Birmingham Arts Journal

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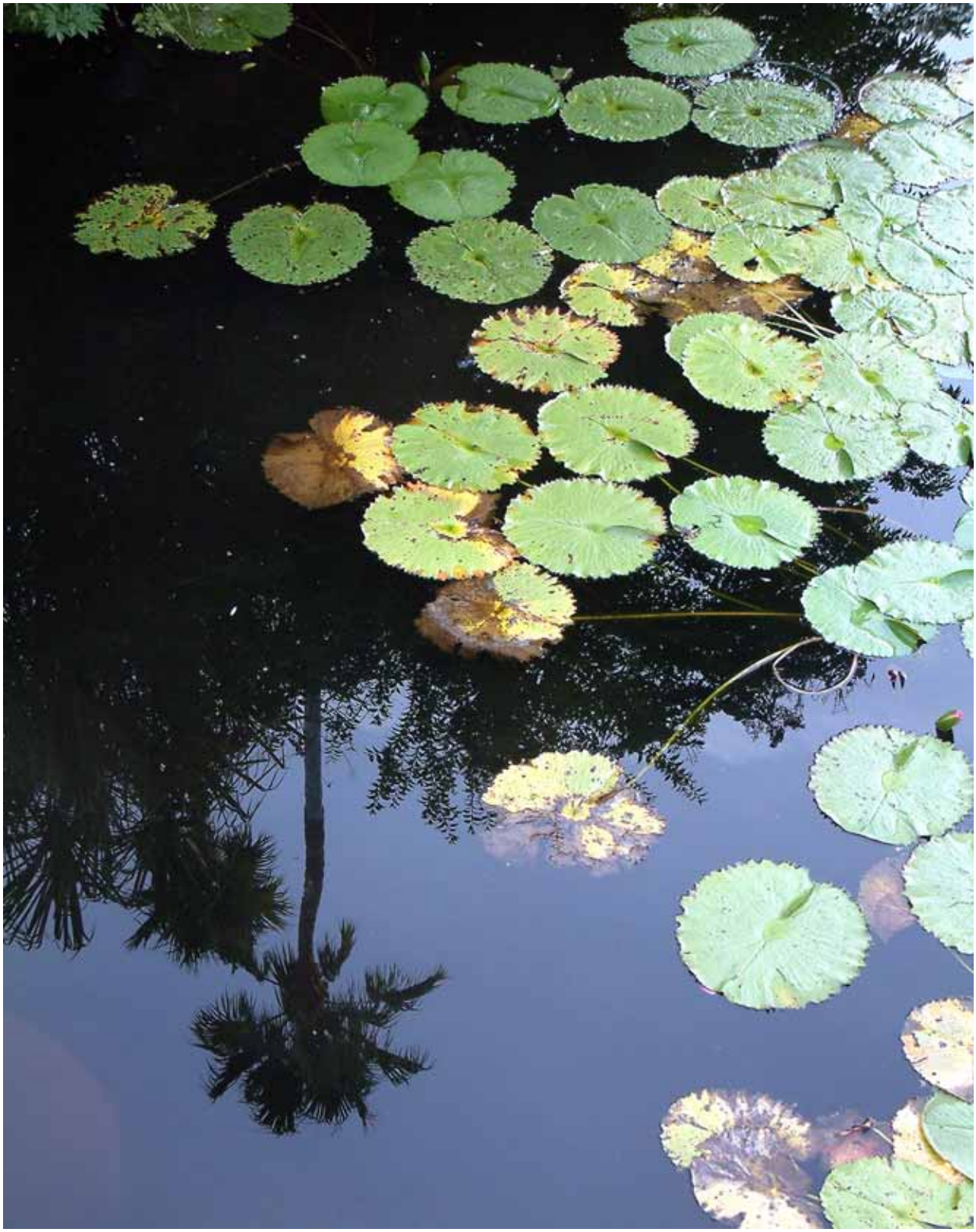

A Birmingham Art Association Publication

Birmingham Art Association since 1908

Birmingham Arts Journal

Front Cover: ***REFLECTIONS**, 10" x 14", Photography*
***David Murray** is a self-taught artist and photographer. As the BAJ photo editor, David photographically documents the monthly Birmingham Art Association Gallery shows and other BAA events. dmur56@cs.com*

Back Cover: ***COKE BOTTLE**, 9" x 12", Photography*
***Jessica** Williamson is an intermittent student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and studies mass communications and photography.*

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MOVING THE BAR

by Kory Wells

Linda almost wishes she and Tom weren't rich. If they weren't rich, they wouldn't live here, and if they didn't live here they probably wouldn't have power right now. Practically no one else in Nashville does. But thanks to buried utility cables and the fact that an influential city councilman lives just a few doors down, Strickland Meadows has heat and lights. Linda's just not home to enjoy them.

With a stranglehold on the steering wheel, she eases her Ford Explorer around a felled Bradford pear at the end of her street. Those trees barely hold up to a summer breeze, let alone an ice storm. The Explorer slides sideways and she holds her breath. *Steer in the direction of the skid.* Why did she let Tom talk her into this?

He'd called from work. "Once you get to the main road, you'll be fine," he said.

Linda isn't so sure when she sees the seven-lane with only two clear tracks in each direction, grooves whitewashed by salt trucks and the people who *had* to get to the office. To Wal-Mart. To their pregnant baby sister miles across town. The rest of the pavement is a dull, frightening shade of slick. Damn Tom.

"Savannah doesn't need to be in a cold, dark apartment," he said. "Bring her back to our house."

Their house is one of the major benefits that Tom brings to the marriage. Life with Tom is far from perfect, but Linda has diversions. The *Pachelbel Canon* on her Bose stereo. Egyptian cotton towels. Her collection of first edition books.

The soft rock station offers only talk radio today. The announcers give updates from the utility companies as if frequent reporting will speed the recovery of service. Traffic lights are hibernating, unable to muster the energy for even a red or yellow flash on the palette of short day grays. A raspy-voiced woman advises, "When you come to a traffic light that's not working, treat it like a four-way stop."

Tom won't stop being Tom. A womanizer. Of course he doesn't come home and say, "I've got a new girlfriend," but he might as well. He tells Linda that he has a new employee who's smart. Who's going to be perfect for that new project. Who's going to need some extra training. And Linda knows. He's so exuberant, she's almost glad for him, although she knows that can't be right.

A driver throws up his hand in appreciation when Linda stops to let him cross. Some cars don't even slow down through the intersections. If Tom had come this way, he would've never made it. He'd be stopping for every female driver in Nashville.

The quick blast of a horn makes Linda jump in her seat as she pauses at the next disabled signal. She glances in her rearview mirror and sees an aged white BMW. The driver makes a sweeping motion with his hand, urging her on.

She diverts her gaze from the mirror. "Aren't you listening to your radio?" she says.

On cue, the announcer repeats, "Remember, when you come to a traffic light that's not working, treat it like a four-way stop."

A block later, the same driver blows the horn longer. Linda looks in the mirror again at him and his passenger, a blonde girl with a red scarf. They are young, probably students at Vanderbilt. The driver runs his fingers through his hair, which looks like it's a semester late for a trim. They mouth "Go." Linda obliges because no other cars are coming, but at the next intersection she stops again and the girl rocks in her seat, shaking her head. Linda realizes her fingers hurt from holding so tight to the steering wheel. She would pull over, but she's scared to leave the clear tracks. If those kids are in such a hurry, why don't they pass her? She decides to hold her ground.

