

THE ALALITCOM

*Selected Works from the Alabama Writers' Conclave
2014
Literary Competition*



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ALALITCOM

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Editor
Marian Lewis

Cover: *Crossvine in Bloom*, Goldsmith Schiffman Wildlife Sanctuary
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~ INTRODUCTION ~

The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC) proudly presents the 2014 ALALITCOM

This, the 91st year as one of the oldest writers organizations in continuous existence in the United States, brought a return of the Conclave for the second year to the beautiful Fairhope Campus of the University of South Alabama. The annual conference and writing contest remain true to, and fulfill the AWC mission statement of promoting fellowship, providing an opportunity for improvement of the writing craft, and supporting Alabama writers.¹ The Conclave also nominates the State of Alabama Poet Laureate for appointment by the Governor. The office of Poet Laureate was created in 1931 by the Alabama Legislature and is an honorary post. Dr. Sue Brannon Walker, current President of the AWC, filled this post from 2003 to 2012. She was succeeded by Mr. Andrew Glaze, the current Poet Laureate of the State of Alabama.

Each year the AWC sponsors a writing contest, which is open to writers across the country. Membership in the AWC is not a prerequisite for submitting to the contest. Over 500 individual submissions were received this year and of these, the majority came from Mississippi, Tennessee and Alabama, with most from Alabama. Several changes to the 2014 contest were made by the current Contest Chair. These included reducing the number of categories from eight to six and changes in submission guidelines and prizes awarded. The six contest categories and word limits are shown in the Winners List on the last pages of this publication.

The *Alalitcom* is the official online journal of the AWC. It is comprised of the writings of first through fourth place, and sometimes honorable mention, winners in each of the contest categories. This year, all awardees were granted the opportunity to publish their winning piece in the *Alalitcom* if they so desired.

Once again, congratulations to the 2014 contest winners. As always, each story, article, poem and novel chapter entered into the AWC contest represents a writer's creativity and honor of the craft; thus every participant is a winner. I hope you enjoy the **2014 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

My Gift

Sylvia Williams Dodgen

Bacchus was a folly, a beautiful folly but nonetheless a folly,
tipped head, empty eyes, bloated belly, a drunken youth;
dissipation, profanity, this is what was asked of me to decorate the garden.
By happenstance a Cardinal stopped by Galli's yards, where I carved.
He caressed the stone, as though it were a yielding thigh or sacred bone.
My heart rose; my breath caught. This was perhaps my opportunity
to prove my artistry to all, to claim a place rightly mine,
to create a work sublime, of such beauty and sorrow
saints would surround and angels weep at a son's brutal death,
a despairing mother's grief, the Father's magnanimity.

I found a stone, a perfect stone of white Carrara marble,
soft and dense in grain without a mar and immense -
tall, deep, and wide. How I rejoiced at its size,
cut to grace a royal room above Saint Peter's tomb.
Next I sought a quiet place, a hiding place; friends would hesitate.
Tucked away in this space with leaking roof, a single fireplace,
I began to draw my Pieta, not a mother's and child's adoring embrace,
but a son's unclothed corpse, lying on his mother's lap,
splendid face composed in death's peaceful mask.
Resigned to fate, the mother would mourn expressionless, forlorn.

With hammer and chisel I began to shave fabric draped in folds,
supporting the body, as though cradled in vast ocean waves.
Winter seeped into my rooms; winds whined through vacant lanes;
and snow banked the door, like lava it found its way inside

and melted from the fire's heat, puddling beneath my feet.
I rose early and chiseled through wintry days into night by candlelight.
With aching hands, fingers numbed by cold, I cursed my gloves
and threw them to the muddy floor. Sleep failed me; I worked as in a fever.
In the window's icy glare the translucent stone haunted days and nights.
Awakening, it breathed and cleaved to burst from stillness into life.

A sleeping visage began to form then sinew, muscle and bone;
I honed the emaciated son. As in a warp in time, I fit finer lines
of veins, eyes, hair, lips, hands, the punctures of the nails.
Tentatively, spring crept into my little room, warming light at last!
I unhinged the shutters and began to polish the malleable marble.
With chalky pumice I rubbed and rubbed the folds in clothing and limbs.
For weeks I rubbed, all summer I rubbed until my fingers faltered.
Finally, the marble stone shone with a silken tone, like newborn flesh.

My feat complete with muscles spent, emotions rent I yearned
for the raging pyre, consuming fire of sculpting my Pieta once again;

for I did not want to let it go so I signed it for the world to know
Michelangelo Buonarroti of Florence made this.

Sylvia Williams Dodgen, an Alabama native, received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Alabama. She won second in State in the 2012 Hackney Literary Awards for a short story entitled, "The Best They Know How." She is retired and writes in Orange Beach, Alabama.

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*First Chapter Novel*

# ***Trouble Blues***

***Jackie Romine Walburn***

## **Chapter 1**

### PART ONE: EVERYBODY'S TALKIN'

It was early morning when the man with the coffee-cream skin and shining green eyes padded silently through the summer woods and climbed a moss-draped tree in front of Percy Williams' shack.

He settled in the crotch of a water oak tree and reached for his side bag, feeling for the blow gun made of cane and palmetto, and for the dart with its poison tip. Later he'd wish he had brought a camera, but electronic surveillance had not been a part of his proclaimed mission for the Spirits.

Breathing deep and quiet and balancing catlike and still—in the way of his Native American ancestors—the man stayed invisible as he became part of the waking forest.

The man who came out of the house—dressed in overalls over pasty white skin, barefoot and stumbling a bit—apparently didn't notice the man or any other creatures outside his front stoop as he sat down. He opened a warm beer from the stack behind the bench, lit a cigarette and reached for the paper bag in his hiding place under the lard bucket.

The watcher in the tree saw two teen-age boys he knew—the ones he'd feared would be there—talking to Percy and sharing the sack's contents. As Percy put a hand deep in his overalls and reached out to the boy closest to him, the man in the tree yelled a coyote call, "yep yah ah, yep yah ah," and shouted, "DeMarcus and Anthony, run now!"

Already wired, then startled by the animal call and their names being shouted from the trees, the boys sprinted off the porch toward the woods and Chilatchee Creek.

As they disappeared into the underbrush, the man in the overalls scrambled down the crooked steps, looking for whoever had yelled; he moved toward the tree, out in the open. “What the hell?”

Then, the man in the tree brought the blow gun to his mouth, took a practiced breath and let the dart go, aiming for Percy Williams’ heart and hitting it dead on.

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Frederick Jones, 25 and at the wheel of his beat-up 1994 Toyota Corolla, was singing along with the radio tuned to the R&B station out of Birmingham and the Blues music his Uncle Mojo taught him to love. “Trouble, trouble, trouble. Trouble is all in the world I see,” he sang along with Lighting Hopkins.

But Frederick didn’t know about trouble. Not yet. As he negotiated the curves on the road from Tuscaloosa and the University of Alabama south to his home in Style’s Bend in Wilson County, Frederick looked again at the 8 by 10 envelope on the time-and-travel stained passenger’s seat—evidence of his having passed the Alabama bar exam on the first try.

I’ve done it, Frederick thought, just like Grandma Ruth said I would.

Frederick smiled his widest smile and pushed up the dark-rimmed glasses his nearsightedness required, glasses that always prompted his classmates to say he looked like Roger on the “What’s Happening?” TV show. “What’s happenin’ Rog?” they’d tease him. He smiled at the memory but wondered at the worry creeping into his mind, even as he headed home, successful, after seven years of college, many a dean’s list and his childhood dream of being an attorney coming true.

“Something’s wrong,” he said out loud.

Then, so quick that he slammed on the brakes and sent his law school letter flying into the floorboard, an owl flew across the road directly in front of him. The barred owl missed his car by a few inches

and appeared to turn and aim its brown owl eyes at him as it banked to the left and flew past the driver's side. Frederick glanced in the rear view mirror and saw no cars behind him, so he stopped in the middle of Highway 5 and watched the owl, its stripe-rimmed eyes, yellow beak and long tail extending from the crisscrossed striped body, as it circled his car and flew back into the thick roadside woods.

"Damn," he said, "I wonder what Big Momma woulda said about that?" But he knew what his late great-grandmother would say. "Owl crossing ya path...that means bad luck, bad things gonna happen. Somebody gonna die."

Frederick breathed deep, clenched his shaking hands on the steering wheel, and slowly sped up, as he saw a log truck coming around the curve behind him. Better speed up quick or it'll be my death, he thought as he got the car moving to 55 and then 60 mph. He knew there was no place to pull off the highway along this stretch of the highway, save a dirt road or logging trail

"Get yourself together son," he said, mimicking his Grandma Ruth's refrain.

But Frederick knew, just as certain as the curves and turns on the road back home, that something was wrong.

\*\*\*

Sheriff Kingston Lewis peered through the Spanish moss that hung from the water oak tree, pushing aside the cool gray tentacles and looking at the dead body propped up against the old oak. He looked past the dead, dark eyes, to the tiny black bag pinned to dirty overalls and the book with underlined passages clutched in stiff white fingers.

Percy Williams had been dead and staring at his beer-can strewn yard for a day or more, Lewis figured. And as he noted the tiny blood stain at heart height on Percy's overalls, the sheriff was sure that Percy's body had been moved after death, posed for someone to find.

“The coroner comin’?” Lewis asked his chief deputy, as he reached his hand to close the dead man’s eyes, but then stopped, his training telling him to wait for the coroner and pictures and procedures. The sheriff studied Percy’s face, beginning-to-bloat, and thought that Percy’s eyes looked just as blank and dead when he was alive.

Kingston Lewis knew Percy Williams, everyone did, as what locals would call a “sorry ass white man” and generally unpopular neighborhood menace in the mostly black, Style’s Bend community. The sheriff knew him also as a suspected drug dealer and community pet killer, but no serious charge ever stuck.

“Whatya think this means?” the sheriff asked Chief Deputy Bender, who was leaning against his squad car, filling out paperwork. “Looks like whoever did it was sending a message, don’t you think? A message with a voodoo bag attached.”

Bender walked over to the sheriff, and together they peered down at the victim of what was the first homicide in Wilson County in five years. “Yeah, Sheriff, that’s a mojo bag. We’ve both seen ’em before, livin’ here. I ain’t never seen a black mojo bag though, and all the rest of it, sure, somebody wanted him to be found like this. They’s some hoodoo involved in this here, you ask me.”

Sheriff Lewis looked again around Percy’s yard, at the tumble-down cabin, sloping porch and broken steps. “Yeah, and who around here knows about mojo bags and voodoo?”

“Madame Butterbean?” Bender smiled.

“Yeah, the root lady. She probably does, but I’m thinkin’ about Mojo Jones. This looks like something Mojo Jones could help explain.

“Wait on the coroner for me, and probably need to call the ABI, so we can cover our asses on this one. I’ll be back in a little while,” Lewis said, as he climbed into his work car, Wilson County 1, and accelerated down the dirt road, kicking up dust and obscuring the legend written in

gold script on the side of the vehicle: SHERIFF KINGSTON LEWIS, TO SERVE AND PROTECT.

As the dust settled, two young boys stepped out from behind a patch of privet hedge a hundred yards away towards Chilatchee Creek. They'd been hiding and watching most of the morning. The teen-aged cousins—one light colored, or “high colored” as his auntie called it, and the other a dark chocolate hue—didn't speak, for fear of being heard by the deputy who remained. Each knew what the other was thinking. He's dead!

Then they smiled, perhaps for the first time in weeks, touched hands high in the air in a silent high five and turned and raced each other to the creek and back home.

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**Jackie Romine Walburn** is a freelance writer, former reporter and corporate communications manager who is polishing the sixth draft of her first novel, “Mojo Jones and the Black Cat Bone,” a story set in the Alabama Black Belt. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama and writes the blog <http://jackierwalburnwrites.blogspot.com>.

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Americans Oust Language

Ruth C. White

The Professional Organization of English Majors, often satirized by Garrison Keillor, represents a group of us quirky folks who take the language seriously. However, somewhere in between all the fun-poking about our lack of gainful employment and our picky attitude toward the language lies the ugly truth. Our English language is in danger. Television and the Internet share much of the blame, but my concern here is not to place blame but rather to provide resuscitation before witnessing the last gasps of a language I love, a language that so well served Chaucer and Shakespeare before traveling across an ocean to invent a new society. Whereas we lovers of language expect change as a natural outgrowth, we need not expect nor desire the barrage of unintentional malapropisms, incorrect usages, acronym-speak, and the army of superlatives that surrounds us.

