that he never ran in Seattle because they didn't have an indoor track—was 6.0 seconds flat. It was held jointly by Bob Hayes, Sam Perry, and a few others. In his first intramural track meet in 1963 (after training for only three weeks), Greene ran a 6.1.1

“It was then that I knew that I was as good as I thought I was,” Greene admitted.

In February of 1964, Greene ran in the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) Track Meet at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Before the final of the 100-yard dash, he informed Bob Hayes (whom he’d never met), “Bobby, if you beat me, you’ll have to set a world record to do it.”

That’s exactly what Hayes did. He finished with a 5.9 clocking and Greene tied the previous world record of 6.0 flat.

Greene acknowledged that he got the sunglasses bit from Henry Carr of Arizona State (who later won two gold medals at the 1964 Olympics). Carr always wore sunglasses.

“I picked up on the sunglasses from him and how you can work on people’s minds,” Greene admitted.

It was his personal brand of showmanship, style, and flair, along with the “thumbs-up” gesture. He still claims that was a positive signal meaning “A-okay.” It was also his incessant chatter before races that compelled some people to refer to him as “Chirpin’ Charlie.”²

While running for the UNL track team (1963-1969) and the U.S. Army (1969-1972), Greene won four AAU, six NCAA, and one U.S. Track and Field federation championships. He is the most decorated sprinter in Nebraska Cornhusker history; a seven-time All-American. This hotshot flash, with the speed of descending lightning, held four world records at the same time in the 1960s.

His sunglasses, crazy quotes, and other antics garnered him more media attention than most of the other athletes. A “status seeker,” he now admits that this was his intention; using sunglasses and a tart tongue to bring attention to himself.

“In those days, in the ‘60s, you weren’t supposed to tell people that you were good,” Greene said. “You were just supposed to run and be good. I found that I didn’t like doing that. It was all about winning.”

Greene once took a reporter down to a lake in Lincoln to point out where he “sat by the water, listening to the bullfrogs and meditating.” A newspaper photographer was assigned to capture this tranquil scene that he used to prepare himself for big races. When the photographer asked his long-suffering coach, Frank Sevigne, where the lake was, Sevigne replied, “What lake?”

“The lake where Charlie meditates.”

“Oh, no, not again,” Sevigne said, with a sigh.

“I just liked to give them something to write about,” Greene noted.

As a member of the 1968 (Mexico City) U.S. Olympic team, Greene added a gold medal (440-meter relay) and a bronze medal (100-meter dash) to his already impressive credentials.

Greene pulled a muscle halfway through the 100-meter final (the first all-black final in Olympic history) and had to settle for a third-place medal. Still injured, he ran the 440-meter relay preliminaries a few days later. He froze the muscle with ice a few minutes before the final. The U.S. team set a world record of 38.19 seconds; a record that stood for 12 years. Today, he still believes that their team of Mel Pender, Ronnie Ray Smith, Jim Hines, and himself could have cut the time to 37.0 flat, if he hadn’t been hurt.

During the finals of college sprints, he developed a tactic that made others believe he was a bit “touched.”

“I’d make an announcement to the other runners before the race began,” Greene said, with a grin. “Gentlemen, my name’s Charlie Greene and I’ve already got first place. The rest of you guys need to figure out who’s going to get second.’ I was supremely confident. I went three straight years (1965-1968) without losing a 60- or 100-yard dash.”

Greene met his wife, Linda, at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City on a blind date. They were married 93 days later in Lincoln, Nebraska and have been married ever since. They have two daughters. So much for the traditional knock on blind dates.

His educational credentials complement his track achievements with B.A. and M.A. degrees in education and a M.A. degree in guidance and counseling. He's come a long way from Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Greene completed ROTC training and was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1967, but didn't enter active duty until May 9, 1969. On active army duty, he served over 20 years on three continents. This included assignments to the U.S. Army Military Academy at West Point, Berlin, West Germany, and Seoul, South Korea. At West Point, where he was assigned to Human Resources, he was also volunteer sprint coach from 1976-1980 and head coach of the All-Army track team from 1985-1989. He retired from the U.S. Army as a major.

Then he worked six years as a director for Special Olympics International in Washington, D.C. and six more at UNL in Lincoln in student affairs before complete retirement.

Greene was inducted into the Drake (Relays) Hall of Fame in 1976 and the National Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1992. Since then, he has been an inspirational speaker for everything from high school and college track and football teams to young "stargazers" who often seek him out for advice.

In recent years, Greene has had to deal with other physical challenges like a medical diagnosis of uncontrolled diabetes at 48 and heart disease at 58 years of age. These are genetic traits he inherited from his mother. He underwent successful triple-bypass surgery on May 21, 2002. That experience led to being a motivational speaker for the American Heart Association about the necessity for continued education and vigilance concerning exercise and diet.³

When Greene turned 60, he began experiencing a lack of mobility. He had difficulty with balance and walking. Tests revealed compressed disks in his neck. On February 4, 2005, a neurologist performed surgery.⁴ Before long, his motor skills returned.

At the age of 64, Greene had to endure a second neck surgery for his spinal stenosis condition (a tightening of the spinal column on his spinal cord). This latest operation affected the use of his legs. Being unable to walk under his own power has been a devastating emotional blow to a former sprinter who was once recognized as being the fastest human on the planet.

Charlie Greene related his latest experiences from a bed at Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital and a wheelchair in their new home in east Lincoln. It's a compelling story of God's grace and mercy to one of His children who has finally come to terms with the awesome spiritual aspects of life.

Greene readily accepts inherent truth in the thought that adversity has a way of introducing you to yourself...and to God. Although the physical and emotional battles he encounters each day aren't in any history books, like his world track records, they're still enlightening moments for him.

"I now believe that faith in God is all you have," Greene began. "Before I went to Madonna (from October 29 until December 24, 2008), I was at St. Elizabeth Regional Hospital in Lincoln. I was in intensive care for two and a half weeks and almost died."