She points to her dashboard and speaks like she's talking to her great-aunt Dorothy. "Listen to your radio."

She should've held her ground with Tom a year ago when he said, "I'm going to fly your sister in for an interview." Linda has three sisters, but she didn't have to ask which one. By telling her about the interview, Tom gave Linda the chance to protest. She gives him credit for that. But she didn't take action. She was out of the habit.

Now they all have to pay, Tom and Savannah and Linda and that poor little baby, when he gets here. Savannah won't admit who the father is, but Linda knows. She wants to be raging mad at Savannah, but mostly she feels pity. Savannah thinks she's going to change Tom, but the only thing Savannah's going to be changing is diapers. Linda doesn't know how she'll introduce that baby to her own children when they come home from college. "Here's your new half-brother-cousin," she imagines saying. "You can call him Cousin Half."

As Linda brakes at another signal, the driver behind her lays on his horn. Her pulse goes double-time and she looks again into her mirror at the contorted faces of the BMW people. The driver honks the horn with each word he speaks. Linda sees the words. "Go. Bitch. Go."

Linda releases all of her air between clinched teeth and looks straight into the rearview mirror. "You watch me go," she says.

Her foot still on the brake, Linda grips the black gearshift behind the steering wheel and moves the little red bar one, two places to the left. "R" for reverse. "R" for no regrets. Not hers, at least. Not anymore. She clutches the steering wheel, moves her foot off the brake and stomps the accelerator into the floorboard. Just like that. Taking action isn't so hard. Her big strong spruce SUV slams into the rickety little old BMW. The metal on metal makes a refreshing wintergreen clash.

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Kory Wells' novel-in-progress, White Line to Graceville, *was a finalist in the William Faulkner Competition. A software developer, she is a mostly accident-free driver. www.korywells.com korywells@comcast.net*

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STORM RISING

22" x 30"

Acrylic on Canvas

***James Knowles** is an artist and art teacher at Hoover High School in Birmingham, Alabama. jamesknowles1@mac.com*

PAGO HURRICANE CHRISTMAS

by Reilly Maginn

Hurricane Val struck at dusk on December 6th but we weren't prepared. In those days we had only twenty-four hours of a hurricane watch and three hours of a hurricane warning. That was in the days before hurricane hunter aircraft and Doppler radar. So on Friday I left the hospital at 3:00 PM and headed for the harbor to secure our sailboat. Too late. By then, even the inner harbor was a maelstrom with strong, gusty, swirling winds, high waves and a rapidly rising tide, the storm surge. There was little I could do, save for doubling up the mooring lines and praying. The storm was predicted to be a Category 5 with 160 mph winds and a 20 foot storm surge. One of the biggest and most dangerous storms. And it seemed it would live up to its predictions.

Not only did Val live up to its category numbers, it also lasted six days, for the eye passed over us three times as the entire hurricane made a huge circle over Samoa for nearly a week. The island suffered massive devastation. Many were injured but only two were killed. The damage to the infrastructure of the island was extreme. No power, phones, or water and most of the roads were washed out by the storm surge.

And just before Christmas, at that. With no power there was no refrigeration, freezers or AC. All the fresh and frozen food was consumed the first three days to prevent it from spoiling for lack of refrigeration. No sense in wasting it, so we were gluttons for three days, and from then on subsisted on dried food, cabin crackers, Vienna Sausage or Spam and bottled water. No lights and no power to the pumps so we had no water for showers, washing or flushing toilets. It was going to be a blue Christmas, I was certain. Candles for light and a bucket of ocean water to flush the toilets, would have to suffice.

When my wife and I came on island three years previous, we brought a Montana tradition with us. At Christmas, on the eastern Montana prairie, we gathered with friends and neighbors, feasted, sang carols and told stories of our most memorable or pleasant holidays. In short order, this annual traditional party on island was eagerly anticipated in Pago Pago. But we dreaded this year's party. It would be meager and frugal at best.

In tropical South Pacific Samoa, the Christmas holidays fall in the monsoon season. Hot and humid, with almost continuous

rain, and mildew is everywhere. No crisp snow, frigid temperatures, pine scented woods, Christmas trees or holiday festivities. And especially not this year with the hurricane. And that's why the party seemed more important this year. We needed the party. No lights, no tree, no turkey, no ice or AC for the expats this Christmas. Cabin crackers and Vienna Sausages, salvaged from the sailboat, would have to do for feasting this year. Not exactly Christmas fare, but it was the best we could do. We were depressed, despondent and homesick. We needed some cheering up. We needed some good Christmas stories and memories to chase away the hurricane blues.

But we'd forgotten about Izzy Luv, the captain of the tuna purse seiner, *Tradition*. Izzy called me on the VHF radio I salvaged from our sunken sailboat.

"Are we gonna have the Christmas party this year, Doc?"

"We're going to try, Izzy, but it looks pretty grim this year."

"Can I bring anything?"

"Just bring a covered dish, yourself and your crew. Tell 'em they'll have to sing carols, though."

"Roger that. *Tradition* out," and he clicked off the VHF radio.

At 5:00 PM, two pick-up trucks from *Tradition's* dock pulled into my compound, brim full of boisterous sailor/fishermen. Filipinos, Peruvians, Chinese, Koreans, Samoans, Portuguese and even a few U.S. mainlanders. They were already singing and laughing. I think they'd been drinking, but hey, it was Christmas. They unloaded crates, boxes and huge containers and pots full of steaming food. There were even trays of olives, cheeses and crackers. They unloaded six jerry cans of fresh cold water, six tubs of crushed ice, and several trays of steaming vegetables, dressing, gravy and sliced turkey. The cook in *Tradition's* galley had been busy that afternoon. Three cases of Cokes and even a case of beer came ashore.

We had forgotten that this huge "Greyhound of the Sea," the ship *Tradition*, was virtually a city unto itself. Water makers, ice makers, air conditioning and a huge freezer chock full of victuals. The crew eat well and live comfortably on the tuna purse seiners.

"Hey, Izzy, thanks a bunch for all the goodies. What else can I say?"

Izzy chuckled and said, "I brought a couple of dishes, Doc, OK?"

The crowning achievement, though, was a huge portable generator that they unloaded and hooked into my power lines. Voila! We had lights, AC, an electric stove to make coffee, lights on the tree and even power to the pump for water to flush the biffy.

Did we have a Christmas party or what? Nearly every expatriate on island showed up. Even our Samoan neighbors came across the adjacent stream to join in the food, festivities and the caroling. Before dinner, when we said grace, I offered a special prayer and thanks to Izzy and his crew, our Christmas Angels. No one left our digs till sun up and there was scant food left on the platters and in the pots. A wonderful Christmas in spite of the hurricane's devastation.

It was months before the island returned to normal but we faced the challenges with renewed enthusiasm and buoyed spirits, primarily because of Izzy and *Tradition's* crew. Thanks again, guys.