In our increasingly complex world, I would be first to admit that no single person knows everything, but an incident last week revealed how far we have digressed in our knowledge of core vocabulary. As I perused the headlines, one jumped out at me. “Man Distinguishes Fire with Beer”. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. The letters remained the same. To my amazement, someone out there in cyberspace, someone trusted to influence millions of people, did not know the difference between two basic words of our language. Thinking that to be a fluke, I related the story later in the day to a younger friend. She listened and gave me a vague smile. “Yeah, my husband and I were conversating about that.” Really? As I shook my head, she added, “I didn’t know you could put out a fire with beer. I thought it would burn, too.”

Before I officially gave up on the language, I began to take stock of my years as an English teacher. Students who had criminally abused the apostrophe and never understood the difference between plural and possessive (heaven help the plural *and* possessive) now hold good jobs and often give back to the community in meaningful ways. Perhaps more importantly, these same, able-bodied people will continue to contribute to Social Security for many years. Ah, I sighed and sat back to watch a football game and relax. A familiar voice droned on, offering advice on events as they transpired. “Between you and I, he’s not gonna make it in this league.” Okay, so the man, once phenomenal on the football field, doesn’t know pronouns. I can’t play football. But he didn’t stop there. “If he had went around the other end, it would a been a touchdown. The way he carries *that* ball, he’s gonna hurt *that* ankle before he crosses *that* goal line.” Faint.

Reaching for the controller, I changed the channel, where a young woman I didn’t recognize frowned appropriately as she concluded her story. The anchor replied, “That’s Anna Banana reporting from MSNBC Headquarters. Join us later when we will further look at the new NCAA rulings on eligibility of SEC quarterback Freddie Football, the man voted by ASWA as the most likely to win the CSWOTY Award.” Should he also win an ESPY? Maybe an EMMY? Was I being too hard on people? After all, it’s been a year of busted pipes all over the country, making the expert’s agree that its been so cold, every dog needs its’ fur; in fact, the cold has been the most epic event of the past decade. Like, you know, it’s been totally awesome. This has to be the most unique winter of all times. Who knows when the end of winter will come and whether it will be like the man who opened the newspaper to find his own obituary. Will it be the ending that no one saw coming? Will it be shocking? Stunning? Sick, dude.

Yes, our English language has taken a beating, but I keep the faith. I cannot persecute anyone for prosecuting the English language.

And furthermore, those same students who don't know that they can't have less cookies in the box just might look down at me lying vulnerable on an operating table some day. Correct pronouns do not a kind heart make, and few ships have been sunk by misplaced apostrophes. Once I realized such, I was like so over it. Thus it is with humble heart, I will continue to amass superlatives in the event our language does not survive recent attacks. After all, there's a really good chance that Chaucer might have as much trouble today as we once experienced when the shoures of aprill perced our brains to the verye roote. But then, he was one smart guy. So, no problem, man. English will survive.

For **Ruth (RC) White**, *literature has always been a passion, first teaching it in high school and later creating her own. A second passion takes her across back roads of the South, where folks speak with certainty of ghosts and hold the past in reverence.*

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*Creative nonfiction*

# ***A Secret Time***

***Vivian W. Newkirk***

They came for me after lunch. No warning, no hint that I was separating from my St. Joe school friends. Like an obedient second-grader I gathered my books and tip-toed from the classroom to join my mother. I didn't know my final destination was the Mississippi State Preventorium at Sanitorium, Mississippi, forty miles south of my Jackson home.

The ride in my uncle's new Ford coupe that April 1940 afternoon seemed to take forever. Although I was headed for the unknown, I felt no fear, only an empty spot in my stomach, as though I'd not eaten that morning.

We turned off Highway 49 and rode through a huge stone entrance. Uncle Nelson slowed down as we ah'ed over the green carpet of grass and rows of colored flowers.

I learned years later the Sanatorium, established in 1916, was virtually a small town of eighty structures scattered on acreage complete with its own water and sewage plants, laundry, beauty and barber services. Outlying farmers provided fresh vegetables and fruits for the patients' food. Dairy farmers provided fresh milk every morning, unpasteurized and still warm.

Along the way we saw, through the car's windows, men and women lying on beds under white sheets on porches. Others, scattered like cotton balls, sat in wooden chairs on the lawn in white gowns, their upward faces soaking the afternoon sun.

Ten years earlier a children's wing called Preventorium was organized to care for children who tested positive for the tuberculosis. The adult building was built a distance from the children's building. This

separation between adults and children became the goal of health departments. In specific sites throughout the United States, preventoria sprang up.

*Mycobacterium tuberculosis* is the bacterium which attacks the lungs, but it can attack any part of the body, especially the kidneys, spine, and brain. Droplets from coughing, spitting, or sneezing spread the disease. Patients received as much fresh air and sunshine as possible to help eliminate the disease, and X-rays were taken often to note changes. Today tuberculosis is alive, but improvements in medication no longer require patients to be hospitalized or X-rayed.

The Mississippi Preventorium was a well-planned temporary home for children. It held fifty patients, twenty-five of each gender. Care was taken to create a friendly environment. Desks, chairs, tables, beds, blackboards, and lockers were child-sized, creating a warm welcome for entering patients.

The main building was in the shape of the Lorraine cross, the emblem of the tuberculosis movement. This allowed every room to face outwards to receive the sunlight. Outdoors in the play area were a swimming pool, a playground equipped with jungle gyms, slides, swings as well as a pond with ducks, a movie theater and a library filled with books.

My entrance ticket to the Preventorium that April was having four of the typical danger signals for tuberculosis: unexplained loss of weight, loss of appetite with indigestion, constant fatigue, and night sweats.

We stopped in front of a building with steps that seemed to go upward forever. Before I could untangle from the back seat, a friendly woman greeted us and said her name was Miss Effie. She took us inside the children's building. Miss Effie assured Mother I'd be a very happy child.

Inside the gigantic building Miss Effie opened a door and said, "This is the dormitory where this sweet girl will live." A fist-like knot

turned in my stomach as we entered. This space was huge; longer than our entire house. Why was I here? Tears slithered from my eyes. This was my first glimpse of a bedroom I'd share with more girls than were in my second grade. The room was white—bed linens, beds, walls. Miss Effie pointed to a top bunk near the front and said, "See there? That's your bed."

Miss Effie opened the door of a white metal locker, one of many standing in the middle of the room. "Here, my dear, is where you'll keep your clothes." Looking inside, I saw a space with two clips for hanging coats, and a shelf—not the "chester drawers" like at home. Mother placed a pair of slippers, several pairs of pajamas, a robe, and a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a comb inside. I stared at the emptiness. No play clothes. No Sunday clothes. What would I wear? I began to understand this was a new life. Forever? I shut out the thought. We turned and walked through a door into the bathroom. I'd never seen so many sinks. They hung on the wall opposite the toilets like bulldogs set to pounce if we failed to flush.

I turned back to Mother who bent down, hugged and kissed me goodbye. I clung fiercely. Would I ever see her again? Would she miss me when she got home? That evening Mother took time to write in her diary: "Left about 2 p.m. to carry V.A. to Prev. I believe she'll like it. She seemed awfully thrilled." In the coming months Mother recorded her twice-monthly visits in her black "5 Year Diary."

I looked up at Miss Effie as she gave me a pair of white bloomers saying, "You'll wear these every day and go barefoot. A fresh pair will be on your bed each morning." She pushed me through a door; I stood on the edge of a playground. The instant friendliness of the kids helped clear my confusion. There were kids younger and some older than I. Not until bedtime when I felt lonely and heard the sniffles of the little girls, did I hear Mother's soft voice telling me, "You'll be all right with Miss Effie."

Effie Marie Clark began her work at the Preventorium in 1929 as a teacher. In 1933 she became director until she retired in 1968. She was responsible for caring for thousands of children separated from their homes for months and years. She was the mother figure guiding us in our studies, teaching us songs and telling stories, reminding us of our manners, leading us in blessings before each meal and punishing our misbehavior.

Assistants kept us busy all day. Up at 7 a. m., bedtime at 8 p.m. Sleep, rest, eat, and play were the activities. We attended school a few hours daily before lunch. This routine was established after “studies of health camps,” provided by the Mississippi Tuberculosis Association, deemed it successful by reporting “...not a single case of tuberculosis has been recorded in a child who has treatment and training at this Preventorium.”

I found a measure of satisfaction in the daily routine. We lined up every time we went anywhere, not unlike at St. Joe. Friendliness helped me through my fear of this life, but not my loneliness.

Weekly I stood with other children while the nurses took our vitals. Seeing visiting doctors watching us was normal. They checked us head to toe and mumbled. Big scales told them our weight. I was the skinniest patient and ashamed of my low 32 pounds. A bump on my chest showed up as a blur on the X-ray film. More mumblings. I had TB, I thought. However, upon release my final assessment was “No TB found.” In the time I was a patient, I absorbed enough X- rays to last a lifetime.

On Saturdays and bad weather days, we gathered in the “round room” to listen to radio programs or read books, or hear Miss Effie read or tell stories. Sunday evenings as the sun set, we sat on the front steps of the main building and sang. Reflecting, I settled happily in my temporary home. However, my mother’s diary found after her death, recorded pages of her visits. May 26 she wrote, “V. A. cried all the time I

was visiting her.” In early June Mother reported, “...went to see V. A. She still wants to come home.” In June she reported, “V. A. is unhappy and begged me to let her come home.” On July 28, 1940, shortly before I was released, she wrote these words: “V. A. weighs 51 ½ pounds. We’re so proud.”

On August 9, 1940, Uncle Nelson’s Ford rolled out through the same gate we had entered months earlier. I didn’t look back. Twenty days later I celebrated my ninth birthday. Mother recorded my gifts as “3 new dresses, 3 pairs of sox, 2 slips.”

In the following years I told no one of my secret life on a TB campus. Disease was not a subject talked about. After twenty years of my marriage I related the experience to my husband after an article appeared in 1960 in the New Orleans *Times Picayune*. When I began relating my story to others, few people believed such a place existed in their state. Ten years later the Preventorium closed due to few patients.

Today turn to the site on FaceBook titled “Magee, Mississippi, Preventorium,” and you can read the reminiscences of former child patients. They call their former home “The P”.

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*Yearly Vivian W. Newkirk teaches a free class for adults on writing family stories. Several of her own stories have been published in local newspapers in New York and Jackson, MS. and in publications of Gulf Coast Writers. She and husband Richard live in Madison, Mississippi.*

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Short Story

The Ugliest Man in Lituca County

Richard Perreault

Ugliest man I ever met was a fella named Buck Bacall. I only saw him that once, in the harsh glare of my flashlight shining into the backseat of an old Pontiac Tempest. But I promise you, in the unforgiving sun of broad daylight, Mr. Bacall wouldn't have been one bit easier to look at.

It was a chilly night in early October. I have no trouble remembering the when of the story because the Lituca County Harvest Fair always comes second weekend in October and this was only a couple of nights before. Darnel Foxx had hired me and Travis Turnbow to keep an eye on the north-south road that runs through the middle of his ranch.

Darnel fancies himself a world-class poultry man, and late summer into early fall there had been a rash of hen house raids all over the county. With the poultry judging coming up that Saturday, Darnel didn't want to take the chance any of his prize brood would turn up missing. That's why he put me and Travis out on the road, to check up on any suspicious activity.

All the boys got a laugh out of me and Travis being hired to guard Foxx's hen house, but it was no laughing matter. *Best in Show* for fowl was sponsored by *Purina* and carried a \$1,000 first prize. Rumor was, Darnel had a Dominicker sure to strut off with this year's cash.

The road through the ranch is dirt and gravel, lightly travelled. It's a county owned road, but Darnel said he didn't have any compunction asking me and Travis to stop folks to make sure they weren't carrying extra cargo. Particularly cargo that clucked.

Travis had gone to the north end of the road, where it joins up with the pavement next to *Alma's All Night*. Since I'm the easy goingest, I agreed to take the south end that tailed off into flat darkness, coyote yelps, and jackrabbits the size of antelope.

By midnight I'd only had three cars come through. Two were folks I knew who made good-natured sport of me standing out in the middle of nowhere hoping to catch a chicken thief. The other car was a fancy new somethin-another made by Japs or Germans, or maybe the Swedes. Tourists looking for some place I'd never heard of and they'd never find.