When Greene was released from St. Elizabeth, he promised himself that he'd begin going to Mass. And he's kept his word.

"When I went to the chapel at Madonna, there's a peace that comes over you . . . when you're in God's house," Greene said. "You're supposed to tell Him how you feel and stop worrying about it. Just thank Him for what He's given you and let it go."

Due to his diabetes, Greene must undergo dialysis three times a week. A kidney transplant has been put on hold until he's completely well. Doctors can't say when he'll walk again because that's up to his body and his determination. It will probably be at least another few months. An additional six months to a year will be required before he

gets a kidney. Recovery from a transplant could take another year. The track he now must run on stretches around the bend and out of sight.

“I’ve been reading the Bible while I’m doing dialysis,” Greene said. “When you read the Bible you find that man often learns the hard way. We all make mistakes. We’re all hardheaded about dealing with God,” he added. “Why do some people find out early and some find out late? That’s the big one. But I’m definitely a late finder.”

With age, Greene became a quiet man. He’s fond of quoting 1 Corinthians 13:11, KJV. “When I was a child, I spoke as a child; I understood as a child; I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

“What if I believed back then what I believe now?” Greene asked. “Would I have been a better person?” He answered his own question. “Yeah, because I’d have understood that my life is about God’s blessing on me,” he added. “And I don’t think my life back then was about God’s blessing on me. I was just there.”

Loss in life can be a tough and tyrannical teacher. But Greene is not afraid to talk about diminished hope and momentary challenges . . . even temporary despair. Or the scraping of fingernails on the chalkboard of his emotions. Perhaps we all wake up at different times. Yet the important point is that we *do* wake up.

“There are two kinds of people,” Greene said, “givers and takers. The first part of my life I was a taker. I always wanted stuff. And now I’m giving back to society.”

Greene confirmed that the only reason he’s alive is because of doctors, he and his wife’s prayers, his own determination, and the prayers from a multitude of other people.

“So God is testing me, I guess,” Greene admitted. “But I don’t know if He’s testing me for any other reason than to make me a better person. There are a lot of people who will not accept any power greater than

themselves. In the end,” he continued, “God is the answer. In the end, He’s the only reason why I exist.”

It’s taken Charlie Greene 66 years, three major surgeries (with another on the horizon), and malfunctioning legs to recognize this truth. Though he’s practically immobile now, this former world record holder understands the universal truth that a man who believes in and walks with God (even when it’s through the assistance of a walker or a cane) always gets to his destination. He also appreciates the fact that if you have a pulse, you still have a purpose on this planet. And he’s learned—the hard way—that when you’re down, the best way back up is to count your blessings.

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¹The *Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1963), vol. 20, p. 723.

²Michael Kelly, “Just Hoping for the Best,” *Omaha (NE) World Herald*, December 22, 1984, p. 27.

³Mark Andersen, “Winning the race for life,” *Lincoln, (NE) Journal Star*, November 12, 2002, pp. 1D-2D.

⁴Brian Christopherson, “Former sprinter Greene back home after surgery,” *Lincoln (NE) Journal Star*, February 8, 2005, p. 5C.

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# **Furnishing the Bedroom\***

**Marian Kaplun Shapiro**

She's always wanted a desk. She knows  
just where it should go, right  
by the window where the sun  
will keep time on its daily trek  
across the sky. And a chair,  
of course, one of those hydraulic  
lifters, wheels ready to move  
at a whim. What about  
a bed? No denying it –  
she has to sleep, if only for  
the gift of dreaming. No lover  
in the wings, no need  
for her double bed, she says,  
Hope takes up too much space;  
she'll sell it on e-bay.  
Get a futon. And dump  
the dresser too. Why hide  
clothes in drawers, just to take them  
out again, wrinkled and squooshed.  
She leaves the laundry draped on door-  
knobs. Makes use of stick-on hooks.  
Clears out the closet. Leaves  
an open area for out-  
of-season clothes. Boots. Summer  
sandals. The rest – the floor,  
the shelves – she saves as shelter for

the books that she can't bear to give  
away. Words she loves. Words  
that have changed her.

Closet.  
Bed. Chair. Desk. And lamps.  
How many? And what kind  
of light? Those indirect soft-focus  
bulbs improve her mood instead  
of flinging imperfections in  
her face. Come to think of it,  
she's glad to see the mirror go,  
along with the dresser. Too  
much truth spoken too  
clearly, is a killer.

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\*or, *Writing The Poem*

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**Marian Kaplun Shapiro**, *Massachusetts Senior Poet Laureate 2006, 2008, practicing psychologist and poet in Lexington, Massachusetts. Publications include* *Second Childhood* (Norton, 1988); *and in 2007, Players in the Dream, Dreamers in the Play* (Plain View Press); *chapbooks, Your Third Wish, (Finishing Line), and The End Of The World, Announced On Wednesday* (Pudding House).

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Humor (nonfiction)

Up the Creek

Allen Russell

Many of my fondest childhood memories came from camping out with my family. In the late 1950's we did a lot of camping. I remember on this one particular trip, we had a crowd with us. In addition to some aunts and uncles, there were five young girls along.

We arrived at camp late Friday evening. It was well after dark by the time we got the lanterns lit and camp set up. Dad had a good fire going, Mom was fixing supper on the Colman stove, and all of us kids were sitting around the fire talking.

In my mind, I knew these mountains like the back of my hand. I figured it wouldn't take long for the girls to recognize they were in the presence of an outdoor legend. Being only a few merit badges short of Eagle Scout, I was the only professional outdoorsman along on this trip.

It wasn't easy, keeping up that rugged persona with my aunt calling me June Bug every five minutes. A lot of my kinfolks called me Junior when I was a kid. Nobody ever heard of a mountain man named Junior, much less, June Bug. I could only imagine how that would have sounded around the council fire at the Spring Rendezvous.