As for the continuing traditional Best Christmas Stories we tell at our subsequent Christmas gatherings each year, I'm sure you know which one we choose.

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Reilly Maginn writes in South Alabama and is a master gardener and former resident of the South Pacific.
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VIEW WITH A ROOM

by Neal Wilgus

It's like living in a cave
but with a balcony
where you can go out
and watch the city lights
with a drink in your hand.
Back in the shadows
are the rocks and dust
and endless bones
and the ashes of countless
fires, and in the blackness
beyond there's something
living but we never know
what it is.

Out on the overlook
you can watch the shifting
patterns of the traffic
and live the sun going down
into the ocean or the desert.
There are drapes that can be
drawn to keep out the night's
cold and the morning sun
and the roar of the city.
But it's that roar
that drives us back
into the shadows of the cave
where we can escape
that awful racket
and the suicidal stress
the balcony allows.

The paintings on the wall
would explain it all
if only we could see them
in the flickering light.

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Neal Wilgus is a writer and poet who lives in Corrales, New Mexico. His work has appeared in a variety of publications over the past three decades. He is originally from Arizona and has a degree in English from Northern Arizona University.

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HELL BENT

by Tammy Wilson

Cousin John Mauer was the bane of my existence. He thrived on aggravation, and the fact that he was relation made it worse. I had to put up with him at school and most every Sunday, since the family attended Flat Rock Methodist Episcopal Church. If he wasn't pounding his younger brother, Melvin, he was making faces at me.

Mama said John was the pure example of "spare the rod, spoil the child," because Aunt Texie never laid down the law. She'd married young and lost her husband before Melvin was born, but it didn't excuse shirking her duties as a parent. Mama said, "She's nothing but a damp noodle."

I was only eleven, but I was smart enough to know that if I ever sassed Mama or acted up in public, I'd taste wrath straight out of Genesis. She used soap or a switch, depending on the crime. Of course I was a girl, but if she'd had boys, it would've been worse. My daddy was still around but he shied away from churchgoing and left the discipline to Mama.

At thirteen, John was blazing the trail for Melvin, acting up in the most inopportune places. Early in December he talked several other boys into leaving a herd of farm cats in the schoolhouse. We knew who the party pooper was, but since the teacher couldn't prove it, the whole school sat out recess until Christmas break, not exactly what you'd call justice.

"It's equal punishment, like taxes," Grandpa said disgustedly. He didn't usually get worked up about much, but when it came to his ornery grandson, he'd speak out. "In my day, that boy would've been taken to the woodshed and smoking by the time he got back and I don't mean tobacco, neither."

He talked in a too-loud voice, because he was deaf as a post, a fact John liked to imitate. He'd shuffle around with one hand cocked on his ear, "eh? eh?", just to get a laugh, but after a while, it wasn't funny.

The idea of confirmation hadn't changed John much. In fact, it probably made him worse since he figured he must be doing right in the eyes of the Lord to be allowed to join the church, which made me wonder what He was up to.

"God uses all kinds of people," Grandma said. "Why look at Moses, Rahab and even King David! They weren't perfect."

Grandpa offered one of his amens.

Then she frowned. "But I suppose we shouldn't judge John too harshly; we were all young once."

That's where she was wrong. I was young, but that didn't give me license to be ornery. John was a full eighteen months older than I was, two years older than his brother Melvin, so he should be setting an example, but the only one he'd set so far was how to break into reform school. Even so, he'd get his comeuppance, Grandma insisted. "Don't forget the Law of Retribution," she said, meaning good always wins over evil, but usually takes its sweet time. The fact that John was up for Confirmation was a kind of twisted punishment. It meant he had had to meet the bishop and sit through classes for a year's worth of Sundays with Reverend Job, who would bump any unruly child down a couple of notches, so I guess the Lord was already working on John.

I'd wondered what it would be like to stand up there in front of the whole church, hoping you didn't do something embarrassing like stuttering or stumbling. I didn't like being on stage at a piano recital, my knees shaking under the keyboard. I knew Confirmation would be one of those times to dread.

Grandpa sat between Mama and me in our Easter finery, like foliage between bright blooms. My grandmother, the church pianist, looked as fancy as a magazine model, wearing a new hat with its fragile veil covering half her face. You wondered how she could see the music. That morning she played a triumphant chord as the choir sang the reverend up to the pulpit. It was a sight, all decked out in yellow bells, jonquils and tulips that folks had brought in. About every pew was filled on account of Confirmation and it so happened that the back of John's head was within spitting distance. I could have spit at him just on principal, but I feared I'd burn in Hell if I did that. Church was serious business and Confirmation made it doubly so.

John sat up there in the Amen Pew with Aunt Texie in a rose-colored frock and Melvin, polished up like the rest of us. John wasn't paying attention until the reverend called out, "John Vernon Mauer." My cousin shifted up to the kneeling rail like a hangdog in low gear. I supposed Aunt Texie was wondering what would come next, him gazing over at the choir and my grandmother, and then back at us.

Like with the rest of those being confirmed, the reverend laid a dry hand on each head. It wasn't necessary to baptize any of them since their folks had seen to that when they were babies, though in John's case it didn't seem to have "took." In fact he may have been more ornery because he figured he was inoculated against sin.

Right when the preacher said, "The Lord bless you and by His grace strengthen and confirm you…," I could see that somebody had written in white letters "Hell Bent" on the bottom of John's shoes. I was sure Melvin had done it, because he was the first to snicker. And then someone else started laughing. Folks craned their necks to see what was so funny and the Reverend, John and my grandmother looked around, bewildered.

Grandma saved the moment by beginning the next hymn, "He Arose," and everyone joined in, cutting short any further embarrassment. Luckily, John was the last one to be confirmed, and when the music started, the Reverend motioned for the group to go sit down. Then Melvin pointed to John's shoes and whispered for him to turn them over. I could tell what they were doing because John's ears turned blood red, and he started swinging at Melvin. A gasp swelled the sanctuary as the Reverend almost stopped his sermon.

Aunt Texie flushed pink to match her dress and scooted over to separate them like a couple of three-year-olds. But John reached around to swat at Melvin, then Melvin reeled back, bumping Texie who finally nabbed Melvin's ear and punched John up side of the head. It was worse than pictures of Jesus driving moneychangers out of the temple.

"Those boys are a disgrace," Mama whispered to Grandpa.

"Amen," he said out loud, but it was hardly out of place. The way those boys were acting, John would count bars in a jail cell and Melvin would follow suit. Mama said that's the way it is in families. The oldest usually sets the pace for the younger ones, so heaven help Melvin.

When the last hymn was sung, everyone was to greet those who'd joined the church. It was all Aunt Texie could do to get John up there, but then he broke out of line and ran after Melvin screaming, "You rotten little creep!"

It didn't make any difference to them if it was Easter Sunday or not. John commenced to kick his brother in the shins at the kneeling rail, yelling, "I'll teach you!" You would have thought they were out in the barn lot.

The Reverend put Melvin in a chokehold and took John by the scruff of his neck, his own collar about to pop off, and he said, "Enough."

They should've been ashamed, but they weren't, so he led them out the door to a forsythia bush, broke off a couple of switches and showed those boys what a whipping was all about. It was quite a sight, the Reverend punishing Melvin and especially John, right after confirming him. The preacher looked as mad as Jesus did at the moneychangers.