Shortly before 1:00 a.m., a car came down the road headed my way from Darnel's direction. There wasn't a lot of moon showing, so I thought it odd the car didn't have its headlights on.

I have a watch that glows like a barn dance of lightning bugs do-si-doing on my wrist so I confirmed the time and wrote *12:50* on the note pad where I was keeping my night-watch log. I stuffed the pad and pencil back into my shirt pocket.

Holding my flashlight out to the side, I stood in the middle of the road swinging it back and forth like I'd seen signalmen do in rail yards when I was a boy. Only then did the car's lights come on. It pulled to a stop about twenty yards shy.

You never know what might happen on a dark road in the middle of the night. I approached the driver's side with an extra dose of caution. I kept my flashlight on, but by my side so as not to shine in anybody's eyes and come across as menacing. The headlights of the car and the bald head of moon that had peeked out from behind black-bellied clouds made enough light so I could see where to walk.

The vehicle was a rusted out old Pontiac Tempest and there looked to be four or maybe five people inside. The driver's window was open. Keeping some distance, I called out, "How you folks doing tonight?"

Though I couldn't see for certain, I assumed it was the driver who answered. "Just a laughin' and a scratchin'. 'Bout yourself?"

“Middlin’, middlin’” I replied. “You know you’re running without headlights?”

“Just tryin’ to save on electricity,” the same voice came back.

I took a step closer. “We’ve had some thieving around lately so we’re checking up on folks out late. Nothing personal. And no offense, I hope.”

This time I could see for certain it was the driver who spoke. “None taken. Just had a few drinks over at the *All Night* and we’re headed back toward Thistleweed. Shaves more than twenty miles to come this way.”

“Makes sense,” I said, leaning over, hands on knees. The driver’s face was the only one lighted enough to show features, smiling a genuinely friendly kind of smile. “I got no legal authority,” I said, “and I know it’s nosey and not all that neighborly, but you mind if I take a look in the trunk?”

The engine cut off and the man stuck his hand out the window clutching the keys. “Help yourself. If you turn up a dead body, Randall here done it.”

There was a round of coarse laughter from inside, and I added a two-syllable chuckle to show we were all getting on.

I opened the trunk and shined my light inside. Empty beer bottles. Jumper cables. Rags that smelled of oil leaks long gone by.

Back alongside the car I handed the keys to the driver. “No dead bodies. Or live one’s for that matter.”

Another round of laughter made its way around the inside. I pulled the notepad and pencil out of my shirt pocket.

“I’m keeping a record for Mr. Foxx. You mind if I get your names?”

“Mine’s Rection,” the driver said. “That’s R-E-C-T-I-O-N. Hugh G. Rection’s my full name, since we’re being formal and writing things down.”

“Farts Daley,” the guy in the passenger seat said.

In addition to Hugh, the driver, and the passenger side guy named Farts, I could see three figures in the back seat. A normal size man sat

next to each window, with a real sawed off runt of a guy squished between them in the middle. The little guy had what looked like one of those Mexican serape things draped over his head.

“One of you gentlemen Randall?” I asked. “Hugh here said if I found a body, Randall done it.”

The man in the passenger seat spoke up, “That’s me. Randall Daley, folks just call me Farts. I’m sure you can guess why.”

On my pad I put quote marks around *Farts* and wrote *Randall* out to the side where a first name would go. I returned my attention to the backseat. “Gentlemen?”

The nearest to me said his name was Ben Dover and the one by the far window said, “Noah Count.”

“How ‘bout you?” I asked, nodding at the scrawny guy in the middle.

When he didn’t speak, I lifted my flashlight, casting a beam in his direction.

Holy Mother of God! Bless the poor man’s soul. His face was all shrunk up, like one of those heads you see in the cannibal stories in the *National Geographic*. Beady little eyes peered out from the serape shroud, and a sharp pointy nose protruded from the middle of a wrinkled red face.

I swallowed a gasp, and managed, “Could I have your name, sir?”

The man’s face quivered, he blinked, bobbed his head, and in a voice like somebody dragging a cheese grater over your eardrums said, “Buck. Buck Bacall.”

“Is that B-A-C-A or B-E-C-A?” I asked.

Hugh spoke up. “It’s B-A-C-A.”

“Like that actress Bogart married,” I said.

“Just like the actress,” Hugh said, which prompted a snorting laugh from the Noah fella by the back passenger-side window.

“She was one hot chick,” he said, following up with another snorted laugh.

I jotted down the forlorn man's name beneath those of his companions, made a comment about the weather and how it would likely be getting colder soon, then bid the party goodbye. I snuggled and shuffled inside my coat to stay warm and make my way through the rest of an uneventful night.

Next morning, just after dawn, back to the north I saw a cloud of dust being dragged down the road behind Darnel Foxx's shiny silver pickup. With brakes engaged, the truck slid a good fifteen feet atop the gravel before coming to a stop beside me.

Hopping mad is exactly what Darnel was, because he hopped out of the truck screaming at the top of his lungs before his feet even hit the ground.

"Tell me you caught the thieves."

"What thieves?" was my reply.

Darnel spun in a circle and flung both hands to the sky, like he was down to his last plea and God was the only one who could intervene.

"The chicken thieves," he screeched.

"Only four cars all night," I said. "Searched them all, but didn't find any chickens. Maybe Travis –"

"Travis's saw nothing neither."

"They take much?" I asked.

"Oh, no." Darnel said. "Not much. Only one thing—my Dominicker."

To prove I'd been hard on the job, I pulled out my pad and pretended to study the times and list of names.

Darnel snatched the pad from my hand.

"Hugh G. Rection. Randall Farts Daley."

He flung the pad into the underbrush and pointed his finger in my face. His mouth opened, but nothing but a spray of spittle came out.

As quickly as he'd hopped out of his truck, Darnel hopped back in and I was left standing in a chalk white cloud of gravel dust.

* * *

That Saturday, pretty much like everybody else in the county, I went to the Harvest Fair. I didn't see Darnel Foxx there, but after what had happened with his prize hen, nobody really expected him to come.

I did see Travis, but he wasn't all that keen to hang around with me. He said Darnel had given him his \$25 for the night's work. I said I figured I'd get mine whenever Darnel got around to it. Travis told me I shouldn't hold my breath unless I looked good in blue.

I also saw that Hugh Rection fella who'd been driving the rusty Tempest the night Darnel's hen went missing. In what I believe is called an *irony*, the man was standing on the stage in the poultry barn cradling the most picture perfect, god-amighty beautiful Dominicker hen that ever lived. Hugh and his hen had just won the thousand-dollar prize for *Best in Show*.

The thought came to me that I might go over and congratulate him on his good fortune, but I remembered it had been me holding the flashlight, so he'd probably never clearly seen my face and wouldn't recognize me.

I didn't see any of the other fellas who had been with him that night, but I have reason to believe they were somewhere there about. I had started making my way out of the barn when from the direction of the stage I heard someone call out, "Buck. Buck Bacall. Buck, Buck, Buck Bacall."

Richard Perreault has received more than 20 awards for short fiction in the last four years. He lives in Bryson City, North Carolina, where he is currently working on a novel, "Coming to Fruition."

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# ***A Place Called Grace***

***Frances D. Roberts***

## **Chapter 1**

**Psalm 27:10 When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me.**

Sheanna knew she wasn't supposed to get out of bed, but her stomach was twisted in painful knots. She had to find something to eat, even if it meant taking a beating from Cullen. She waved the flies away from her face, and silently rolled from the mattress to the floor, listening for the sound of his stomping steps in the hallway, or the rattling click as he unlocked the padlock that kept her inside, but all was still.

Cullen was never happy, unless he was screaming or swinging his brick-like fists. He was skeleton-thin, smelled like sweat and beer and seemed to take singular pleasure in towering over Sheanna, who was small even for a four-year-old. Sheanna often spent nights crying silently on her mattress as he raged; calling her names she didn't dare repeat. Then he would suddenly go to sleep, and she would have a few hours of peace.

Mom would cry and kiss the top of her head saying, "Be a good girl, Sheanna," then curl up next to the beast, as if he was a regular person.

The moon shone brightly through the tattered towel that was their curtain, and Sheanna tiptoed across the tiny studio apartment to the refrigerator. She opened it gingerly. No light. No outline of a leftover piece of pizza or jar of jelly. Nothing. A tear coursed down her cheek as Sheanna ran her hand around the inside of the warm, musty-smelling box, and her insides contracted again. It hurt, and nobody cared. She

crawled back on her mattress and peeked out the window at the trashy street below, where teenage boys sold their wares while music pulsed from rusty cars. Sometimes, a pretty girl would walk by, get into a car, and speed away. Sheanna wished she could speed away. Anywhere there was food.

“Granny LouAnn has food,” a voice whispered inside her head. “She’s only three blocks away.”

Sheanna pictured herself running to the townhouse where Granny LouAnn lived. She also pictured the wrath of Cullen, and looked down at the scars and yellowing bruises on her legs. He said that she could never, ever go back there or he would break her legs next time. He said that Granny lied about him to the police, and Mom agreed that Sheanna was too little to walk alone. Mom said someone might grab her and do terrible things to her, but nothing had ever happened. Besides, Cullen would beat her no matter what, so Sheanna decided to go. Anything would be better than the hunger that sliced through her.

Sheanna pawed through her mom’s pile of clothes, looking for something that wasn’t too dirty or smelly. Finally, she found a t-shirt with only one small tear in the arm, and no sweaty smell. It hung like a dress on Sheanna’s tiny body, but it was better than nothing. She looked at the window Cullen had nailed shut, the one by the fire escape, and then tiptoed past the grimy mattress. She pulled away the broken lock, and slid open the window on the back wall. She placed a tiny foot on the narrow ledge that would take her to freedom. The bite of the chilly April air deadened her toes, and Sheanna wished she had some shoes. She pressed her back against the rough bricks as she slid along the ledge and held her breath as she swung her leg around the corner, then pushed off and dropped onto the fire escape as silently as she could. She glided down the stairs, looking for pieces of glass or pointy rocks. She stepped carefully, her aching stomach urging her on. Soon she was sprinting through the back gate and down the alley as fast as she dared.

“Please, Jesus,” Sheanna prayed silently. “Granny said you would protect me. Please, I’m so hungry.”

Thunder shook the air. Sheanna jumped a little, and then ran faster. She was already cold, her feet were wet, and she didn’t know how much longer she could stand it. Her teeth chattered, and the cold air sliced through her. It felt like forever before she saw the little apartment her Granny called home, with its cheerful yellow light, and tiny porch full of potted plants, which she somehow kept alive in the Wisconsin cold. With the last of her strength, Sheanna threw herself at the door, pounding her tiny fists as hard as she could manage.

“Granny! It’s Sheanna. Please open up, Granny!” she called as hot tears flowed down her cheeks.

“I’m comin’ child,” LouAnn sounded close to the door, as if she had been expecting her.

Sheanna almost fainted with relief when she heard the deadbolt turn and saw the sweet face smiling down at her. She threw herself into Granny LouAnn’s arms and squeezed as tightly as she could.

“I was so scared, Granny. He put a big lock on the door, so I couldn’t come see you.”

“Shh, I know, Baby. I knew there was a good reason you didn’t come. It’s all right now. Come on and get something to eat, and we’ll get you into a nice hot bath. We’ll fix you right up, She-she.”

Sheanna wiped her feet on the braided rug and quickly washed her hands as Granny shuffled to the refrigerator. The tiny woman with bright ice-blue eyes carefully poured a tall glass of milk with her shaky hands and handed it to Sheanna.

“Drink up, while I fix you a warm sandwich.”

Sheanna tried not to gulp the rich, cool drink too quickly. She knew that she had to take it slow, or her stomach would hurt even worse. She took a drink, then set down her glass, and reached for an apple in Granny’s fruit bowl. She bit into the aptly named red delicious,

her tongue darting to catch all the juice. The elderly woman set the sandwich in the microwave for a few seconds. Soon it steamed on the plate in front of her, while Granny slipped a fleece blanket over the girl's shoulders.

"You're like ice, girl," she whispered, and then she winked. "Next time, take three t-shirts before you run away."

"They were nasty, Granny," Sheanna said, her big aquamarine eyes wide with the memory. "I hate that sweaty smell."