"Yeah, there we were, trapped by a blizzard, faced with a hunnerd howling redskins. It was just me, Grizzly Tom, Billy Blackfoot, and good ol' June Bug."

I was fourteen at the time, and just beginning to really appreciate the fairer sex. One of the girls along that weekend was Italian. She had dark hair and big brown eyes. Like a lot of Italian girls, she had already begun to blossom into a young woman. As I sat there and watched her in the firelight, my hyper-active, hormone-charged teenaged brain was thinking this was going to be a real interesting weekend.

As my imagination wandered into the dancing flames of our campfire, I could picture a huge snarling bear stalking into our camp, looking to devour some innocent little Italian girl from the city.

Everyone else would abandon her and run for the cars. I alone would face the beast with my trusty knife in one hand, while holding her with the other. I could hear her softly pleading with me as she buried her face in my chest, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck. “Oh, Allen ... Allen,” It seemed funny somehow, but in my fire-light dream she had a real masculine voice, “Allen!!”

My dream was suddenly shattered by my Dad, “What’s the matter with you ... pay attention,” he said.

“I’m just listening,” I replied, trying to sound legendary, “Thought I heard something ... out yonder ... beyond the firelight.” *Yonder*, all mountain men say that.

“Well, take this watermelon back yonder to the creek,” Dad said, trying to sound legendary at my expense, “we want it cold for tomorrow.”

“Back to the creek ... in the dark ... all by my...” I suddenly realized that all the girls were listening and a legend never backs away from a challenge, “I mean ... sure ... back to the creek ... no problem.”

It was a quarter-mile or more, up a little path, over a hill, and down into the creekbottom, to the spot where Dad wanted me to put that melon. It was big woods all the way. Not only that, it was pitch-black, can’t-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face, monster-movie-dark. Legend or not, I wasn’t looking forward to going back there.

I knew Dad had picked me because I was the only professional outdoorsman in camp. He also knew nobody else was crazy enough to carry that big melon all the way back there in the dark, including him. I reluctantly picked up the melon and asked if anybody wanted to go with me.

Thankfully, the girls wanted to go. They all got flashlights and followed me out of camp. I was in front, trying to find my way as they pointed their lights everywhere but on the path in front of me. They were jabbering among themselves, as only a bunch of girls can do, while we made our way through the dark woods.

Just before we got to the top of the rise above the creek, we found our way blocked by a large tree that had fallen across the path. It evidently had been toppled by a storm. The trunk was suspended about two feet off the ground and it was well over a foot in diameter. I managed to swing one leg over and scoot across with the melon.

The girls had to form a committee to decide exactly how they were going to negotiate this obstacle. After a short debate, they finally slipped under it one by one, taking turns holding the flashlights for each other.

My feminine followers stopped at the top of the little hill overlooking the brushy creekbottom. They weren't about to go down in there, even with me. They were still laughing, talking about the dark, and trying to spook each other as they waited up on the hill. Occasionally, they would shine their lights for me as I made my way down into the dark creekbottom.

Just about the time I got to water's edge, I became aware of ominous heavy footsteps in the dry leaves just across the creek from me. They were loud enough that the girls up on the hill heard them too.

Things began to get tense when I heard one of them utter those dreaded words, "What was that?" Silence fell on the girls as all the flashlights focused on the hillside across from me. They were trying to figure out if they had really heard something or not.

Whatever was out there was not only big; it was incredibly adept at keeping out of the light. I couldn't see anything in the distant dancing flashlight beams, but the loud footsteps suddenly began all over again.

That's all it took, the gaggle of girls were suddenly beset with a massive case of highly infectious Bovine Group Hysteria. That is to say, a stampede was about to erupt.

The once-peaceful night was shattered with shrieks and screams as the frantic feminine herd performed a few tight laps in a semi-stationary panic, got their bearings, and disappeared down the trail. You could mark their progress by the flashlight beams reflecting in the tree-tops as they ran for camp.

If the big tree across their path was an obstacle, it sure didn't seem that way to me. There was no debate this time; I don't think they even slowed down when they sailed over it.

Now, I'm left all alone in the suffocating darkness with only a twenty-pound watermelon, my big knife, and a blood-thirsty beast of unknown origin for company. As my granddad would always say, the rabbit blood was just about to hit my heart.

The hair on the back of my neck was standing at attention and the bunny blood was on ready-alert. It was only one thump away from my pounding heart as it did flip-flops in my chest. I slowly bent over and launched the melon into the creek. With my mission finally accomplished and being relieved of my burden, I was ready to boogie.

My mind was racing as I debated my next move. If the beast out there came across the creek, I was hoping it would devour the melon before starting on me, thereby giving me the opportunity to affect a retreat.

The footsteps were slow and deliberate. The beast of the darkness almost sounded two-legged and to make matters worse it obviously wasn't afraid of me. I tried to put that thought out of my mind. This was too much like some of those Saturday Matinee horror movies I'd watched through my fingers.

I slowly backed up the hill away from the creek, trying to see into the pitch-black void of the creekbottom. It was quiet for a few moments; all I could hear was the gurgling sounds of the creek. Then the foot steps started up again. I couldn't tell if he was going away or on my side of the creek and coming after me.

It took all the nerve I possessed not to run. If it was a bear, I didn't want to give him any reason to chase me. The melon was in the creek and he was welcome to it as far as I was concerned. By that time, I was almost hoping it was a bear. A snarling bruin would be much better than what my out-of-control imagination was cooking up.

There was a gravel road that ran by our camp and across the back of our land. It was the long way around, but I was close to where it crossed the creek. My eyes were getting more accustomed to the darkness as I slipped away toward the road. The light was better out from under the trees. When my feet finally touched the familiar gravel, I could see well enough to tell the road from the forest and now I had room to run.