On the way home, Mama said she was purely horrified. "Texie better get a handle on them before it's too late. Why I'm ashamed to admit they're kin, acting like that in the House of the Lord, much less Easter."

My grandfather, who was driving, said, "Amen."

"Those ignoramuses," Grandma said. "I'd pay to send them to reform school."

All three of us stared at her, but Grandpa kept driving.

I was relieved knowing that I shouldn't be nervous about Confirmation next year. There's nothing I could do more embarrassing than what Melvin and John had already done. And with any luck, Grandma would call up that Reform School and we'd be rid of them both inside of six months, thanks to her Law of Retribution.

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Tammy Wilson writes in Newton, North Carolina.
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THE HAND THAT WARDS OFF EVIL

9" x 12"
Mixed Media

***Demetrius Foster** is a student at West End High School in Birmingham, Alabama, where his art teacher is Marjorie Hyatt. This particular piece won Best of Show at the 2006 annual high school students' juried show sponsored by Birmingham Art Association.*

BUDDHA'S ENLIGHTENMENT

by Amos Jasper Wright IV

Yasodhara could not keep you.
The valley of the Ganges
still holds your footprints
somewhere deep in mud.

Spurning the fruit of the flesh-
rotten at the core of its first ripening –
even the ascetics left a bitter taste
in your mouth
like love too long left on the vine.

While under the shade
of that fabled Bodhi-tree –
like so many to follow after you –
the stone in your hands,
which has worn it smooth
like the passing of water,
became a light refracted
in the prism of your brain.

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Amos Wright lives and writes in Birmingham, Alabama.

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FRUIT TO FRUIT

by Judy Lee Green

(The editor has selected this excerpt from Ms. Green's longer work, "Fruit to Fruit.")

Cassie's labor pains had begun during the night. She insisted on cooking breakfast for Rell though and tidying the kitchen before she left for Granny's. Now her pain had increased in intensity and frequency.

Granny Deatheridge turned her back and stirred up the fire while Cassie undressed. Cassie looked at her nakedness in amazement. Only seventeen years old, her body was not yet that of a grown woman. Her build was slight. Her skin was smooth and unblemished like that of a child. With pregnancy, her tiny breasts had grown larger and become full and firm like juice oranges. Her nipples had blossomed into little pink raspberries, not quite ripe enough to pick.

Cassie ran her hand across her shoulders and over her breasts then cupped them beneath her belly. She remembered carrying a sugar baby watermelon up against her stomach from the field to the house when she was a little girl. My sugar baby, she thought and caressed her stomach. A contraction hit and almost bent her double. When Cassie stood up, watermelon juice was running down her legs. Her water had broken.

For three days and two nights Cassie Sue Ellen was delirious with unbearable pain. Her immature body fought to deliver the child within her while a raging storm snarled and dashed against the house. As lightning flashed, winds howled, and the rumble of thunder shook the rafters of the granny woman's shack, Cassie Sue Ellen gripped the bars of the iron bed and internalized the sound, the rage, the fury, the force and the power of the storm resonating all around her.

Amid her frightful suffering and delirious ramblings, Cassie Sue Ellen imagined that she was giving birth to a fish. Or was it a duck? She remembered Oley Mosley, her seventh grade science teacher, explaining the theory of evolution, but she had not really believed that the human race actually descended from apes. She had harbored a secret suspicion that people had descended from fruit.

She loved fuzz-covered peachy-fresh newborn babies and had longingly looked forward to the arrival of her very own. And weren't newborn babies often jaundiced and the color of fresh sliced summer peaches? Young girls were often said to have peaches-and-cream complexions. And didn't Indian peaches, blood red on the inside, almost seem to bleed when cut open?

She knew lots of people who were apple shaped with mottled red skin and pear shaped people with blotchy yellow skin. They looked for all the world like they were constipated and needed a good dose of salts. Teenagers often had pitted skin like oranges.

GRAPES OF ASIA

9" x 12"

Watercolor and Chinese Black Ink on Paper

Shuangqin (Qin) Zhang *is a senior in the University of Alabama at Birmingham Honors Program and plans to attend medical school. "My goal for the future is to expand my horizons by touring different countries and ultimately projecting my experiences onto canvas."*

And don't we all have navels? Her English teacher, Miss Raylene Worden, had been lemon shaped with a puckered little mouth and a tart disposition.

Sister Goodman, the preacher's wife, looked just like a pineapple with her bleached greenish-yellow hair caught up on top of her head and her ten-count dernier stockings dimpled with tufts of unshaven leg hair.

One of her grannies had smelled sweet and musty like a pomegranate and was just as round and firm. And the way her granddaddy squirted tobacco juice through his front teeth, which were spaced like a picket fence, reminded her of a grapefruit. She often noticed that a sour smell lingered about him too.

Old people, banana shaped and arthritic bent, could be seen every day with little pointy heads and brown shoes. Often they had dark spots all over their skin, like bananas when they ripen too long. She thought that most people, if they lived long enough, became as wrinkled as prunes, bleeding beneath their onion-thin skin and turning a dark purplish-black. Mr. Lender at the bank was like that.

Cassie Sue Ellen had never mentioned her theory of evolution to anyone but recently had become even more convinced of its validity. The public health nurse had shown her a book with a picture of the female reproductive organs in an attempt to explain impregnation to her. She thought the fallopian tubes and ovaries looked just like an apple cut half in two.

The Bible even said to be fruitful and multiply. And women who couldn't bear children were said to be fruitless. Hadn't Brother Goodman's sermon last Sunday been entitled, "Bearing Fruit to the Glory of God"? He reminded them that Jesus is the true vine and His Father is the gardener. A man cannot bear fruit apart from God, and God desires that we bear much fruit. Cassie couldn't remember the verses but the message came from the gospel of John.

Fruit was of the earth, an offspring. When rotted it returned to the earth just like man. Ashes to ashes, fruit to fruit. It all sounded like the same thing to her. And when she considered how many nuts she knew, and nuts were fruit, she was convinced that human beings were descended from fruits and Oley Mosley was the biggest fruit of all.

In muddled thought and torturous pain, Cassie Sue Ellen convinced herself that she was not giving birth to an animal or a fish. As the storm caterwauled down the chimney and shook Granny Deatheridge's little two room house like a rag doll, Cassie Sue Ellen agonizingly gave one last push and surrendered the fruit of her loins to the gentle hands of the granny woman.

Granny announced, "Hit's a girl," and laid the child in her mother's arms.

Liberated from the anguish and pain that racked her childish frame, Cassie Sue Ellen smiled upon the dewy, fuzz-covered infant, said, "My l'il peach. My l'il peach," and died.

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Judy Lee Green writes in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.
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ELEMENTS OF PRAYER

by Carey A. Link

"*Make ready for your gifts. Prepare. Prepare.*" – Theodore Roethke

The shadow of my bent Fingers
around a single Flame.
To feel the Warmth of clothes dried in the sun.
To Watch water
Shutter and Drip
off a pitcher's Edge
and make Clouds on glass.
To Open and Close my eyes.
To walk Looking up.
To Taste bittersweet chocolate and raspberries.
To Trace the dark skeleton of a winter tree.
To Fear nothing.
To Hide nothing.
Hands that Hold me.
To Float in the oval house –
Below the Pulse drum.
To remember the Ghost
and let it go.
To Forget to search
between gray Crevices.
To Feel the oily pink center of a white petal.
Action is primary and Thought is secondary to art.
Tumble.
Turn.
Roll.
Crawl.
To Rock my child to sleep,
High and Low.