LouAnn muttered to herself, "Brinne should be whopped for how she's 'raising' her only child, and that sorry boyfriend of hers is barely human."

She turned and ran her hand lightly along Sheanna's arm.

"I'm going to fill the bathtub, She-she. You look like you could use a bath, and I still have your bootee pajamas from last time."

Sheanna grinned. They were pink, fuzzy and warmed her from her neck to her toes. Granny used special shampoo to take the itches away, and her soap smelled like flowers. Then Granny would brush her hair until it shined like gold, and read her Bible stories until she fell asleep in a nice warm bed. In the morning, there would be scrambled eggs, toast with jelly and real orange juice. If she was real lucky, it would be days before Mom and Cullen would come and get her. Maybe this time they would think she just disappeared and leave her alone.

"Honey," Granny LouAnn said, with a very serious look on her face, "how would you like to go see your Aunt Beth and Uncle Phil down in Mississippi? I've been dreaming of going home since your dear Pappy died, and I want to take you with me. They have a huge house right near the beach, and you'll love it there. You'll have other kids to play with, and you will never, ever go hungry or be hurt again, I promise."

"But I thought you said I had to stay with Mom or you go to jail. Why can't we stay here? Just don't answer the door when they come knocking. That's what Cullen does."

LouAnn traced her fingers over the scars that criss-crossed Sheanna's legs. Then she pulled a small disposable camera from her purse and started taking pictures of the welts on the girl's legs, then her arms and neck. Sheanna knew to keep very still so the pictures wouldn't be blurry.

"Cullen is a terrible man. I tried doing it the legal way, and it just got you hurt worse and locked up like an animal. Now I'm going to do it my way—if you want. Your Uncle Phil is a police officer, and he will help me find the right people so we can keep you forever."

The smile that lit up Sheanna's pixie face was the answer LouAnn was looking for.

"Finish up, baby," she said as she marched toward the phone. "I'm gettin' us a ride home."

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**Frances Roberts'** *love of reading has filled her mind with stories since grade school. She is married with three children and lives in Grand Bay, Alabama. She is a student at the University of South Alabama (Ed. Specialist), and teaches Compensatory English at Colmer Middle School in Pascagoula*

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Short Story

The Affair

Larry Wilson

George talked to himself, especially when he was driving. Sometimes at red lights, during a fine conversation, he noticed people in other cars staring at him. Often that caused him to stop talking and look straight ahead but today he simply ignored them.

“What a beautiful day it is, George, and you’re one lucky man, yes you are. You’re going to see Wanda today and you’ve got some of the best bear claws and pecan sticky buns the world has ever known. She’s going to love them. And you’ve got Starbucks coffee, extra large mocha lattes, with chocolate and caramel, topped with pillows of whipped cream, and dusted with sprinkles of dark chocolate. No McDonald’s for Wanda and George today.”

He turned into the parking lot next to the lake and pulled into a slot on the opposite side, far away from her blue Buick. “There she is George, just like she said she’d be, on the bench under the willow tree. Good, no one will see us there.”

George looked around to make sure no one was watching before grabbing the sack of pastries and the tray holding the big coffee containers and heading toward Wanda. He stopped once to catch his breath and then walked the rest of the fifty yards to her side.

“Hi darling,” he gasped trying to catch his breath, and kissed her on the forehead.

“George, stop that,” she said giggling. “Someone might see us.”

“I wish they would and we could stop this charade. I’ve missed you so much, Wanda, it seems more like it’s been a month, no a year, rather than a week since I’ve seen you. Look what I’ve brought; bear claws and

pecan sticky buns from Tony's bakery, and Starbucks coffee just the way you like it."

"Oh George, you spoil me. I brought you some homemade brownies with chocolate bits and walnuts. I made them after Bill left for work and cleaned up the kitchen real good so he won't know. He's always nagging me about what I eat and wanting me to exercise. He knew I was from a family of heavy people when he married me. I'm so sick of him."

"You shouldn't have to put up with that, darling, he doesn't appreciate you. Let's eat your brownies first; they'll taste so much sweeter because you made them."

The smell of the brownies reminded him of his mother's kitchen, but here with Wanda there was a touch of sensuality and the exotic mixed in. The brownies were still warm and the chocolate bits soft against his tongue. They devoured the first ones in seconds and Wanda pulled two more from the sack which were consumed almost as quickly. A small bit of chocolate remained on the corner of Wanda's mouth and George gently rubbed it off with his finger. Wanda grabbed his hand and slowly licked the chocolate off before wrapping her lips around his finger in a wet kiss.

"George, let's have some of the mocha latte." Wanda said. She looked up into his eyes and ran her tongue slowly around her lips.

George passed her a latte with trembling hands and they both drank deeply, savoring the rich creaminess. The caffeine and sugar produced an instant rush, and he thought the mustache of whipped cream on her lip was one of the most sensuous things he'd ever seen.

"Wanda, how could cocaine possibly be as good as this? Brownies and mocha lattes, it has to be illegal it's so good."

"Let's eat the sticky buns next," Wanda said, and ran her left hand up his leg all the way to where his bulging stomach rested on his thighs. George took her hand in his and held it so tightly he could feel the groove in her ring finger from the plain gold band embedded so deeply it would

have to be cut off. They both looked around furtively to make sure no one was watching.

“I feel so guilty meeting you like this,” she said, and then ducked away as he tried to kiss her. “Please, George, let’s eat the sticky buns.”

George opened the bag and handed her a bun as big as a softball with caramel sauce running over the sides and topped with a crown of pecan halves. “Look at the balance of form and color,” he said. “I swear Tony is the Michelangelo of the bakery world. He creates masterpieces that should be kept in a museum’s locked display case and sells them to us to ravage.” He took a huge bite. The flesh of the bun was soft and light, the pecans crisp and fresh, and the gooey topping screamed brown sugar, butter, and cinnamon. Wanda made soft cooing sounds as she chewed. The sticky buns were gone in moments and George paused for a gulp of latte.

He could feel his heart racing from the mixture of sugar, caffeine, and Wanda’s presence but he refused to think about what it was doing to his dangerously high blood pressure. At this moment nothing, even death, was as important as the remaining two bear claws. He lifted them out of the sack with reverence and handed one to Wanda. Their white frosting glittered and the dark brown filling smiled up from between the claws.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, before she bit down languidly. Her eyes closed and her breathing became quicker with each bite until, as she swallowed the last morsel, she shuddered and trembled for seconds before collapsing against the back of the bench.

“God that was good,” she gasped. Grabbing his hand and pulling it to her mouth she kissed it, and then bit down until he winced in pain. “I love you George, more than I’ve ever loved any man.”

“I love you too, Wanda. Leave Bill and go away with me.” Knowing even as he said it he had crossed an invisible line between them.

“I can’t do that, you know I can’t. Why can’t you be happy with what we have? I love you, but I can’t leave Bill, it would kill him.”

George tried to put his arm around her but she pulled away.

“I’ve got to go. Please, George, let go of me.” Standing up she grabbed the bag of brownies and started off. A few yards away she turned and walked back. “Here, I made these for you. I’ll just take one to nibble on while I drive.” She took two and handed him the sack before leaning down and kissing him passionately. “Same time next week?”

“Of course, what would I do without these moments with you?”

“Give me a few minutes before you leave in case there’s someone around who knows us.”

A great sadness settled on him as he watched her walk away. “I’ll wait five minutes,” he said to himself, and began collecting the bags, napkins, and cups. Inside the bag from Tony’s he found a small shred of sticky bun and ate it. There was a swallow of cold latte in a cup which he drank before throwing everything into a garbage can.

In the bag she’d left one brownie for him. “I think I’ll keep this one and have it preserved so I’ll have something to remember her by if she ever leaves me.”

George shuffled slowly to his car, stopping twice to rest. Getting in he adjusted the tilt steering wheel to its highest point to clear his stomach, and sighed as he looked out over the lake. “The next week will seem like an eternity,” he said, and removing the last brownie from the sack, ate it before driving away.

Larry Wilson is a retired Air Force officer who lives on the lip of the Wetumpka meteor crater overlooking Montgomery. He is a member of several creative writing groups and past president of Montgomery Creative Writers. He writes primarily short fiction, but if sufficiently depressed, an occasional poem sneaks out.

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# ***Egg Handler's Daughter***

**Betty Spence**

Looking for shadows he hoped not to find, there was no poetry, no lore in holding on the slant the pointed end of egg after egg after egg over the glow of forty watts pushing its way up through a hole in the shiny lid of a *dis sho' am good* Uncle Remus syrup can.

When daddy set his mind to candling marketable commodities as fragile as an old man's bones, he was hardly distracted by notions of the world having been hatched from some cosmic egg or other. White was white: yolk was, well you know. Shells were shells and not containers for matter and thought.

He never once called out for me to look over his shoulder and see inside what let light in at every pore. But now as I let myself into a shadowy room called remember, a room smelling faintly of cinnamon and menthol, I watch as he anoints work-strutted hands with camphor oil.

Tripping the light fantastic I see a philosopher gazing at candlelight without blinking. See fingers, fingernails, a palm glowing with the brilliant red glow of a neon lamp. See a hand throwing no shadows. A hand letting light in at every pore.

I close the door and smile to think that if ever an egg like a sun danced on jets of light passing through the Candler's hands, he was sure to have missed the show.

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**Betty Spence** is a frequent poetry contest winner. She is author of "Pinned-on Wings" and co-author of *Reading the Silences*. She was named **Poet of the Year by the Alabama State Poetry Society in 1998**. Betty lives in west Mobile with her son, Chuck.

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Pick It Up, Please!

Linda Hudson Hoagland

I started collecting secrets when I was just six years old. Perhaps I could find another this day as I helped the Labor of Love Collection Depot in my small town of North Stillwell.

“Lisa, you can work on that stack of junk over there in the corner,” Mary said as she pointed to an unsightly pile of personal belongings from someone’s life.

“Sure, okay,” I said as I grimaced at the stack to be sorted and distributed to the correct areas of the warehouse.

I shouldn’t grumble, I thought, I volunteered to help in any way that I could.

Clothes, shoes, curtains, dishes, pots, and pans were haphazardly piled into the boxes and then unceremoniously dropped into the corner that was the furthest away from the shelves and bins.

Maybe they are trying to tell me something by making me walk so much, I thought as I glanced down my oversized, round body.

“Just shut up, Lisa, and get it finished now,” I told myself gruffly.

I spoke the words out loud and managed to get a lot of quizzical glances from others walking near me.

I talked to myself a lot since my husband died. It was mainly because I was almost always alone.

Retirement didn’t help me with combating all of the alone time but I definitely didn’t miss the daily grind of trying to make the boss happy.

Oh well, I thought, I’m not the first person to ever talk to herself and I’m sure I won’t be the last.

I picked up a pair of jeans and searched the pockets for items that shouldn’t be in there.

I felt something; a piece of paper was folded up and shoved to the very tip of the front pocket.

I pulled at the small, folded paper and began the process of straightening it so I could read it. I wanted to find a secret, not that I wanted to tell anyone else, but it would be interesting to know a hidden fact about one of my neighbors. That way I could smile a knowing smile when I bumped into them and move on letting them wonder.

My jaw dropped when I started reading the handwritten words with letters written in bold, black, permanent ink.

To the Person Who Finds Me:

I'm so tired of being lonely with nothing or nobody to live for each day. I don't want to go on anymore. Please forgive me,

Larry Questor

I knew a Larry Questor but I hadn't seen him for a while. I hoped that he had not ended his life, especially from loneliness. I had thought about doing the same thing, once or twice. I wasn't desperate enough or brave enough to carry out the act.

I kept the note and vowed that I would look up Larry Questor. I really wanted to talk with him if he was still among the living. I wanted him to know that loneliness was not a good enough reason to end it all.

I worked about another hour to finally reach the bottom of the stack.

I drove home with my mind completely focused on trying to locate Larry Questor.

I greeted my three cats at the front door and performed my kitty obligations of feeding my feline children.

Then it was my next step to turn on my computer. While it did its thing of booting itself up, I located my telephone book.

I looked up Questor, Larry in the white pages. No listing—that meant he probably had an unlisted number.

I decided to search through the small pieces of paper in my handbag. I think he gave me his card when I saw him last. I'm a little old-fashioned and did not call him at that time. I felt that if he wanted to talk with me, he could call me at the numbers I had handed him that were imprinted on my business card.