The rabbit blood had been pounding on the valves of my heart trying to get in for several minutes, and I had kept my nerve for as long as I could. I decided if the beast of the darkness was going to catch me, he'd be breathing hard when he did. I turned the rabbit blood loose, my adrenaline pump went into warp-drive, and I was gone like a shot.

I slowed down when I got close to the camp. There was plenty of light from the bonfire and several Coleman lanterns that were burning. It looked like a band of nyctophobic Gypsies were in town.

I left the road and slipped back through the woods to the path. I stood there in the dark long enough to catch my breath so it would appear that I had calmly walked back through the woods. I could hear everyone talking at once as I got near the camp.

"What was it?" Dad asked.

“We don’t know,” all the girls said at once.

“Where’s Allen?” my Mom asked. At least she was worried about me.

“He was down in there with it!”

“It!” Mom said, “With what? What was it?”

“We don’t know,” the girls repeated.

“Here he comes,” Dad said as I strolled into the lantern light.

“What was out there?” several people asked at once. They knew the legendary outdoorsman would have the answer.

I put my hand on my big sheath knife, trying to look unconcerned. “Don’t know for sure ... it was plenty dark down in there ... didn’t have a light” I looked away to the far horizons for a moment, trying to seem legendary, then my eyes returned to theirs, “I suppose ... it could’ve been a bear ... they’ve been known to come down off the mountain at night.”

“A bear!” my aunt exclaimed. Everyone else looked alarmed. I was sure they were picturing me out there alone in the dark with the blood-thirsty beast, armed only with my trusty knife.

“*What a boy,*” I could almost hear them thinking. Actually, they were probably more worried about the watermelon. I shrugged it off like it was just another night on the mountain. I started toward the picnic table using my best John Wayne stroll. “What’s for supper,” I asked over my shoulder.

Next afternoon, I went back for the melon and the beast of the night was still there. It was a female grouse. With a ground nest nearby, she was doing a broken wing act as she flopped around in the leaves to draw me away from it. I didn’t share that with anyone. A good mountain man doesn’t tell the pilgrims everything. It kind o’ takes the mystery out of the wilderness.

Allen Russell is a lifelong outdoorsman and a licensed professional guide in Montana. He has written numerous magazine articles, hosted and produced an outdoor television program and several DVD's. He enjoys telling stories about his family, but his first love is the old west and writing western fiction.

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# **Meant to Live**

**Bonnie Faye Dunn**

My house is old and gray and sits on top of a hill. The front porch sags and the roof droops. The steps leading from the yard to the front porch creak. Branches on the Big Oak Tree hang low over our house and scratch at the windows and roof. They say our house is haunted but my Daddy says there's no such thing as ghosts.

I am four years old, going on five. I live here with Mama and Daddy and my sisters and brothers. Jean is eight, Bobbie is six, Robert is two, and Riley is a baby. I am stuck right smack dab in the middle of everybody. Mama and Daddy wanted a baby boy when I was born, what with having two girls already. But then just one day before my second birthday, brother Robert was born. A boy! So my Mama said "Look, Bunnie Faye, a baby brother fur yore birthday." I said I didn't want no baby brother, that I wanted a Tiny Tears baby doll for my birthday, just like Cousin Nancy got for Christmas. But I didn't get a Tiny Tears baby doll. I got a baby brother instead! So my birthday is one day AFTER his birthday and this year there was only one birthday cake for us both and it was on HIS birthday, not mine.

Bobbie and Jean play together. Sometimes Robert plays with me but mostly I play by myself. Riley stays inside with Mama because he's just a baby. Sometimes I get to rock him to sleep in my little rocking chair but ever since I dropped him when I was toting him to his crib, it's now a rule that I can't tote him anymore. But I can rock him anytime as long as I sit down first and somebody brings him to me. My rocking chair is just the right size for me. It was first Jean's rocking chair, then Bobbie's, and now it's mine. I reckon it'll be Robert's one day soon but I told him it's sissy for boys to rock in a rocking chair so maybe he won't

want it after all. I keep it close to Riley's crib so I can sit and play with him through the slats in the crib. He likes to throw his bottle on the floor and he laughs when I pick it up for him. Sometimes I sneak inside and when Mama's not looking I tickle him until he wakes up. She says for me to go back outside and play and LEAVE THAT BABY ALONE!

This is how my house looks. It is gray on the inside and gray on the outside. The floors and walls are gray. The shingles on the roof are gray. The outbuildings are gray too. The smokehouse is gray. The toilet is gray. The well house is gray. The barns are gray. The cotton house down in the cotton patch is gray. The pen Ole John stays in is gray. Ole John is my Daddy's mule. The cotton wagon is gray. I told my sisters I want Daddy to paint our house another color and they said it is not painted gray. That it is just the color of old pine wood, STUPID! They call me Stupid a lot. My house is over a hundred years old. Grand Daddy owns it and all the fields around it and he said we can live here as long as we want to live here.

A dirt road runs in front of my house. If you go down the road in one direction you get to Cousin Minnie's house. If you go in the other direction you get to Toby's Crossing. A crossing is where four roads come together and that make a cross like Jesus died on. That's what the Preacher said anyway. Our dirt road meets another dirt road at the Crossing. It's called Enon Road because it runs by Enon Baptist Church and that's where we go to Sunday School. Up the road in the other direction Enon Road runs by Grand Daddy and Mama Dunn's house. Their house is my most favorite place in the whole world. I love to spend the night with them and wake up smelling biscuits baking in the oven and hear Mama Dunn moving around in the kitchen. Pass their house Enon Road dead ends into a big paved road that goes to town.

Toby's Crossing was named for Toby who was hung a long time ago from an Oak Tree that is now dead. Just the stump remains in the far corner of Daddy's strawberry patch. Grownups whisper when they talk

about Poor Ole Toby and I don't know why they whisper unless they are scared of his ghost too. My Granny Lissie, she is my Mama's Mama, said she saw Toby hanging over the road when she was just a little girl. She was born twenty years after the War so that was a real long time ago.