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Carey Link is a Senior at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, Alabama, majoring in Psychology. In 1996 a poem of hers entitled Connection *was distributed by the Huntsville and Madison County Red Cross. Her work has appeared in previous issues of* Poem *and* Birmingham Arts Journal.

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"We are confronted with insurmountable opportunities."

–Walt Kelly

MY PULITZER PRIZE

by Jim Reed

Why did I ever go into *retail*?

Well, you know the answer to that–if you, too, are in *retail*.

I did it because I couldn't think of any other way to be my own boss and actually provide food and shelter for the family, *outside the corporate world.* I couldn't think of any other way to have the freedom to write what I needed to write, free of the Dilbert shackles of the corporate world.

So, a couple of decades later, here I am, at 4:50pm on Friday, just ten minutes till closing time, digging through computer-numbered boxes for a 1962 Esquire Magazine featuring Hemingway, a 1956 BBC Listener magazine containing a Salinger review, a first printing of Asimov's *The Martian Way*, and a first edition copy of Salinger's *Raise High the Roofbeams*…got to get these things overnighted for an anxious customer and then make it to a bookshop across town to conduct a reading, all by 6pm.

The front door chimes go off, so that means somebody has entered the store, 150 feet up the hall and up a steep flight of red stairs. You know the mixed feelings you get: *Damn! Now I've got to wait on somebody and still get my tasks done…if it weren't for these pesky customers, I could make a living* (!).

I head up the hall to see who's there, passing the glowing lava lamps and glistening Santas that line the path, giving a

Untitled

9" x 12"
Watercolor on Paper

***Darryl Williams** is a student at Wenonah High School in Jefferson County, Alabama. His colored marker portrait was chosen by his art teacher to be included in the 2006 annual high school students' juried show sponsored by Birmingham Art Association.*

fairyland glow to the gathering dusk. When I get to the front, I see a small, pointy-haired big-rimmed eyeglass man, standing and staring at me as if I'm about to hit him. I do my usual "*Hello, how can I help you today?*" customer-friendly voice thing, since I have never seen this guy before.

"Well, do you buy stuff?" he asks. I'm in a hurry, so this means my thoughts are going to be negative–I'm thinking he's got the usual dog-eared Reader's Digest Condensed books and Stephen King paperbacks that we see a lot of around here. "Well, it depends on what it is," I say, thinking this does not look like a millionaire about to donate his Gutenberg Bible to me. "We have just about everything, but we're always looking for what we don't have," I say, motioning down the hallway at the 6,000-square-foot shop.

"What about this?" he says, pulling a rusty three-inch-tall miniature replica of a Sprite cola bottle from his pocket. It's cute, just the thing I have all over the store for decoration, along with the life-sized Leg Lamp from Jean Shepherd, the seven-foot-tall Piggly Wiggly statue and the Pee-Wee Herman Playhouse suitcase, interspersed with books galore.

The next negative thought I have is that he will, like most people, have watched the Antiques Roadshow and determined that this is worth $32,000, of which I should pay him half for re-sale. I brace myself and say, "That's neat. How much do you want for it?" He says in a small and meek voice, "What about a dollar?"

I am relieved and brighten up instantly, I pull a dollar from the cash tray, give it to him and he walks happily toward the stairs.

He bends to pick up two large and obviously heavy satchels he's lugged up the stairs–I'm just now noticing them. Then, he turns and asks, "Can you tell me how to get to Jimmie Hale?"

The Jimmie Hale mission is for homeless people, and it's seven walking blocks away. I give him instructions, he thanks me, then begins his painful descent. I wait in the foyer, hoping he doesn't stumble, and hoping I can get the door locked behind him so I can head to the post office on my way to being an unknown author reading his stuff aloud.

I can tell he's about halfway down the stairs when I hear his meek voice, "I read everything you write." I freeze in place to hear more. "And I see your columns in Birmingham Weekly. You are a natural-born writer."

I can only yell *thanks!* as he closes the door behind him and disappears from hearing. I rush down the stairs to lock up, look up and down the street, and see nothing. No trace of this fellow and his heavy luggage and his mild temperament.

I lock the door, take down the OPEN sign, and start up the stair, turning out lights as I go.

Back at my counter, I reach into my pocket for keys and find the tiny Sprite bottle. I hold it up to the lava lights and note its special green glow. And I wonder what a Pulitzer Prize looks like. This may be as close to one as I'll ever get, so I'm going to adopt it and keep it around to remind me that now and then–just every once in a while–a writer can get a good review, a good award, at an unexpected time from an unlikely source…and then wonder later whether it was all imagination.

At the reading, I tell the story of the little man and his Sprite bottle to Joey Kennedy, who is a genuine Putlizer Prize winner. He grins ear to ear, because he knows all about fate and how things come to you only if you don't look at them straight on.

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Alabama native Jim Reed writes stories that are actual and/or true. He is editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and resides in Birmingham, Alabama. You can meet him at www.jimreedbooks.com

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THREE

by Stacy Pickett

Pancakes gone, sticky fingers,
I spring from my chair, ideas run wild,
This box is my house,
That one can be yours,
Mom says, "Let's wipe those hands."
Wait, brrrrmmm, I'm a pilot taking off
I'm running, soaring
Mom's chasing, wiping

Let's go to the beach now
Wait, I'll cook a yummy meal, Mom
Here, drink your milk
Hey, let's be kitty cats
My name is Soft Cat,
Your name is Fluffy
I'm crawling, purring
Mom's watching, smiling

I pounce on the couch
Cushions become big hills
Mom says, "Time for errands."
"Put your shoes on now."
MEOW! But, cats don't wear shoes!
She says, "Please, we really must go."
I'm climbing, hiding
Mom's flopping, melting

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Stacy Pickett writes poetry and creative nonfiction in Hoover, Alabama. Email: stacypickett@bellsouth.net

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A GARDEN

by T.K. Thorne

What is a garden
but a space set aside for growing?
Seeds sown in darkness
emerge.
Tiny, fragile buds,
Vulnerable,
they unfold in sunlight,
wait
in night's gloom,
root tendrils thrust bravely,
seeking sustenance in understanding.
Bent by winds, still they grow,
drink
from tears wept,
eat
the earth's essence-laughter shared,
books read,
loves lost
and found again.
What is love
but a space set aside for growing?

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Teresa Thorne is a writer and retired police officer in Birmingham, Alabama, where she directs the CAP program.

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SEASONAL ART

by Jerri Hardesty

Spring likes fingerpaints
Summer throws ceramic ware
Fall does decoupage
But Winter makes ice sculptures
Monuments to the year past.