Next, I would need to search for his name on the computer.

“There it is!” I shouted as I grabbed the piece of paper on which his phone number was printed.

I dialed the number and held my breath.

“Come on, Larry, pick it up, please,” I mumbled as I heard the phone ring and ring.

After the tenth ring without an answer, I headed to my computer.

I was going to enter his name into the search engine to see if I could find anything important listed about him out there for the world to see.

The world of the Internet seemed to be filled with Larry Questors. I was so surprised to see that many men with the same name.

The next step was, Larry Questor, followed by Virginia. Another bunch of items popped up but not as many as there was for Larry Questor alone.

I couldn't find any references that led me to believe that any of the Larry Questors I was seeing before me was the one for which I was searching.

Then it occurred to me that he could be from West Virginia. My little town was located less than twenty miles from the state line. Maybe I was looking in the wrong state.

Larry Questor and West Virginia took me to a reference to a school teacher.

“That’s him!” I shouted which made my cats look at me to see what was going to happen to them. Usually when I raised my voice, it was because I was after them for one reason or another but mostly for scratching and sharpening their claws on my furniture.

I continued to scan through the references and saw nothing that indicated he was dead.

My husband’s obituary could be found referenced to my name. I knew if Larry Questor had died, an obituary would have been published, and it would be referenced somewhere in the Internet world.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I did not find a listing for his next of kin.

At least he is still alive, I thought as I returned to my easy chair next to my phone so I could try his phone number again if I had the right number. Hopefully, he had not changed his number or cancelled his service as many people were doing nowadays, giving up a land line for only the cellular phone connection.

I punched in the numbers and waited.

“Hello,” said Larry as he struggled to gain control of his breathing.

“Larry Questor, is that you” I asked.

“Yeah, this is Larry. Who am I talking to?” he asked as he continued to try to control his breathing.

“It doesn’t sound like you, Larry,” I said.

“Been running to get to the phone, who is this?” he demanded.

“Lisa Hutchins. You met me at the Appalachian Arts Center,” I explained.

“Oh yeah, right. How are you, Lisa?” he said with a little more courtesy flavoring his tone of voice.

“I’m fine, but I want to know how you are doing?” I asked softly.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, I heard you endured an ugly divorce and then you were forced into retirement. I know you didn’t want to retire. You weren’t ready yet. So—how are you doing?” I said again.

There was a long pause that was filled with silence, so much silence that I thought he had disconnected the line.

“I’m okay, Lisa. I don’t like being retired and alone all of the time so I went back to teaching as a substitute. I get called out a couple of times a week to fill in for absent teachers. Things are a lot better now. Thank you for asking,” he said.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. I don’t want anything else from you. I just want to know you’re okay,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

I didn’t want to tell him I had found his note. I didn’t want him to know that I had discovered that deep, dark secret from his past. I didn’t want to tell him that I, too, had had those same thoughts but not because of the death of a marriage. I had lost my partner, my husband, my lover of twenty-five years when his heart failed to work.

I knew when I first met Larry he thought I was husband hunting. My husband had passed on about a year earlier, but finding a replacement for Vern was the furthest thing from my mind.

It has been four years since he died and I’m still not looking for a replacement, a little companionship and/or conversation, but nothing permanent.

Just like, Larry, I am afraid of the word permanent but not because it might be a relationship that will end in divorce. On the contrary, I do not want to watch another man die.

“Larry, I will see you when you stop in the Appalachian Arts Center the next time for one of the receptions. It’s time for me to go. Bye.”

I hung up the telephone and smiled. It felt good to know that Larry Questor was still alive.

*Published in seventeen books of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, **Linda Hoagland** has won awards for works in all of those genres and more. She won First Writing Prize – Summer 2012 in the Dream Quest One Contest for her short story “I Am Mom.”*

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# ***A Song for MamaLoo***

***Peggy Wilkins***

## **Chapter 1 - 1897**

She lay on the make-shift cot in a small cedar-lined closet in a brothel in Storyville, a place where good women might sneak a quick glance and cultured men pretended they would never tread; it was red-light district of New Orleans. Gas lamps beyond the closet dotted the dark, smoke-infused hallway and staircase with soft, golden halos throughout the house. She could smell a mixture of Carolina tobacco and cheap perfume wafting their way throughout the hallways like ghosts wandering aimlessly.

The sounds of giggling, tinkling ice in glasses of her mother's rye whiskey, and the occasional angry out-burst kept her from drifting off into the escape of sleep. Even though it was mid-October, the air was thick with the humidity of the Deep South, causing her to be restless. She knew she must be quiet to slip out of her closet unseen. Desiring a glass of water, and fresh air from the back porch, she pushed herself out of the twisted sheets of the lumpy cot. Tip-toeing softly down the stairs, aware that she must avoid stair-step number three and its groan beneath her bare feet, Claire had reached the bottom of the staircase when she heard the familiar, harsh, gravel-sounding voice.

"What are you doing up?" It was her mother sitting in the semi-darkness of the parlor—catching her in her attempt to steal into the night. She always sounded angry. Claire was old enough to realize that her mother was not as pretty as some of the other women at the house. Her face was puffy and her white skin was covered in too much rouge. It seemed odd to her that her mother painted her eyebrows on and Claire wondered what happened to her original eyebrows. Nobody wanted to be

with her, but she made a good drinking partner for the lone man who needed a set of ears to listen to his problems. Clair noticed when men came around her mother, she was like left-over food, the last to be chosen because of its staleness.

“I just want some water, Mama.”

“Be quick with it then,” she brushed the child off with a flash of her hand.

Claire quickly slipped into the back of the house and ladled out a small glass of water. Stepping out onto the back porch that faced an alley, she could hear low sounds coming from the French Quarter; a horse snorting softly in the distance, and a dog barking closer by. She felt restless and at the young age of twelve, she was already thinking ahead to new places. The one thing she was most proud of was that she had taught herself to read. One of the women living at the house knew a few letters, and prodded her on in learning the sounds of them. It was easier than she thought and she could count, too, and understood the value of money. She had saved some coins from tips for small errands she had run. She wondered how far she could get on the few dollars she had been saving, if and when she decided to leave this place. No one knew she had money saved, it was her secret alone.

“What choo doin’ out here, young Claire?” said the friendly voice of MamaLoo. MamaLoo was sitting in an old rocking chair out beyond the porch on the paved courtyard, puffing her pipe.

“MamaLoo, you surprised me! I came for some water.”

MamaLoo, always perceptive, looked at Claire with a knowing eye. “You can’t sleep, can you?”

“No, and I don’t like it here no more, MamaLoo.”

MamaLoo already knew that. She had noticed a change in Claire. It was more than just Claire growing physically, she knew that the child was changing emotionally, distancing herself from an irrational mother. She knew her better than her own mama. MamaLoo was the one

constant in Claire's life and had been with her the day she was born, the day the storm blew into New Orleans.

"Come tell me about it, honey," MamaLoo said in her soothing contralto voice.

Claire looked at her and pulled up a chair. She loved the familiarity of MamaLoo. She smelled like fresh peach pie and had a certain softness about her that her own mother didn't have. She was older than her mother and Claire loved her because she knew MamaLoo loved her, no matter what she did. When MamaLoo smiled, it made Claire smile; MamaLoo had the prettiest white teeth, set in a round, creamy-brown face. Graying at her temples and with her hair in a bun—to Claire MamaLoo was perfect.

"I'm tired of the way Mama treats me, always yelling and telling me how stupid I am. I want to go someplace, any place where I don't have to listen to her hollering. I know my mama doesn't really want me around, I know I get in her way and see too much."

MamaLoo shook her head in silent agreement.

"You know you need to grow up a little bit more; you're just too young to take out on your own."

The old woman worried deeply for Claire. She suspected that Claire's mother had plans for the girl's future at the brothel and that did not sit well with MamaLoo. She would guard Claire fiercely from being used in such a manner, but MamaLoo knew she wouldn't be allowed to voice her opinion when it came to Claire's future. She might just have to leave, taking Claire with her to protect her from what threatened to be a gloomy future. MamaLoo worried about that, for she had no place of her own to go. Claire looked at MamaLoo and could see that she was lost in her own thoughts, but Claire had her own ideas. She wanted to save at least two more dollars, and then she believed she would have enough money to leave. To go where, she didn't know. She might start walking and see where the road led her.

MamaLoo puffed her pipe in the silence of the night. The smoke from it was sweet and made swirls in the night sky.

“Rain is coming,” MamaLoo said with the assurance of one who has witnessed many a storm. Claire knew she was right; she always was. Claire was sitting close enough to lay her head on MamaLoo’s arm. MamaLoo patted and swirled Claire’s hair in her fingers. She started humming, which led into a soft song to sooth Claire. The girl listened to the first two verses of “Amazing Grace,” then joined in softly singing. MamaLoo smiled. Claire had grown up singing with MamaLoo and had her Creole voice inflection, and she could keep a tune. MamaLoo thought Claire’s voice was beautiful, reminding her of a sweet, singing sparrow. At the end of the song, Claire yawned deeply and kissed MamaLoo on her cheek.

“Get you some sleep young ‘un; we gonna talk more tomorrow,” MamaLoo assured her.

Claire sipped her water and quietly headed back up the staircase to her closet.

The next morning, the stale New Orleans air was warm and sticky. Bourbon Street was waking up, even though it never really slept. The sun was slowly rising in the eastern sky. In the quietness of the morning, the sounds of keelboats and paddle-wheelers docking in New Orleans, with stevedores shouting out orders, could be heard in the distance. The muddy, brown water of the Mississippi splashed against the banks and the smell of decaying fish filled the entire area when the wind wasn’t blowing. A grey, damp fog descended so thickly, the sun couldn’t break its barrier. Everything was damp and the morning dew coated the glass window panes on every building.

Claire crawled out of her cot and rubbed her eyes. She could hear MamaLoo in the kitchen below already making coffee and heating water for grits. She slipped her plaid dress on and pulled her smock over it. She put on black stockings and leather lace-up boots then rubbed the

sleep from her face. She didn't have a hairbrush, but tried to smooth her strawberry-blonde hair down with her hands. It was useless; her curly hair had other ideas and she eventually gave up trying to tame something so wild.

She walked quietly down the old, wooden staircase, once again avoiding step number three. MamaLoo shoved a biscuit into her hand and said, "Honey you got to get to Mrs. Slanksy's for some milk from dat ol' cow of hers. Get a nickel out of the can and that'd pay for last week's milk too."

Claire reached for the rusted tin can on an upper shelf and took out a nickel. She grabbed her bonnet off a peg and headed out the back, slamming the screen door in the process. MamaLoo, ever patient, smiled and watched her girl leave. Claire already seemed like a young lady and the thought sent a chill to MamaLoo because she knew Claire's mother, Madam Anna, would notice the girl's good looks blossoming as well. It amazed her to think Claire was Madam Anna's child; they were worlds apart from each other in looks and in character.

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*Born in Long Beach, California, **Peggy Wilkins** and is an Alabama transplant and graduate of the University of South Alabama. After retiring from education, she discovered her love of Southern literature and writing. She is the mother of two daughters and lives in Daphne, Alabama, with her husband and assorted pets.*

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The Memory Book

Linda F. Willing

My son gave me this book. He thinks there's something wrong with me.

I know there is.

"You're just absent-minded, Dad," he says. "Maybe this book will help." He laughs, like maybe he's kidding. But not long ago he had me sign papers giving him all my legal powers. He told me it was nothing, just a formality. He thinks I don't know what he's done, and what he will do.

This book has exercises and advice for how to remember things. Mostly it seems stupid, like thinking of Color A Toe for Colorado and Flower-there for Florida. Make lists, it says. Look for rules and patterns. Think in pictures. The mind never thinks without a mental picture.

I take it all very seriously and I underline as I work my way through the book. I want my son to be wrong.

All memory is based on association. I underline that. You can remember any new piece of information if it is associated with something you already know.

I know there are homes on the Great Lakes. Homes stands for Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.

I know Every Good Boy Does Fine.

I know my son is only interested in the things he can take from me.

Christmas always comes after Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving has turkey and Christmas has Santa Claus. Santa's reindeer: Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Comet, Donner, Blixen.

My underlining is unsteady and blacks out the words.

Spelling is remembering. Mississippi is M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I. It's like a song. It is always a PIEce of PIE. Or maybe a piece of cake. That's easy: Chocolate, vanilla, devil's food. Eating and drinking. Breathing.