She said she was sitting in the back of a mule-drawn wagon with her brothers and sisters, and her Mama and Daddy and baby sister Carrie were sitting up front on the plank board seat. They were on their way up Enon Road to Ramah Primitive Baptist Church for Fourth Sunday Dinner on the Grounds and Footwashing. Grannie Lissie said that is one picture she has not been able to get out of her head for over seventy years and she expects she will see it until the day she draws her last breath. Ole Toby just swinging dead from the Oak Tree that is now just a stump in my Daddy's strawberry patch.

Our house doesn't have any flowers or ferns on the front porch like at Mama Dunn's house. But there are pretty pink and purple and red Hollyhocks blooming in front of the toilet. There are no rocking chairs on the front porch to rock in either. But there is a big fireplace in the front room and in the wintertime there's always a fire burning to keep us warm. The only problem with that is when you warm one side it gets too hot and the other side gets too cold. So you're never just right. We sit in front of the fireplace on split-bottom straight chairs.

There is a quilting frame that can be raised and lowered from the ceiling depending on whether Mama is piecing a quilt or not. If she is piecing a quilt the frame is raised up at night out of the way. But next day when the neighbor ladies come back to help Mama quilt, the frame is lowered and the womenfolk pull up straight chairs and put their thimbles on their fingers. They take their needles off their apron bibs and start quilting. And TALKING!

The front room also has Baby Riley's crib in it and a bed that Mama and Daddy sleep in. There's a chifforobe that Mama keeps her dresses in that is strictly off limits to me. Sometimes when Mama's not

looking though I plunder through her chifforobe. Even though I put everything back just like I found it she always seems to know when I've touched her things.

Mama has a radio and she loves to listen to The Grand Ole Opry. She loves Kitty Wells and Mother Maybelle Carter and the Carter Family. Hank Williams is her favorite singer though. He is from the next county over but he married Miss Audrey who grew up just pass Enon Baptist Church.

There are three windows in the front room. One looks towards Toby's Crossing and that's where the sun sets every afternoon. The other two windows look out towards the front yard. From these windows you can see our Big Oak Tree. Beyond the tree and the dirt road is Mr. Wiley's cotton field, and beyond that is Mr. Wiley and Miss Myron's house. Mr. Wiley and Miss Myron are Joyce Turner's Daddy and Mama, and Joyce Turner is my best friend.

It's cool under our Big Oak Tree and we play there when we're not working in the fields. We play making roads to push our little cars and trucks on. And we make pretend animals out of Chinaberries that we stick sticks in for their legs and they look just like cows and hogs. Then we have to make a pen for them to live in. The roots of our Big Oak Tree stick up on top of the ground and you can't run fast underneath the tree or you'll stub your toe or maybe knock a toenail off. When it rains we make toady frog houses under our tree. We take the wet dirt and pack it hard around our bare feet and quick as lightning pull our feet out. That makes little dirt houses just the right size for frogs to live in but we never see any frogs in them.

There is a little room off the front room that has two beds in it. Me and Bobbie sleep in one bed and Jean and Robert sleep in the other bed. There is a window on one wall and a door that goes outside on the other wall only there are NO steps outside the screen door. If you want to go



outside you just have to jump way down to the ground. My sister said there use to be steps leading to the ground but they rotted away.

Sometimes at night branches from our Big Oak Tree rub against the window and make scratching noises. My sister said she hopes it's not Ole Toby's Ghost trying to get me and that makes me real scared. There are no curtains hanging at the windows so you can see outside even if you don't want to see outside. We leave the door open to let the cool breeze blow through and I can look outside and see Ole John in his pen. He is just huge. John eats dry corn that makes a lot of noise when he chews and he makes snorting noises too, even at night. I sit up in bed and look out that door that has no steps leading to the ground and I can see John in his pen with the moonlight glistening on his back. Sometimes when he pulls his lips back and shows his big yellow teeth it looks like he's smiling at me! I wish he would just lie down and sleep but Daddy said mules can sleep standing up.

I don't get very close to John but the worst thing is his pen is right next to the toilet. I mean there is a wall between me when I am sitting on the toilet seat and John when he's in his pen, but I can still hear him eating and snorting and hoofing up dirt with his big old mule feet. John is so strong that I know he could kick the toilet over with his big feet and eat me with his big yellow teeth. Daddy said why in the world would John do that, he likes to eat corn, not little girls. My sister said but Bunnie Faye's hair is yellow like corn and maybe John might think she is just a big ear of corn for him to eat.

John doesn't seem so big though when he's plowing the fields with Daddy behind him. Sometimes Daddy gets mad and cusses him because John likes to do everything the same way, every day, at the same time. If it's dinnertime and Daddy is trying to finish plowing a row, John doesn't care. He just turns towards home and home they come. He then gets to eat his dried corn on the cob and drink all the cool well water he wants to drink. I like to hear Daddy and John coming home. Daddy'll say

“Whoa, John, Whoa!” trying to slow him down as they round the corner of the house but you better get out of John’s way. Daddy said if John would plow the fields half as fast as he walks towards home at dinnertime or day’s end that he would have more time to just stand around in his pen, eating corn.

When Daddy and John are working in the fields I like to listen to the sounds they make. It sort of sounds like the first grade band at Banks School where my sisters go. In a year and a half me and Joyce Turner are going to start first grade at Banks School and we’re going to play in the band.