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A renowned performance poet, Jerri Hardesty lives in the woods of Alabama with her husband Kirk and too many animals. Through her publishing company, New Dawn Unlimited, they publish the quarterly, "Alternative Harmonies" Literary and Arts Magazine, the "NDU Presents" chapbook and anthology series and other projects. NewDawnUnlimited.com, PoetrySlam.net, and AlabamaPoetry.com

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UNITY IN NATURE

Watercolor on Paper
9" x 12"

Courtney Smith *is a high school student in Leeds, Alabama, whose art teacher is Gudrun Rominger. Courtney's work was chosen for exhibition in the 2006 annual high school students' juried show sponsored by Birmingham Art Association*

FALL GUY

by Geoff Langdon

Each season rises, falls and then
leaves us without so much a goodbye

Spring, the youngest of the weathered family
quartet, can barely contain her passionate juices.

Summer bakes the colors that Spring birthed,
but all too often does not know her own strength.

Fall comes just in time to cool her sibling's
furnace, turning out earthen, golden tones.

All too soon Winter, coldest of the sisters,
with white, cold fury leaves a pure canvas
for the most beautiful sister, the baby, the pampered one.

I do love this family quartet, how could
I not. But Autumn, her nickname, I have fallen for
as she is the most reasonable of the seasons.

Not as pretty as Spring.
Not as daunting as Winter
nor warm as Summer,
She is, I think, the wisest and kindest.

She will not freeze or bake your face,
nor over-promise like Spring.
She is the buffer between
the two strongest girls who would
fight each other to the death if not for her.

And Spring, though loved by Fall
Is kept from her by the eldest girl,
By necessity not meanness, I suspect.
They are by all accounts an amazing family.

It is Fall that I will always look out for,
I guess I am partial to the underdog,
The least noticed, the quieter one.

I think Fall keeps this family together
with her tempered, earthen tones
and wise counsel, as she prepares
us for the harsher family member.

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Geoff Langdon is an award-winning poet and author in Birmingham, Alabama.

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IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR

by Liz Reed

There is an adage for writers: write what you know. In my senior painting class, the instructor suggested that as painters, we do the same thing. "Paint what you know," he said. One thing I know is dresses: I've worn them all my life, designed and sewn them since the early 50's. I really relate to the book, *Where I Was and What I Wore*.

In the series, "It Was a Very Good Year," each of these dresses represents a particular occasion: a Mardi Gras dance in Mobile, a wedding in Florida, a governor's inaugural ball in Montgomery, Christmas in Birmingham. Some have served the next generation, accompanying my daughters to proms and parties. Some were bought in a store; others made by hand. They represent a variety of styles popular in the 60's, 70's, 80's, and 90's. The memories are a variety of styles as well – some happy, some poignant, some disappointing, some sad.

In a de-acquisition mode one day, I decided to paint favorite, old dresses that take up closet space, as a way of crystallizing memories of the times and places I wore each one, with hope that after transferring the dresses to canvas, I could part with them.

My closet is too full – I've still got dresses I wore in the 1960's! I had visions of loading up the car and heading to the vintage consignment shop. Visions of more closet space. Visions of moving on with a clean slate.

Painting these dresses has not produced the hoped-for results. After re-examining the lines, fabrics, folds and trims, and the memories they invoke, I am even more reluctant to give them away. My hope for more closet space is that my granddaughters will appreciate the vintage look and appropriate one or all for future proms and parties. My other hope is that people who look at these paintings will understand, that they will recall where they were, what they wore, and their own memories associated with a closet full of clothes, too old (or too small) to wear and too precious to give away.

1976: CAMPBELL'S WEDDING

Dressmaking is often a matter of problem-solving. And, for me, easier than exhaustive shopping to find the right thing to wear, especially to a special event. If I were some standard size (as defined by manufacturers) perhaps it wouldn't be such a challenge, but since my high school days, it's just been easier to sew than shop.

In the summer of 1976, the special event was my brother's wedding in Clearwater, Florida, at 4:00 p.m. on July 4th and the dinner and dancing reception that followed. It was hot! It was also the country's bi-centennial celebration. I thought about making something in red, white and blue, but the wedding party was to be dressed in shades of peach.

The problem was what to wear to the church where my mother expected me to be suitably covered. "Elizabeth, you'll have to have sleeves," she said. I also wanted an elegant, flowy dress that would swirl on the dance floor. Hmmm. Several sketches and fabric samples later, a peachy-yellow long dress of cotton voile with an underskirt, backless to the waist and a demure, ruffled shawl to wear in church was ready for duty. Perfect! Mother was happy it had sleeves, the bride was very happy I hadn't chosen patriotic colors, and the dress did indeed swirl on the dance floor.

1974: DANCING AT THE CLUB

We moved to Birmingham from a very North Carolina small town in the fall of 1973. My new boss hosted a springtime party at The Club for the staff a

few months later. The prospect of going dining and dancing at a private club on top of the mountain was exciting. Disco was in full swing, my then-husband was a great dancer, and as usual, I didn't have a thing to wear.

I did have some great fabric stashed away, though, and decided to make a dancing dress with a double circular skirt in honor of Ginger Rogers, a skirt that would flip and swirl and flow in a riot of color.

We danced to, among other tunes, "Love Will Keep Us Together," (which didn't turn out to be true).

I never wore the dress again.

1975: CHRISTMAS IN BIRMINGHAM

Nothing says Christmas like red velvet. 1975 had been a tough year: a marriage ending, a new home for the children, a new career beginning – and all in a new city. As the holiday season approached, we were all busy with work and school, choir practice, acolyte practice, gift-making, cookie-making. And there was certainly no extra money for a Christmas dress.

I wanted (honestly, needed) to feel elegant and special that year. Foraging in the cedar chest I found the old red velvet dress and with a few minor alterations made it my own. I remember driving to the church on Christmas Eve in time for the children's pageant, feeling the soft velvet on my skin. Later, singing in the choir at the midnight service, the dress safely closeted in the choir room, I remember feeling that we might just make it as a family, that I could manage as a single mom.

Other memories from that Christmas are faded. I remember that our church friends were very generous with food and small gifts. We got a small tree from the grocery store for $5 and decorated our small apartment with popcorn strings and garlands of paper rings. Santa was even able to give the children some of what they had on their lists.

But it's the red velvet dress I remember most.

1980: CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL BENEFIT

I always wanted the proverbial "little black dress." This one is actually a reincarnation of a Mardi Gras gown, worn in Mobile in the late 1960's. By 1980, I was living in Birmingham, had remarried in 1978, and my husband was, at the time, an executive at The Children's Hospital of Alabama. The evening event promised elegance and what's more elegant than black?

Originally, the Lillie Rubin creation had very long, very full sleeves and rows of white daisy tatting. The design was way out of style but the fabric was so beautiful it cried out for a new life. The sleeves were voluminous – there was enough material to make a new top and by adding a waist band, to create a separate skirt. A morning spent at the sewing machine and the dress sprang back to life.

Some years later, the reincarnated little black dress went back to Mobile to a Mardi Gras Ball, this time in the company of daughter Margaret.

Today, it waits in the closet for the third generation.