Hands and feet. Mouth and nose. Head, shoulders, knees and toes. Color A Toe.

I picture my son as a little boy holding my hand. He always wanted to and I made him stop. I told him, men don't do that. Grow up. Now he is this man who never touches me. Who would never associate with me at all if he didn't have to.

He thinks I failed him. I know he's right. That is what he will remember about me for the rest of his life.

I know where I am going even as I don't know where I am. I can see it. And I am alone.

The five senses: See, hear, smell, taste.

Something is missing. I've forgotten what.

Linda F. Willing has published short fiction in several literary journals. She is a retired career firefighter and the author of the book *On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories*. Linda divides her life between the gulf coast of Alabama and the mountains of Colorado.

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*Short Story*

# **November 4<sup>th</sup>**

***Linda Hudson Hoagland***

A light snow was falling as Charlie Reardon left the diner and made his way down Madison Street. That was the last thing he remembered about Thursday, November 4<sup>th</sup>.

He didn't know why he couldn't remember, but he just couldn't. Maybe he didn't want to remember; maybe that was it.

He tried to figure out what happened. He strained his memory thinking back to November 4<sup>th</sup> and all he saw displayed before him was the snow as it began to fall.

He was sitting in his usual spot in his wheeled chair, staring out the window, watching for his home health nurse to arrive. He never did see Martha, his nurse, but she said she had been there for more than an hour that day of November 4<sup>th</sup> that he can't remember.

He should remember. He never gets to leave this room unless someone comes to haul him out in an ambulance to take him to the hospital. He doesn't bother with doctor's offices anymore. He bypasses them and goes straight to the emergency room.

There was a knock at the door.

"Must be Martha," he said as he rolled to his door where he snapped the lock and then rolled away so she could enter the room.

"How are you doing, Charlie?" Martha asked cheerfully.

"Okay, I guess. I didn't lose any more time so I guess I'm doing just fine," he answered with a smile spreading across his lips.

Charlie loved the daily visit from Martha. He was so alone most of the time and it was wonderful to hear the sounds from other humans, especially the cheerful, happy tones spoken by Martha.

Charlie's loneliness was almost constant, broken up only by the visits from Martha and the landlady who only wanted to collect his rent which was contrary to what Martha believed.

"Charlie, I told you, you probably had a stroke or a little series of them that caused your memory to stop recording the events that were happening while they were actively shutting off the blood and oxygen traveling to your brain."

"Yeah, I know that's what you said, but I thought your hands drew up into claw like objects and your face pulled to one side or the other so you looked like you're grotesquely disfigured."

"Sometimes there is not any sign of a problem, just the loss of memory. I guess what's what happened to you, Charlie. Did you ever go to the doctor and get checked out?" she asked displaying concern on her face and in her voice.

"Yeah, I told him about it yesterday but he didn't seem to think it was anything," Charlie answered.

"Well, I think he is wrong, Charlie."

"So do I, but I don't think I have been having strokes," Charlie said.

"You're in denial, Charlie. I see that happen with a lot of my elderly patients," Martha added.

Charlie jerked his head up at Martha's statement. He didn't consider himself old, not yet, not at fifty-nine.

"I'm old? You think I'm elderly, do you?" snapped Charlie.

"No, no, Charlie. I wasn't talking about you," said an apologetic Martha.

"Really now?"

"Charlie, don't be mad at me. I was talking about what ails you. It usually afflicts people much older than you. I'm sure that's why you are in denial."

“Denial? What do you mean by that?” Charlie snapped back at Martha.

“Well, you won’t admit you could have had a stroke. That’s denial, Charlie. I’m almost positive that’s what happened to you. It couldn’t be anything else.”

“Why not? Why couldn’t it be anything else?”

“You are living in an assisted living facility, Charlie. The lady that runs this place is here to help you, take care of you.”

“She doesn’t do anything for me except collect my rent,” said an indignant Charlie.

“Sure she does. She checks on you all the time. Agnes calls me when she thinks you’ve been quiet for too long,” added Martha.

“Since when? Who is Agnes?” Charlie demanded.

“Since you’ve been here, Charlie. Agnes, your landlady, looks after you all of the time,” explained Martha.

“Why don’t I remember what she has done?” he asked softly.

“It might be the mini strokes or the medication you take,” said Martha patiently.

“Why do you keep telling me I’m having mini strokes?” asked Charlie.

“Because it’s true, Charlie,” she answered firmly.

“No, the doctor never told me that,” he snapped.

“What did he tell you?” Martha asked.

“I haven’t been to see the doctor for a long time,” Charlie said.

“Yes, you have. You saw him yesterday. Remember?”

“No, no,” he sputtered angrily. “I haven’t seen him for a long time.”

Martha nodded in agreement. That was the only way to calm him down. Charlie seemed to be getting worse. His memory was fading much more quickly and his temper was getting short. He would need twenty-four hour care soon. It would take more than Agnes to look after him. He

could be so strong when he was in a fighting mood. The Alzheimer's was putting him in that belligerent frame of mine.

"Charlie, your blood pressure is up a little today. Are you worried about anything to make it go up a little?" asked Martha with a frown on her face.

"No, no, just waiting for Martha to get here, that's all. She should be here any time now," Charlie said as he watched the light snow falling. It reminded him of the time he left the diner on Madison Street when he was a young man of twenty-two.

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*Published in 17 books of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, **Linda Hoagland** has won awards for works in all of those genres and more. She won First Writing Prize – Summer 2012 in the Dream Quest One Contest for her short story "I Am Mom."*

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Not This Time

Margie Tubbs

Doctor leaning over me is all in white, his eyes tired, but not as tired as mine. His head's still capped. I'm groggy, barely able to peek out from under my eyelids. Anesthetic killed everything but the pain.

He shakes my arm. "We couldn't save the baby."

I can't open my eyes, but I can squeeze my face into a fist. I have to wake up now. It's one of those repeated dreams, glimpses. The doctor says the same thing every time. "I'm sorry, but we couldn't save the baby."

I see him looming over me, white-coated, poker-faced, each word slow, guttural. I dismiss him as an apparition. Face to the wall, I rub my head to brush away the haze. I squint and blink but still don't know that wall. My middle finger catches the elastic of a microfiber cap and there are clinking noises. No tears. Just a room swirling with reality. Recovery. Will I ever?

I told the doctor about the dreams. I thought he should know that one of us was going to die. He said all first-time mothers think they're going to die.

He didn't know that dreams are angels that forewarn. My husband sees me for the first time. "You lost my son," he says. I wasn't forewarned about this.

Six months later, I'm pregnant again. Another doctor this time. He says not to worry. "There's usually some little something wrong with the first baby." I nod. Doctors understand, and I don't.

My son and his wife have been wanting a baby for a year, a long time to them, and a baby girl is coming today. They've induced labor, so

there's no hurry. How long did it take for my first one? Twenty-five hours or so? It's a four-hour drive, so there's plenty of time, isn't there?

I call to check her progress. Caesarean? "Something's wrong," I say to my husband. "Drive faster." He speeds though the yellow light, the caution light.

My black suit is hanging on the hook against the window, and my husband's is on the other side against the opposite window.

Caution now.

My cousin's husband died in Kentucky, and if things go well after the baby is born, we are heading that way for the funeral.

Caution again.

A familiar knowing grinds my teeth. *Damn it, God. Haven't I suffered enough for them, too? Black suits don't count as forewarning. They are not dream angels. They are real fabric hanging on hooks above the back seat. God, stay your hand. Spare them the pain of "Sorry we couldn't save the baby."*

But this is their first baby. *"There's usually some little something wrong with the first baby."*

Not this time. This time will be different.

We make it to the waiting room, and her family is there, except her mother who is in the operating room with her. Her sister says she hasn't heard anything. It has been forty-five minutes.

We stare at each other, a tickertape of thoughts spitting out our eyes. "Too long," I say finally, and fear is invited into the space between us.

Ten more minutes, and their mom comes out, smiling slightly. "She cried," she says. "A weak cry, but a cry. Cord around her neck. They took her to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. We can see her through the window."

The walk to NICU seems miles, and halfway there I stop to breathe. Finally. I get my first glimpse of her. Thank God, she's fat like her grandmother.

They prick her arm to get blood. Nothing. Shine a light through her wrist and try again. Call for someone else. The baby's not crying, barely moving. "Something's not right," the other grandmother says, but I don't know what it could be.

My baby was going home to a chest full of clothes and parents who loved him before something went wrong and he couldn't breathe. He was alive, they said, and then died when he couldn't breathe.

"She's breathing good," I say, and they respond with lackluster stares.

Back in the room, all seems normal. The mother hasn't seen the baby yet. I send the father and my new husband to the car to bring in the birthday cake so we can celebrate.

While they're out, the phone rings. Doctor on the line. The baby's mother is a nurse, and she understands; her face has the anguish of something going wrong. Transfusions. I understand transfusions, but they're saying numbers and unfamiliar words.

My son comes back carrying the cake. Why do I take cakes when my grandchildren are born? Because my ex-husband brought a cake when my son was born, and this seemed like a good tradition to keep. Keep the tradition, throw out the husband. The cake says *Happy birthday, Collins*; yet I've only seen one occasion that was more unhappy.

The couple holds each other and cries. No tears for me. Facial tics scrunch and release my nose and cheeks. A nun enters. "Anyone want communion?" She holds a wafer in the crucifix position, and we are all broken in pieces as she shatters it like a dropped plate with her thumb.

We extend our hands for the body of Christ.

But where's his blood? She didn't bring blood.

Blood is the issue here, isn't it? Not the body? There's no blood in the infant or the Eucharist.

A leak somewhere?

The mother hasn't seen the baby. They bring her in, mummy wrapped. Just hold her a moment before the transfusion. And pray. There are no unbelievers here today and no time for counting toes.

I wanted to hold my baby, but they kept me sedated. I never saw him. There was never a chance to count toes or touch his face or see the color of his hair. And his dad had a funeral without me. Lifelong pain. God, don't let them know it.

There's a funereal air in the room. I understand that they think death awaits. It waits for all of us. I get the cake and pass it around. Stupid thing to do when everybody's heavy, pensive. It says, *Happy Birthday*, not *Happy Deathday*. *Can't you see? She'll be fine. We won't need those suits hanging in the car on hooks against the windows. We won't.*

What's your blood type? Baby needs O negative, and we have a room full of family with O negative. Later for that. Right now they have some they will put into her vein slowly through her heel. The phone rings again. The transfusion took, and her color has begun to come back. Will she break it down? The doctor hopes not, so I hope not, too.

I didn't have a breakdown after my baby died. I would have if I hadn't put it away, like pictures of old lovers in a box to look at later when the pain is a memory. I pretended it didn't happen. There're more lovers and babies. Honey, where did you bury him?

For hours we sit. More transfusions. Collins is pink now, a little fussy. Strangers are comforting her, watching to see if the blips on the screen go up or down. I ask them what they mean, and they say don't watch those too closely or you'll be alarmed. Not me. You know what they say about ignorance. I hug my son, proof that there are other children.

We wait at the hospital four days to hear something. She wasn't meant to live, they say. She had almost no blood. Maybe the doctor didn't clamp the cord. No, that isn't where her blood went. It leaked out into the mother while she was still in the womb. The doctors aren't sure what happened.

The pediatrician finally says that as far as he can tell, she's perfect. She's a miracle. Time will tell about developmental delays. Time will tell.

Time is like that. It tells things if we wait long enough. What was wrong with my baby that he had curds like buttermilk in his lungs and couldn't breathe? Thirty-five years after the little mound at the graveyard a doctor friend casually told me: the doctor left him in there too long. If only he had listened to me! Would it have mattered?

We go home and put the black suits away. The black suits and their forebodings were wrong. We didn't need to wear them after all. Not this time.

Even the doctors couldn't understand why there wasn't another little mound. I'd try to explain it to them, but I don't think they'd get it. It is much more complicated than the stuff they learn from medical books.

Margie Addison Tubbs and her husband Dennis live in Mobile, AL. Her first novel, *The Silver Grays*, was published last year and is available on Amazon. She has four brilliant grandchildren. Baby Collins will soon be a year old and is meeting all milestone markers with no hint of disability.

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Poetry

# *Eve Speaks*

**Mickey Cleverdon**

What if God had prized my banished Cain's  
produce, the plump brown figs, the seeds of grain,

more than Abel's larded slab of newborn sheep,  
or was it just a toss of die, which one to keep?