John sort of sounds like a whistle when every once in a while he says “wheeeee”. Then he sounds like a drum as he goes clopping along. He picks his feet up ever so slowly and they make a plopping sound as they hit the dirt. You can hear the red dirt being plowed up as the plowshare reaches way down deep in the earth, slicing it open like a ripe watermelon. Daddy walks along behind John, making tracks in the fresh dirt with his bare feet. The harness around John’s neck is always clanking and clanging when the chains hit the wood. The plow is made of steel and the handles are made of wood and that is what Daddy holds on to. He says “gee” and “haw” and if John is being good and wanting to cooperate that day, he’ll turn the way Daddy wants him to turn. It especially sounds like music coming from the field when the birds are singing in the plum trees next to it. The chickens run all over the yard, cluck, cluck, clucking. The mama cat purrs lazily in the sun, her kittens playing all around. It is so pretty it about makes me cry seeing it all. Daddy is so big and strong plowing the pretty fields and the red dirt smells so good. His footprints are in a straight line down the even rows. The sky is so blue. I’ll be standing at the edge of the field, watching everything, or sitting on a branch in my favorite Chinaberry Tree where our swing is. Sometimes I’ll be swinging high, watching it all. I feel real safe from John if I’m sitting in the Chinaberry Tree when he comes

towards the house. Daddy takes the plow out of the ground at the end of the row and John comes way over towards the yard to make the turn, but then my Daddy turns him around and the plow goes back down deep in the ground and off they go in the other direction.

Or maybe it's my turn to hang upside down in our little Pecan Tree next to the field, so then I can watch them upside down. Bobbie thinks our Hanging Upside Down Pecan Tree is her very own tree and she tries to hog the best hanging-upside branch. Jean plays with us and Robert is usually toddling around. Sometimes Baby Riley is in his playpen in the shade next to the swing while Mama hangs out the wash. She whistles "Your Cheating Heart" every time she hangs out clothes. She says whistling just seems to make the time go by faster.

But then John will go and ruin all the pretty sounds. He will fart. But I'm not suppose to say that word or I'll get my mouth washed out with soap and that is worse than having to bathe with it. Mama Dunn said I must never say dirty words or even think them. But sometimes I just can't help myself. One day when Daddy was plowing Ole John he moved way back away from John and let go of the plow handles and John thought it was time to go home for dinner so he headed home. That made Daddy even madder because he had to run and catch John and turn him around to get him going in the right direction again. I asked Daddy why he turned loose of the plow handles so fast and he said if you were downwind of John when he had gas you'd turn loose of the plow handles too. IN A HURRY!

One day last week Daddy went to town so John didn't have to work. He was standing in his pen, eating corn, and then he started acting funny. His stomach was swollen and he pushed and pushed his head against the wall of the barn, real hard, groaning all the while. Then he ran around his pen, kicking his hind legs up in the air. Mama was so scared she wouldn't let us play outside under our Big Oak Tree or swing high in the Chinaberry Tree, so we watched John from the door in our

bedroom that doesn't have any steps leading to the outside. He was kicking up dust and the dust was just floating down in the sunlight through the screen door where we sat scared. Daddy soon came home from town and he said it beat all the way Ole John was acting. He said, "I ain't never seen a mule act up so."

We wanted Daddy to do something to make John stop running around kicking up his heels and pushing his head real hard against the barn, making those funny groaning noises. We were all watching John from the door in the side room. Mama was holding baby Riley who was crying. Daddy was standing next to Mama and me and Bobbie and Jean and Robert were hanging onto Mama's coattails and hiding behind Daddy's britchy legs. Then John kicked the gate of his pen open and started running around and around the house, and of all things, he was farting the whole time.

I begged Mama to close the door so John wouldn't come in the house. She said the last place John wanted to be was in this house, but she closed the door anyway. She said just to keep out some of the dust that John was kicking up as he went flying by where we stood. About that time John made one last big fart as he circled the house towards his pen. We were watching him from the window by this time. He just marched right back into his pen, took a big drink of water and started eating corn just like nothing had happened at all.

Daddy said "Don't that beat all" as he opened the door real slow and looked around. He jumped down on the ground and ran over to John's pen and quick locked the gate. We were afraid John would kill our Daddy dead since he'd been acting so strange but he just kept right on eating his corn. Daddy started looking around to see if he could figure out what caused John to act so peculiar. He found a hamper of old butterbeans that had dried up in the shell. John had poked his head through the fence that needs mending and ate most of the butterbeans. That caused his stomach to swell up with gas and hurt real bad. Daddy

said he was just thankful for one thing. That he was not plowing downwind of John when all this happened.

Seeing John kick his gate open confirmed my worst fear. He could push the toilet over with me inside if he wanted to. Since then the only time I go to the toilet is when Daddy is plowing John in the fields or if somebody goes with me and keeps an eye on that mule. It's really hard to concentrate on peeing when you see John through the cracks in the wall and hear him snorting so close to where you sit. Even looking at pictures in the Sears and Roebuck Catalog can't take my mind off wondering what John is doing.

It sounds like I don't love John, but I do. I just wish his pen was somewhere else so I wouldn't have to see him every time I look out that door at night. Or I wish maybe he just wouldn't be looking back in at me. When the full moon is shining on him he looks like a big ole ghost mule, making ghost mule noises. Or that is what my sister said a ghost mule would look like and sound like. I said if it was a real ghost mule it would have white ghost mule teeth instead of old yellow regular mule teeth and she said that was the interesting thing about ghost mules. They were white all over except for their yellow teeth! I told on Bobbie. I told my Daddy what she said. He said my sister is just trying to scare me. He said it's only John out there in his pen, swishing his tail at the flies and gnats that are buzzing around him day and night. Pestering him to death. Daddy said there is no such a thing as a ghost and especially no such thing as a ghost mule. That Ole Toby does not haunt our house and his mule does not haunt John's pen

The only place I'm not scared of ghosts is when I'm at Mama Dunn and Grand Daddy's house. I'm never scared of anything there. Their house is so pretty and it's warm in the wintertime. It smells like sweet smelling flowers and there is always something good to eat. They have an inside toilet and running water. But best of all Mama Dunn and Grand Daddy are there. Sometimes I wish that I lived with them all the time.

But I never told anybody that before now. Not even Joyce Turner. And she is my best friend in the whole world.