IT WAS A VERY GOOD YEAR *(series)*

22" x 30"

Oil on Canvas

Liz Reed *is Immediate Past President of Birmingham Art Association. When she is not volunteering she sometimes finds time to paint and write. liz@lizreed.com*

ATTENTION-DEFICIT DISORDER

by Irene Latham

A MOTHER'S DIARY

February 9: Tomorrow is the parent-teacher conference regarding my seven-year-old, Andrew. I'm anxious because I know things haven't been going well at school. This is nothing new, but still difficult to deal with. It keeps me awake at night. It keeps me buying parenting books, just for the hope of something on those pages that might work for Andrew. He's always been different from my other children – more intense, harder to handle, often aggressive. He has a hard time sitting still, and he seems to have little idea about respect and personal space. Discipline is a never-ending challenge. Yet when he's alone, he's the sweetest, kindest child. Unfortunately he's not in a classroom alone.

February 10: At the conference his first grade teacher says Andrew's doing great academically and that she suspects he's gifted, but he continues to have behavioral problems. She says he often appears to be in his own little world. She says when she talks to the class as a group, my son tends to look all around, as if not hearing a word she says. We, his parents, are not surprised by her observations and even share a few of our own, like how in football practice, Andrew just couldn't pay attention and then wouldn't know what to do when the coach asked. How he has problems with daily tasks like getting dressed and brushing teeth, how he's prone to torment his brothers, to get angry and sometimes destructive. How no disciplinary technique seems to work. She says he's respectful to her and other adults, but is not kind to his peers. She says she's doing her best to protect his self-esteem by telling him he's a good boy, he just makes bad choices sometimes. She says she's worried because he seems to be in a tailspin. She asks: have you ever thought he might have ADD? She says she can't diagnose it, but she's seen other kids much like Andrew. I quickly get past this suggestion, saying I have no interest in medicating my child. Together we brainstorm about new reward-based programs for Andrew. She says we'll keep trying new things until something works. .

February 11: I chaperone a field trip for Andrew's class to the Children's Theater. I am not allowed on the bus, so I follow in my own vehicle. I notice that the teacher is sharing a bus seat with my child, presumably to keep him under control. I notice that when the class exits the bus, she walks beside my child, her hand on his shoulder, and that she hands him over to me immediately, for me to "take over." I realize I am there just to chaperone my own child.

February 12: Andrew brings a note home from his P.E. teacher saying that he had trouble in class today. The note says Andrew would not follow instructions and had to sit out because he was "out of control." I am embarrassed. I talk to Andrew about the situation and take away gameboy privileges. What is it with this child?

February 13: In his weekly progress folder, my child's teacher says none of the new things she's tried have worked. She says she hates it, but she has had to move Andrew's desk away from the other students. He is now isolated, sitting in a desk behind the door, facing the wall of the classroom. I understand the hows and whys, but when I think of Andrew at a desk behind a door and facing a wall I want to cry.

February 14: My godmother calls. My long-lost godmother whose first words are an apology for being out of touch and then an explanation revolving around issues with her own son. She says her son's problems made her feel ashamed, and for a very long time she was unable to talk about it. We proceed to catch up with each other's lives. I describe my children to her, taking particular care in describing Andrew. I say he is an active boy, my most challenging child. This is a positive spin, and we both know it. I remember that we are both social workers, that we've both been trained to read between the lines. She says something about how she was in denial for a while about her child's problems. I begin to feel defensive. We're not even talking about my child, but all I can think about is MY child. She says getting a diagnosis and putting her child on medication has done wonders for his self-esteem and for the quality of their lives. She says I'll know it's time to take action when I begin identifying my child as the "problem child." I don't say it, but I realize I have already done this. Andrew is the problem child.

That night I have a date with my husband. Over lovely Mediterranean kabobs and hummus, I tell him about the conversation with my godmother. I say, I think this is why I even had a godmother: not to protect my spiritual life, but to come back years later and give me permission to see my child in a new light. I say, that's two people in three days who have suggested Andrew needs help. I cry. I sob, actually, and I don't even care who's looking. My husband reaches across the table to hold my hand and says, what you're saying is, there's hope. I sob harder and nod ever so slightly.

February 15: I do some internet research. I find site after site describing my child. I read arguments for and against medication. I remember all the reasons I've always thought ADD was a bogus disorder. I realize my biggest reason against medication is that I don't want a zombie child. I want him to feel his feelings. The internet tells me that there are new drugs, like Straterra, which are not stimulants and affect the brain the same way that anti-depressants do. I am still not entirely convinced, but I can feel my mind opening. I call my mother. Knowing she's had experience with a challenging child – my brother – I tell her about Andrew and ask her what she thinks. She gives me exactly the answer I need: She says, what do you think? She is behind me no matter what. I decide I will call the pediatrician first thing Monday morning.

February 16: One minute after they open, I am on the phone with the doctor's office. I find out there is a protocol for an ADD evaluation. I must come to the office and get some forms – one for me to fill out, one for the teacher. I collect the forms and drop one off at the school. While I wait for my sons

at the bus stop, I call my sister, who is a pediatrician. I tell her about my conversation with the teacher, and I tell her what I'm thinking. She says the best new drug is Straterra. She verifies everything I'd been reading on-line. She says Straterra is the drug she would recommend first. She says not to worry, everything will be okay. I begin to feel more confident.

That night, my husband and I go over the form. It's a checklist with a rating system. We argue about some of our responses – he tends to see Andrew's behavior as more severe than I do. When I want to check that Andrew NEVER steals, my husband reminds me of the times he's stolen and destroyed his brother's pokemon cards. I hate the form. I hate answering questions that cast my child in a negative light. My husband reminds me that we need to be as honest as possible. I tell him, I hate this form. What I mean is, I hate the answers.

February 17: I stop by the school to pick up the form completed by the teacher. It's in a sealed envelope, but I have to look at it. I order lunch at a Chinese restaurant and bravely open the envelope. My child pokes others, it says. My child steals erasers. Other children ask to be seated away from my child, because they don't want to get into trouble. I cry. My child is not normal. I know already that he will qualify for any and all drug therapies.

February 18: The nurse calls from the doctor's office. She says the doctor does not have an available appointment until March 15. I say, I can't wait that long. She says the doctor looked at the forms, and would I like to go ahead and try a medication? I say yes, gratefully, and we discuss Straterra. The nurse says it's the lesser of two evils. She says we should see a difference within a week. She says the doctor will start him on a low dose and then ease him up to a full dose. She says I should stop by the office to collect the sample. She says I should call in a week to update the doctor on Andrew's progress, to ask for her, so I won't have to get into everything with another nurse. I am grateful. I realize I don't want anyone to know what I am doing. Even as I am hopeful, I am ashamed. I understand now what my godmother was talking about. There is something wrong with my child. It feels like failure to resort to medication. I remember everything we've tried, and I tell myself this is just us trying something else. I remind myself to be open-minded. I remember Andrew as an infant at my breast, a one-year-old with a mischievous grin. I remember his blue-blue eyes and how he always brings me flowers. I remember how much I love this child.

Februray 19: I explain to Andrew that beginning tomorrow he will take one blue pill every morning. I say his brain is different from other people's brains, that this medicine will help him be able to control himself. I say it will help him make better choices in school. I tell him I love him more than life and I only want him to do well. He is perfectly agreeable, excited even. I feel good about the conversation. I feel like he understands what we're doing. I feel like he wants to do better.