I watched them from our barely more than cave,  
going out early each morning to slave

till nightfall, never talking, and my God,  
it seemed to me a miracle that they got

anything from that sour land. Labor  
intensive! How many skins of water,

how many hours spent over each plant, each lamb,  
each one, a victory. At last the day came

when they brought before the Lord their finest  
gifts. Had anyone said it was a contest?

What difference could it make? A male-thing, who won?  
And if Cain's sweet offerings, his fruit, his corn,

had pleased God more, would Abel turn and sulk,  
then ask Cain, in brotherly love, "Come walk

with me awhile?" They had never done  
that before. Would Abel's fat-fed blood run

sizzling through his frame, cry out, "Not fair,"  
and to the blood-stained earth, "Not fair."

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**Mickey Cleverdon** and artist husband John, retired teachers living on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay, have collaborated on woodcut/poetry shows and a chapbook, *Questions of Form*, published by Slo Loris Press. Mickey's poems have appeared in *Negative Capability*, *Penumbra*, *Red Bluff Review*, and *Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry*.

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Short Story

Yellowed Picture

Mahala Church

My mind drifts, enjoying the evening breeze whispering across the front porch and tickling my skin. My birthday celebration is over. My kinfolks went home. We've settled on the front porch to watch the drowsy day put itself to bed. Momma and Granny are still a bit standoffish because I'm a nosy rosy—that's what Momma calls me—a habit I can't seem to break. It wasn't like I dug to the bottom of the hope chest on a treasure hunt. I stumbled on the picture when I picked up a stack of embroidered handkerchiefs. That yellowed picture upset Granny something awful.

I jump when Grandpa snaps the Sunday paper closed and his metal glider squeaks in protest.

"Ruth, I'm sorry I bit your head off about that little picture," Granny says.

"It's okay," Momma says. "Caroline shouldn't have been digging around in Mae's hope chest."

Daddy winks at me. "Our daughter has an inquiring mind, but sometimes her enthusiasm inquires a bit too much. Let's forget it and enjoy the peace that passeth all understanding." He puts his arm around Momma and slowly pushes the porch swing with his foot.

"The child meant no harm, and well, it ain't okay," Granny says. "Sometimes God provokes us to do what we should have done a while back." She fiddles with the eyelet trim on the front of her dress. "Today, he provoked me by way of Caroline."

He did?

Grandpa peers over his reading glasses. "Bea, you sure?"

I wish he would call her by her real name. Beatitude is beautiful and should be said as often as possible. Granny's slat-back rocker talks to the wooden porch—clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop—crickets harmonize and lightning bugs dance across the yard. As dusk settles, Granny speaks softly.

“Tic, the day you come into this world, I was plum tuckered out. Naomi and I had put up corn all day, and the night did nothing to cool off the kitchen. I thought I was just bilious from the mess of cabbage I'd cooked for supper, but that evening God had more in mind than cabbage.”

“We should'a known,” Grandpa says. “You was smaller with the rest of 'em.”

Granny nods. “Yeah, probably should. I was big as the side of the house, could barely drag my feet, ankles like swelled anvils. I was ready to be shed of my fat belly, but I wished God had chosen a time when I wasn't wore out.” She rocks awhile, looks like she's coming to terms with something. If she doesn't quit worrying that eyelet, she'll shred it. Her rocker stills, and she stares into the shadowy evening.

“I named your eight brothers and sisters right out of my Bible, so it was purely odd that during that time of carrying, nary a boy nor a girl's name suited me. Anyway, into that sticky night, you came. You whimpered when you was born; my other young'uns squalled. You was a weak little feller. While Naomi cleaned you up, I spied a flour sack of White Lily in the kitchen. I was studying on calling you White when Naomi sent shivers up my back: “Beatitude, I see another baby in there.”

“Aunt Naomi delivered me?”

“Yep, she delivered bout all the babies in the county back then,” Grandpa says.

“Weren't no time before a baby girl no bigger than a fairy was born,” Granny says. “I knew right off her name was Lily. She never drew a breath, nary a one. Naomi rubbed her with toweling and paddled her

bump of a butt, but she didn't have it in her to breathe. That picture your daughter found tucked away is your twin sister."

And I thought Momma's people had secrets. Who takes pictures of dead babies?

The squeaks of Grandpa's glider and the patter of rockers keep time as the crickets discuss the situation. The chain on the swing creaks every time Daddy's foot pushes it back and forth, back and forth. I can barely see the bundle that is my brother asleep between Daddy and Momma. Daddy sits tall in the growing dark, stiff as a toy soldier. I tie my tongue in knots to keep from asking questions, so many questions.

"How come y'all kept it a secret?" Daddy squeezes out.

"Never meant to keep it a secret," Granny says. "One quick look at that tiny, pale blue fairy was a glimpse of magic."

I thought babies were pale pink.

"Well, we tucked that little sprite away in our hearts and never spoke about her again," Granny says. "We told Naomi to keep it to herself. Even your brothers and sisters, excepting Mae, don't know."

"So, where did my name come from?"

"Well, you was bout fairy sized your own self, so when Naomi handed you to me, I figured you'd be leaving me before the night was done. I wrapped you up tight like an Indian baby and stuffed you down my gown to keep you warm. I wanted to love on you while you passed over."

Granny stops to blow her nose and wipe her eyes. Her rocker is so close to mine, I can hear her swallow hard over and over. I want to pat her hand, but I'm afraid to move. It might stop the story.

"After Lily come, I dozed off and on. Like I said, I was tuckered out before the birthing started. Every time I woke, I felt your little heart beating against me: tick, tick, tick—steady as a clock."

“I always wondered why everybody else had a Biblical name and I was named after a bug.”

“That ain’t exactly what happened,” Grandpa says. “Your mother named you Toy Columbus.”

Momma’s voice crunches like a snow cone. I swear she’s making ice with her tongue. “I don’t think either of those names is in the Bible.” She gets on her high horse when somebody messes with Daddy. He tends to turn the other cheek. Momma prefers to slap it.

“Ruth, he was so tiny—like your David—and so much happened at one time.... Mae and me worked on a name for a spell. Kid-like, she thought up Toy on accounta he was tiny.”

“Bea said that Columbus feller liked adventure and twins was the closest she’d ever come to one,” Grandpa says with a smile in his voice. “I was right proud of it.”

“So my real name is Toy Columbus, not Tic.”

“Yes, son, it is,” Granny says. “We tried to call you Toy, but Tic was already in everybody’s mouths.”

Daddy’s lonesome voice drags across the porch, “My birth certificate says plain Tic.”

“That’s my fault,” Grandpa mumbles. “I kept meaning to get into the courthouse to fill out the papers on you and Lily, but it was harvest season...our old mule, Sal, was so old...I didn’t know if he could pull the wagon that far...with one thing and another...time got away....”

“So, how did Tic get on the birth certificate?” Daddy asks.

“I reckon the courthouse did it,” Grandpa says. “I never knew till you just told us.”

Aunt Mae takes a deep breath. “The next day Momma said she was so hungry she could eat a whole pig, so I made her biscuits and gravy with fried ham and eggs. She ate enough for a lumberjack while she nursed you. You reckon that’s why you love ham and eggs?”

All these reckons have to be driving Daddy crazy. It's one of his pet peeves. Your reckon's as good as my reckon, you reckon? I can't be quiet another second.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Daddy, but I think you got the best end of the deal."

"Caroline, hush," Momma spits ice cubes into the night. She is fit-to-be-tied.

I'm not letting this one go.

"Think about it. Daddy is blessed not to have a name like my uncles: Obadiah, Genesis, Ezra. Daddy, you ever meet anybody else named Obadiah?"

I thought he'd laugh. He didn't.

Quiet crawls all over everybody and grabs hold for a spell. When Daddy speaks, I'm curled in my rocker almost asleep.

"I want y'all to call me Toy from now on. I'm tired of being a blood sucking bug."

Aunt Mae starts to giggle and everyone laughs loud and long. I'm pretty sure Momma's laughter isn't involved. I can't see her face in the dark, but I can feel her anger peppering the porch.

I wish I'd never found that yellowed picture. Even more, I wish I hadn't asked about it. None of this would have happened if I'd kept my big mouth shut. On top of that, I probably hurt Granny's feelings making fun of my uncles' names. None of them will ever speak to me again.

The swing creaks. The glider squeaks. The rockers clip and clop.

Mahala Church, a Pushcart Prize nominee, is published in numerous anthologies, online blogs, and websites. Owner and resident, creative writing instructor at Barefoot Writing Academy, she is a professional editor and writer. A member of the founding board of Emerald Coast Writers, she co-founded Mobile Writers Guild and gives workshop presentations.

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*First Chapter Novel*

# ***The Year Ava Lee's Daddy Went Away***

***Linda S. Safford***

## **Chapter 1**

Two hours after midnight the baby's cry was heard amid anguished breaths of the delivery. He brushed her hand, left a note on the bedside table, nodded toward the midwife, and slung the duffle bag onto his back. "Don't let her suffer."

"The baby?"

"I have to go...I'm sorry...so, so sorry. If she doesn't make it there are instructions in the note for the baby. Please tell me you will do what I ask. This is killing me...but I have to go."

The midwife felt his anguish and understood he was not jilting her or the baby. She promised to carry out his wishes if the mother did not make it.

The streets were crowded with people moving quickly and speaking in hushed tones. He ventured through the maze of the village to a small embassy compound. He flashed an ID and asked the guard about his transportation just as the jeep arrived. Tossing the bag into the seat behind the driver, he looked back to the dim lights of the village where he would never again see the light of day.

"Sir, they are leaving at 0430 and this trip is three hours. We're not going to make it."

"Move...I'll drive."

The men traveled over jungle roads through axel deep river crossings and a mountain pass to get to the rendezvous point. His part of the operation was a success but Martin could only think of the way he

passed his time during the slow days of the assignment. The coffee shop, the food, her home, the family, the celebrations, the assignment being carried out and then the call to evacuate would now be only memories clouded with her lying near death after losing so much blood during delivery. He had ventured off the course and lost focus. He fathered a child now possibly motherless. His training sought to keep him emotionless. The pain in his heart was real and not something that could be mind controlled. A woman, a baby, plus a family back home. What he was leaving now had to remain in this distant land. He had to focus on getting out of the country. The mission had to leave no man behind. His mind flashed images of home. Adrenaline coursed through him. He focused on the unseen road and forced the vehicle to exceed its limitations. There was little conversation. Hours passed as minutes.

“Sir, over there...lights. We can’t be here already!”

“It’s where we need to be. The trip through the river valley shortened our time by 30 minutes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, this is the zone. Those are the hangars. There may be gunfire for cover or it could be the enemy. In any case, run toward the third hangar and don’t look back no matter what happens. The chopper will be waiting just behind the hangar.”

The jeep screeched to a stop on a crumbled edge of road. “GO!” The young man did as instructed and did not look back.

After disabling the jeep, Martin began the journey slapping at vines and moving as quickly as possible through thick underbrush. He arrived at the hangar just as his companion boarded the helicopter. Shots rang out as he ducked for cover and then made his last attempt to reach the helicopter. A man standing in the door yelled, “Come on!”

The helicopter began to hover. He moved with great strides and leapt to the doorway reaching for the extended arm. With a strong yank, he was in the airborne chopper. He looked back to see a line of fire

headed their way. Quick and precise maneuvers by the pilot moved them from the conflict zone to a safer area.

Radio communication gave the last call of the mission and Martin still could not breathe easily.

“Ready to be home, sir?” asked a medic who tended a bleeding gash on his hand.

Martin gave a quick nod, recognizing the young man’s attempt at calming him. His chest pounded from the drive, the run, the gunfire and the leap to the helicopter. His heart ached as he tried to assess his year away from home.

“Sir, you need to make the changes and get ready to meet the commercial flight when we land.”

“Same orders from Command?”

“No change, sir.”

He nodded as two other men passed him the familiar suitcase and a packet of mail.

“I think they wrote to you every week. We sent your letters back to them. You’ll be home in time for pecan harvest and Ava Lee’s homecoming dance.”

He shook his head and managed to laugh at the thought of Ava battling her Grandma over what would be permissible to wear to the prom.

“Any word on the rebels back in the village?”

“Yes, sir. They’ve overtaken and are holding. No more communication. It’s done.”