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**Bonnie Faye Dunn** grew up in south Alabama where her family has lived and farmed for over two hundred years. She is currently writing a novel and a collection of short stories based on her childhood in the South. Bonnie resides in California and Hawaii and may be reached at [bonniefayedunn@comcast.net](mailto:bonniefayedunn@comcast.net).

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Same Initials as Jesse James

Robin Martin

In the 1960's Clark, a boyfriend of Frank's mother had talked her into buying, on the cheap, a landslide of pornography. Though the investment on paper might seem small to many, 10k represented 50 percent of her savings or half of Frank's inheritance. At two cents a book she would be partners in the acquisition of a half- million copies. Oh, what a profit was there to be had! This brief foray into the world of porno filled Penny Pope with something far more potent than hope; rather it seemed to Frank that his mother turned inside-out as the preparations for this deal got underway. By inside-out Frank meant that all the beauty he understood to be held pit-like within his mother came to the surface in a radiant release. Every cliché came to life: her eyes shone, her skin glowed, her step displayed verve, her voice chirped. Plus, she dyed her hair copperhead-red, danced, sang and whistled while she worked. Clark, too, shed his ne'er-do-well bluster and became quietly confident, chewing casually on a toothpick and looking like a Gatsby stand-in. (A reference Frank did not make at the time, but a few years later; this day really altered all references for him.) Clark finally appeared as the leading man he'd planned on being. Penny had helped craft his stage name, Clark Mantle, which had little relationship to his real name, Horace Weiss.

Though only 11 years old, Frank took all of this in with a secret queasy terror, as he already felt that the truer truth *nothing comes easy* could no sooner be proven wrong than the truism *honesty is its own reward* might just be bullshit. The boxes of pornographic literature were to be stored in an El Monte warehouse for free! Having made the book deal through the second cousin of an actor friend, who had graciously

secured the storage space as part of the deal, Clark had only to pay the building insurance. The day arrived when they drove out to El Monte to have a gander at their stock, which had been delivered and unloaded surreptitiously. Clark wanted Frank to come along and help load some of the boxes into the car trunk and backseat. Clark felt he could handily unload the books directly to stores across the Valley on his own without a distribution company and he was eager to begin. So off they went with a bottle of champagne.

Frank hunkered down in the backseat below the wind on the drive out with his *Green Lantern* comic book. With the top down the backseat felt like an empty construction site with a sky's the limit ceiling. El Monte lay marooned in a toxic plain of industrial smog that burned and drained the color from the sky. The drive did nothing to dilute the adults' spirits, but rather seemed to fuel them with a giddiness Frank could not fathom; his eyes scratched by the air. His mother emerged with her lettuce-head-shaped poof of hair blown to smithereens, as Clark opened the car door and took her hand. Frank followed. The warehouse, dark and bovine, emitted a funny smell, not at all like paper or ink; its previous incarnation being a frozen meat warehouse. The smell made Frank hungry and the cool temperature cleared his head.

"Open a box," Clark instructed, "You're not too young to take a peek."

Though Penny disagreed, romance and anticipatory glee dominated the moment and precipitated a lapse in maternal balance. Clark tossed him the box cutter and Frank sliced into the first box while Clark popped the Korbel. The cork took off on a homerun trajectory, arcing in a seamless half-moon trace to the other side of their great haul. Penny ran after the cork for memento sake.

Pulling out a book, Frank was first struck by its bulk and then the non-descript plain manila-yellow-white shaded cover. Its blankness was such a surprise. The hiccups got him.

“Give it here.”

Frank walked over and handed Clark the book, careful not to look at him and holding his breath to seduce the hiccups away.

“What is this? What the fuck? What the fuck!” Clark shrank and muttered.

Frank walked back to the box and looked at each book and its empty cover and inside the pages and pages of print. Clark opened another box.

“What the F U C K! FUCK!”

“What is going on?” Penny hollered. The click of her high heels echoed and moved in a quickening pace toward them.

Clark, berserk, grabbed Frank, wanting to shake himself free of having been duped; he gripped Frank’s shoulders and shook him with all his force. Penny saw the outline of Frank blur so that it did not seem to be a person Clark was shaking. She picked up the bottle of Korbel and swung it like a bat at Clark’s head. Though she missed landing a hit and cracking his skull by a breath, the sheer gravity of her intent brought things to a standstill.

Clark fell back stumbling, and righting himself, stunned out of insanity. He sat on the floor and cried.

Frank dropped to the floor. Everything kept moving. It took a good 20 minutes before he could sense stillness.

“What’s your name?” Penny asked.

“Frank.”

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

Frank looked up at her face as it seemed to slide back and forth and then fall down on him. The world was raining his mom. He took hold of her wrist, to stop the movement and saw the fingers clearly.

“Three.”

She turned away then and went to check on Clark; he was humming and singing “Hang down your head Tom Dooley.”

Frank picked up a book. *Hey, same initials as Jesse James.* Thus began his first reading of Ulysses.

Robin Martin currently lives in Brooklyn and is working on an episodic novel titled Beautiful Men. "*Same Initials as Jesse James*" is part of a novel manuscript. Robin reads from one of her stories at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/Soulmakingawards#p/u/0/eGEt7T-YuIo>.

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*Traditional Poem*

# When Dreams Are Neatly Broken Up

**James K. Zimmerman**

There comes a time of day, it seems,  
When dreams are neatly broken up  
In pieces small enough to read  
As tea leaves or a fleeting frown.

When dreams are neatly broken up,  
No force of will can make them hold  
As tea leaves or a fleeting frown  
Might steep in lingering bitter taste.

No force of will can make them hold  
As if in sleep, a mordant smile  
Might steep in lingering bitter taste,  
Might make a thought run far too fast.

As if in sleep, a mordant smile,  
Slowly spreading through the gloom,  
Might make a thought run far too fast  
When dreams at last are shaken out.

Slowly spreading through the gloom  
There comes a time of day, it seems,  
When dreams at last are shaken out  
In pieces small enough to read.