Martin nodded, opened the suitcase, and began his change back to civilian life.

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**Linda S. Safford**, a Florida Panhandle native, began writing stories at the prompting of her first grade teacher. She has been encouraged by writing mentors through the years and presently writes Southern fiction and creative nonfiction. She is a member of the Alabama Writers’ Conclave and Write On! Pensacola.

*Short Story*

# **My Turn**

**Jim Herod**

It wasn't my turn to be the bagboy at the downtown Fresh Food Market. Being the new guy, there was no way I was thinking about crashing in and breaking the rules, but Delores said my name. What was I going to do? She's the honcho over us bagboys. I looked at the two guys in line ahead of me and shrugged. They both gave me the finger, but...well...like I said, Delores called me over.

She knew we took turns and she knew it had pissed off the others that I got called ahead. "Bag him," was all she said, pointing at this man shuffling in his pockets for his plastic.

Seven of us worked for just about nothing at the last store in Birmingham to use bagboys. We didn't split the tips. It was every guy for himself. Tips were pretty important, usually more than five times the almost nothing that Fresh Food paid. Before I came on the scene, the other guys had agreed to form a line. Fate would declare who got the little old ladies with big pocketbooks and who got the lonely women who just wanted to talk. For the talkers, I say "Yes, ma'am" no more than two times, turn away, and head back to the line. Once in a while, just walking to the car behind a looker is all you're gonna get, and that's not always bad. For them, I do all the looking I can. One of these days, I'm going to say something like, "Is there anything else I can do for you?" I've been practicing the right kind of smile to have when I say that.

I'd never seen the guy waiting to have his stuff bagged. Too young to be a big tipper I figured. Sometimes, you can tell the big tippers by what they buy. This guy? A sack of dog food, frozen dinners, two six packs, and coffee. The usual for single guys, and this one didn't have a ring. He was looking at me. I nodded and smiled, but what I was really

interested in was what card he would use. His platinum American Express raised my hopes.

As we walked out of the store, I looked over at the other guys waiting their turn. All were practicing their sign language. I hope they noticed me pushing the cart with my middle finger over the handle.

Anyway, I looked at my man, wanting some directions. He pointed. I gave him my best smile. "Nice car." It was a BMW.

"Work hard and you can have one, too."

I'd put up with a short sermon from this guy for a big tip. "Yes, sir. I'm going to do that."

"What grade are you going to be in?"

"Eleventh."

"You skipped a grade."

"Second grade. How'd you know?"

"You're fifteen. Fifteen and one month."

Course, that shut me up, him knowing my birthday. I was putting his stuff in his car, wondering who was going to say what next. When I stood up, he handed me the tip. He didn't roll it up like they do when the tip is a skinny dollar bill. He handed it to me so I could see.

"Sir, you know this is a hundred dollar bill."

"A late birthday present."

I shoved the bill into my jeans and started backing away. I didn't want to talk any more with a man who hands me that kind of money, and I didn't care for any of the guys back at the store knowing how much I'd gotten. I turned and shoved the cart between us.

"How's your mama?"

That stopped me. I had to think about that. "She's okay. You know my mama?"

"Does your stepdaddy treat you okay?"

I didn't answer. I just looked at him. A lot of things were going through my head.

He went on talking. "I need to tell you something. I've been wanting to talk with you." He looked around the parking lot like he was wondering who might be listening. And then he started talking slowly as if the words were stuck in the back of his throat. "I was a med student at the University Hospital fifteen years ago. Fifteen years and a month, in fact. I was..."

I guess we both were wondering what was coming next.

"I was standing at the window, looking at you. In the nursery, you know." He stopped and let me soak that up. "I nodded to the nurse holding you."

I must have looked like some kind of idiot standing there, my brains hanging out. "You nodded to some nurse who was holding me? Why'd you do that?"

"She was on the other side of the glass, but I could hear her. The reason I nodded... ." He stopped and then started again. "The reason I nodded was to confirm that I was the father."

What would you think? Some guy comes up to you and tells you he's your dad, the person your mama won't talk about? I could hear my heart beating, him staring at me like he wanted me to say something. What was I going to say? Then, he kept on with his...with his...with his confession? "I shook my head," he stopped, coughed. "I told her I didn't want to hold you." He should have practiced this confession so that his face wouldn't get all wrinkled up out there in the middle of the parking lot.

My brain started screaming inside my skull. "Where have you been?" Once in a while, I had thought about my daddy looking me up. Sometimes I made up a story of how he would come and find me. I figured he was going to be some outdoors guy who spent his life in fire towers, or maybe he was going to be a computer jock who had to go into hiding because he had hacked into government computers. But not this guy. "You're too young to be my daddy."

“Not really, but I was back then.”

Kind of an apology, maybe. “I always thought I’d beat the shit out of you. Leaving me and my mama like you did. Leaving her with nothing. I’d try right now, but I need this job.”

That got his attention. “I hope you weren’t thinking we’re going to hug each other or something.” I shook my head. I figured it was over.

“Can we...?” He stood there for a while. “Do you make much working here?”

I wasn’t saying anything, but the man who messed up my mama’s life was right there in front of me. Busting him would get me fired for sure. I started doing what my counselor said to do when I wanted to kick ass. “Count to ten,” she said. “Count to ten.” She made me promise. I didn’t get to but five.

“Your stepdad... .”

“He’s not my stepdad.” I didn’t mean to be so loud. “They’re not married. He’s not but twenty-five.”

He nodded. “I know. She could do better.”

“He won’t stay much longer. I get in his way.”

“You get in his way?” he echoed me.

“Yeah. I knock on their door before I go out and then later, knock again before sticking my head in to tell Mom when I get home. He came busting in my room last night because I’d poured out all the booze I could find. He thought he was going to whip my ass, until he saw I was sleeping with a baseball bat.

“And, you know what? I’ve got a job back in there. Mama and I need the money, so how about getting away from in front of the cart.”

“Sorry.” He moved, but kept his hand on the cart. “Can we talk sometime?”

“Yeah, talk.” I shoved the cart enough so that he moved his hand. “But, don’t come in asking me to be your bagboy. That’s not the way we do it.” I started walking away. “You want to make up for fifteen years



while my mom does all kind of things to keep me from starving?” But then, I stopped. I looked back at him still standing there. “Come watch me run with the track team. Seven o’clock. Every morning.” I figured if he’s not smart enough or doesn’t care enough to find out where the Jefferson High School track team runs, then maybe he can just disappear again.

He was there this morning, leaning on the fence at the edge of the field. He had on one of those blue outfits like doctors wear. I’ll take that as a start, but one hundred dollars is just a little more than the application fee at Georgia Tech. He had an opportunity... what?...sixteen years ago and he took it.

Now, by damn, it’s going to be my turn.

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**Jim Herod** spent his professional life as a mathematician. He published in the Journal of Geophysical Research, Physics Letters, various mathematics journals, and coauthored a text in mathematical biology. In 1998, Herod retired to Southwest Alabama. He considers anything that interferes with his reading, writing, and running as a distraction.

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Broken Dishes

Jackie Romine Walburn

The concrete front steps felt hot and bumpy through the thin cloth of my dress as Roger and me sat there, bracing for the crashing, up-and-down sounds coming from inside our house.

I could feel the step's rocky imprints through the cotton of my faded red and white sailor dress—the beloved one Momma made with the polka dots and big collar. I'd put on the dress that morning, hoping that seeing me my favorite dress would stop another fight between my two most loved people.

It hadn't.

Instead, fear and heat radiated from the concrete into my confused four-year-old soul as we sat on the steps and waited, holding hands, me flinching with each new noise—thrown dishes and raised voices.

Our legs stretched out in front of us, Roger's two and a half years longer and bigger. We looked out on the yard Daddy had mown yesterday after he got off work from the steel mills, coming in sweating and smelling of metal and smoke, with his big boots, shiny hard hat and funny-looking eyeglasses.

I looked down my skinny legs to the sidewalk and considered our unused chalk hopscotch lines, the ones Roger had drawn for me. I couldn't make myself jump, hop or skip. From inside we heard the loud see-saw voices of our parents. Shouted words we couldn't understand came from Momma, and then stern answers, less loud, from Daddy.

Another dish crashed, and a smile flashed across Roger's brown, butch-cut framed face. I already knew that loud, crashing, breaking things appealed to my brother. I didn't know then if all boys were like that.

“That was a big plate, I think,” he said. “Bet there’s a mess in there.”

Roger squeezed my hand but avoided my eyes, realizing even then that he wasn’t old enough and eventually, strong enough, to protect little sister from the noise of broken dishes, raised voices or other things we didn’t yet understand.

The front door opened and Daddy came out fast. He caught the door before he slammed it, stopped, tried a smile and asked, “uh, y’all don’t feel like playing?”

Inside, I heard Momma making loud crying, choking noises, and the sound of glass hitting the bottom of a trash can. I got up to go comfort her like she’d done for me so many times.

Daddy reached his big hand to my shoulder and hugged me to his hip. Roger got up then and took Daddy’s other side. “Better not go in. Best leave Momma alone right now.”

Daddy looked out into the yard, at the chalk filled sidewalk, the freshly mowed grass, and his 1950 Chevrolet Fleetline parked in front. He took a deep breath, and I thought Daddy would cry too, something I’d never seen.

Instead, he guided us back to the steps and sat down between us. “Yeah babies. Maybe we better not go in right now. Some things got broken in there today.”

Jackie Romine Walburn is a freelance writer, former reporter and corporate communications manager who is polishing the sixth draft of her first novel, “Mojo Jones and the Black Cat Bone,” a story set in the Alabama Black Belt. She lives in Birmingham, Ala. and writes the blog <http://jackierwalburnwrites.blogspot.com>.

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# 2014 AWC Writing Contest Winners List

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## SHORT STORY – 1500 WORDS

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|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Mahala Church         | Yellowed Picture                  | Mobile, AL         |
| 2. Larry Wilson          | The Affair                        | Wetumpka, AL       |
| 3. Richard Perreault     | The Ugliest Man in Litucca County | Bryson City, NC    |
| 4. Linda Hudson Hoagland | November 4 <sup>th</sup>          | North Tazewell, VA |
| HM. Jim Herod            | My Turn                           | Grove Hill, AL     |
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## FLASH FICTION – 500 WORDS

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|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Linda F. Willing       | The Memory Book         | Grand Lake, CO    |
| 2. Elizabeth Bloom Albert | Deluge                  | Highland Park, IL |
| 3. Jackie Romine Walburn  | Broken Dishes           | Birmingham, AL    |
| 4. Jane Sasser            | Orange Maternity Jumper | Oak Ridge, TN     |
| HM. Chervis Isom          | The Letter              | Birmingham, AL    |
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## JUVENILE FICTION – 1500 WORDS

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|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Glenda Slater  | The Prickle Bomb Tree            | Spanish Fork AL |
| 2. Barbara Gold   | Weed Whackers, Open for Business | Stamford, CT    |
| 3. Kate Celauro   | Medicine Man                     | Nashville, TN   |
| 4. Ramey Channell | Uncle Bede and the Biscuit Angel | Leeds, AL       |
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### **CREATIVE NONFICTION**

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|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Vivian W. Newkirk     | A Secret Time           | Madison, MS        |
| 2. Margie Tubbs          | Not This Time           | Mobile, AL         |
| 3. Linda Hudson Hoagland | Pick It Up Please       | North Tazewell, VA |
| 4. Ruth C. White         | Americans Oust Language | Mobile, AL         |

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### **POETRY - 1000 WORDS**

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|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Sylvia Williams Dodgen | My Gift                   | Orange Beach, AL |
| 2. Mickey Cleverdon       | Eve Speaks                | Point Clear, AL  |
| 3. Susan Martinello       | Venus in the Eternal City | Gulf Shores, AL  |
| 4. Betty Spence           | Egg Handler's Daughter    | Mobile, AL       |
| HM. Jane Sasser           | Native Soil               | Oak Ridge, TN    |

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### **FIRST CHAPTER NOVEL - 1500**

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|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Peggy Wilkins         | A Song for MamaLoo                    | Daphne, AL     |
| 2. Jackie Romine Walburn | Trouble Blues                         | Birmingham, AL |
| 3. Frances D. Roberts    | A Place Called Grace                  | Grand Bay, AL  |
| 4. Linda S. Safford      | The Year Ava Lee's Daddy<br>Went Away | Niceville, FL  |

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