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**James K. Zimmerman** *is the winner of the 2009 Daniel Varoujan Award and the 2009 & 2010 Hart Crane Memorial Poetry Awards. His work appears or is upcoming in Bellingham Review, Westchester Review, ICON, Hawaii Pacific Review, and The Cafe Review, among others. He is also a psychologist in private practice.*

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2010 AWC Writing Competition Winners List

FICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Shawn Jacobsen	Mojave	Auburn, AL
2. Adrienne Y. Norton	It's the Little Things	Birmingham, AL
3. Laura Loomis	Please	Pittsburg, CA
4. Steve Scott	The Yellow Glove	Rancho Mirage, CA

Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Peg Daniels	My Sister, A Girl	Auburn, AL
Thomas Doppke	The Cemetery	Sterling Heights, MI
Sara Gipson	Steeplechase	North Little Rock, AR
Tammie Painter	The Heron	Milwaukie, OR

SHORT FICTION – 1000 WORDS

1. Robin Martin	Same Initials as Jesse James	Brooklyn, NY
2. Douglas Campbell	Last Call for the Fiddlers Three	Point Marion, PA
3. Sara Gipson	Living on the Edge	North Little Rock, AR
4. Shawn Jacobsen	Threat	Auburn, AL

Short Fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Rebecca Carroll	Encounters with Doors	Clinton, TN
Frank Dawson	Clock	Birmingham, AL
Gary R. Hoffman	Beer and Pantyhose	Okeechobee, FL
J. J. White	The Blizzards of 1888	Merritt Island, FL

HUMOR – 2000 WORDS

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|------------------|
| 1. Riley N. Kelly | What Mother Nature Gives Father Time Takes Away | Excel, AL |
| 2. Allen Russell | Up the Creek | Hartford, KY |
| 3. Dick Michener | The Night the Bed Broke | Waynesville, NC |
| 4. Judy Lee Green | From Blush to Bloom | Murfreesboro, TN |

Humor Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

- | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Sara Gipson | The Naked Truth | North Little Rock, AR |
| Cathy C. Hall | New Age Awkward | Lilburn, GA |
| Carol Robbins Hull | Better Than | Montgomery, AL |
| Dr. Reilly Maginn | New Beau | Daphne, AL |

FREE VERSE POEM

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Kory Wells | Snow Advisory | Murfreesboro, TN |
| 2. Ellaraine Lockie | The Art of Resistance, 2008 | Sunnyvale, CA |
| 3. Paul Amago | An Australian From Tokyo | Birmingham, AL |
| 4. Marian Kaplun Shapiro | Furnishing the Bedroom | Lexington, MA |

Free Verse Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

- | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| John Alexanderson | Retrospect | Doylestown, PA |
| Sally Clark | My Grandmother's House | Fredericksburg, TN |
| Frank Dawson | Bojangles | Birmingham, AL |
| Connie Jordan Green | Following Strangers | Lenoir City, TN |

JUVENILE FICTION - 2500 WORDS

1. Cindy Peavy	Blanket of Snow	Birmingham, AL
2. Ellaraine Lockie	Clawford in the House of the Mouse	Sunnyvale, CA
3. Rose Nelson	Grandma's Violets	Greenville, NC
4. Kate Robinson	Li'l Bit	Ceredigion, Wales UK

Juvenile fiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Willma Willis Gore	The Adventures of Backpack Betty	Sedona, AZ
Connie Jordan Green	Tim's Orchard	Lenoir City, TN
Victoria Medaglia	Clara's Window	Oak Ridge, TN
Randi Lynn Mrvos	Maggie and the Third Grade Blues	Lexington, KY

NONFICTION – 2500 WORDS

1. Riley N. Kelly	Bucking the System	Excel, AL
2. Jan Sherbin	Under Fire	Cincinnati, OH
3. Bonnie Faye Dunn	I Sure Did Hate to Kill Him	Healdsburg, CA
4. Robert B. Robeson	[Olympic Champion Charlie Green's Long Run to Faith]	Lincoln, NE

Nonfiction Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order))

Adrienne Y. Norton	Torn Pages	Birmingham, AL
Leonard A. Temme	Levels of Military Medical Research	Enterprise, AL
Margaret Truly	Scarlett Was a Paremiographer	Hoover, AL
Christy Wise	Swimming with Sharks. Or Not	Washington, DC

TRADITIONAL POEM

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------|
| 1. Carol Dee Meeks | [Poetry Everywhere, Many Lines
from Pros and Others] | Tulsa, OK |
| 2. Catherine Moran | Stranded | Little Rock, AR |
| 3. James K. Zimmerman | When Dreams Are Neatly Broken Up | Pleasantville, NY |
| 4. Joseph L. Whitten | Nocturne | Odenville, AL |

Traditional Poem Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

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|------------------|---|----------------|
| Hansell G. Burke | The Guest | Birmingham, AL |
| Jerry Hardesty | Creative Living (a Rubaiyat) | Brierfield, AL |
| Ellaraine Lockie | An American Haibun | Sunnyvale, CA |
| Leonard A. Temme | For the Feast of St. Thomas the Apostle | Enterprise, AL |

FIRST CHAPTER of a NOVEL

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|
| 1. Dianne Moffat | Harm | Madison, AL |
| 2. Bonnie Faye Dunn | Meant to Live | Healdsburg, CA |
| 3. Jo Middlebrooks | The Circle | Columbus, GA |
| 4. Carol Robbins Hull | Catalpa Worm Wettn' and Caterpillar Crawl | Montgomery, AL |

First Chapter Novel Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

- | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Connie Jordan Green | Over the Mountain | Lenoir City, TN |
| Shawn Jacobsen | South Side | Auburn, AL |
| Wanda Stricklin Robertson | Over the Next Hill | Florence, AL |
| Larry Wilson | Escape from the Bluffs | Wetumpka, AL |