February 20: Andrew takes the pill. At the nurse's suggestion, I refrain from alerting the teacher about the medication, hoping that I will hear from her if there is improvement in Andrew's behavior. About an hour into the school day, I get a call from the nurse. She says Andrew is crying, that he feels like he wants to throw up. She says he told her he started a new medication. I verify this and feel completely torn about whether or not to come get him. I explain that it's been a tough week for Andrew, that he's on Straterra, that this is his first day. I say stomach upset is a common side-effect. I suggest he get an early snack. This works. We learn to keep food in Andrew's stomach all the

TOGETHER A RAINBOW FORMS

9" x 12"
Photography

***Jessica Whisenhunt** is a Vestavia Hills, Alabama, High School student whose work was included in the 2006 annual high school students' juried show sponsored by Birmingham Art Association. Her art teacher is Timarie Fisk.*

time. We later learn that constipation is also a common side-effect. We counter with increased natural fiber intake, such as watermelon.

February 23: We can already tell a difference in Andrew. He's calmer, more respectful. He's even been reading books to his little brother. When squabbles erupt, instead of slamming a door, Andrew cries and seems to express himself more appropriately. I realize how unaccustomed I am to a teary response from him. I think the drug may be helping Andrew to be more in touch with his feelings, not less. We feel pleased and hopeful. So far, so good.

February 25: My husband and I realize we haven't raised our voices or had to threaten to take away Andrew's gameboy privileges since beginning the medication. We observe ourselves still feeling anxiety when we anticipate an escalation of Andrew's behavior, but the escalation never comes. We find the dynamics in our family are changing. We are having to re-learn how to interact with our child.

February 27: On the behavior portion of Andrew's progress folder he gets a #8 for "kind and thoughtful behavior." The teacher writes that Andrew's desk has been moved back with his peers and that she's noticed a big improvement in Andrew's handwriting since beginning the medication. We take Andrew and his brothers to the ice cream stand to celebrate his success. Andrew glows. We glow. And hope it lasts.

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Irene Latham is poetry editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal. *Her book of poetry, illustrated by Jeff Faulk, will be published by Mercy Seat Press. Latham was named Alabama Poet of Year 2006 by the Alabama State Poetry Society. irenelatham@bellsouth.net*

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OH, THE WANT OF AN OPEN DOOR

by Tommie Willis

Stepping out of my car I heard it! Scratching sounds… gnawing sounds…coming from my kitchen window.

Looking up I carefully examined the window. Nothing, but the reflection of the evening sun. Maybe I was hearing things. Maybe not; my wife says I'm deaf.

I opened the walk-in door to my garage basement and stared at the security monitor. A tiny red light glowed in the dark. Good! The alarm was activated. No intruder in my home.

Upstairs, dropping my luggage on the den floor, I proceeded toward the kitchen with my Bar-B-Que supper. Suddenly, I stopped and listened. Something moving from the kitchen to the dining room.

With utmost caution I stepped into the kitchen. A disaster area! My wife's plants turned over. Her music CDs scattered across the floor. Wood splinters and pieces everywhere, especially on the floor in front of the dinette area window. Every other window pane's mounting gnawed down to the glass. The kitchen window over the sink likewise gnawed. My wife's calendar, our church directory, and telephone message pads scattered about the kitchen counter. In the sink, a crystal drinking glass lay shattered.

A varmint! Looking for a way out. I opened the back door, locked the storm door open, reached behind the refrigerator, grabbed the broom, and went hunting.

I found the varmint behind the piano in the living room. A large gray squirrel. I poked it with the broom. The squirrel darted back through the dining room to the kitchen, ignored the open door, and dashed behind the sofa in the den.

I closed the dining room door and chased it back to the kitchen. The squirrel ignored the open door again. As I searched for its hiding place, the squirrel got mad and started barking at me. Its bark told me the squirrel was behind the refrigerator. Growling in return I gathered up two large foot stools to block the den doorway. Now there was only one escape route, via the open back door.

As it barked and I growled, I poked the squirrel with the broom's handle. The squirrel skirted around me to the dinette area near the gnawed up window. I cornered it, and using my broom, I herded it toward the gnawed window adjacent to the open back door. Finally, after bashing its head several times against the window, the squirrel tried the open door and was free. It bounded across the deck and down the stairs.

Later, as I ate my Bar-B-Que supper, I surveyed the squirrel's damage. I admired its determination to escape an unknown and confusing environment. It could see the outdoors from which it came but couldn't return to its familiar world. I'm sure the squirrel was already exhausted from its efforts to escape when I showed up and threatened it with my broom. Although it surely was terrified, the squirrel couldn't go through the open door on its own. I had to force it out the door and into its known territory.

I wondered if we humans always recognize open doors that allow us to escape difficult situations at work, at church, at home, or in other personal relationships. Often times we ignore the open doors in our lives until we are forced through them.

Now, picking up the telephone, I did something that terrified me. I informed my wife, who was visiting her family in South Carolina, her pristine kitchen was a disaster area.

Oh, the want of an open door!

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Tommie Willis resides in Birmingham, Alabama, and serves on the board of the Alabama Writers' Conclave. tmwillis@charter.net

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HURRICANE

by Joey Kennedy

September 14, 2005

Mostly, I remember the sound of the wind. At least I think I do. There was that roar, loud and level for a long, long time it seemed, and, in my 5-year-old mind, not scary at all.

I loved storms - the lightning, the thunder, the wind, even the rain – and in 1961, Hurricane Carla was the biggest storm yet for me. Like Hurricane Katrina, Carla was a monster, too, at one time a Category 5, and she was headed for us in Texas.

We lived in a small town between Beaumont and Houston, a few miles inland from High Island. As the storm started to come in and the winds picked up, my mom sent me outside to chase down a plastic clothes basket that somehow had escaped and was tumbling across the front yard. The basket eluded me until it got caught on the barbed-wire fence that separated our lot from the cow pasture next door. I grabbed the basket and, now drenched but loving every second of it, ran back inside, making my clearly reckless mother awfully proud.

When the power went out, we all gathered on the living room floor with blankets, candles and a portable radio. We munched Vienna sausages and crackers. For a little boy who liked storms, this was great adventure. During the first 21 years of my life, I lived on the Gulf Coast, in southeastern Texas and then south Louisiana. I spent most of those years in Houma, down in Terrebonne Parish just southwest of New Orleans. When the tropical storms come in, as they do at a regular clip, the people along the bayous take care of each other.

STORMY DAY

9" x 12"
Watercolor on Paper

***Alpha Richards** is a student of Janice Cook, art teacher at Erwin High School in Centerpoint, Alabama. His work was included in the 2006 annual high school students' juried show sponsored by Birmingham Art Association. In addition to art, Alpha enjoys soccer.*

If a hurricane comes in very much to the west, the storm surge pushes the Gulf up pretty close to Houma. Just drive down the bayous south of the city, toward Cocodrie or Pointe-au-Chien, and you'll see houses built up on stilts to keep the inevitable floodwaters out.

As a cub reporter for the Houma Daily Courier in 1974, I eagerly volunteered to stay in the office and cover the season's strongest storm, Hurricane Carmen, which at one time had worked itself up to Category 4 with 150 mph winds. When it clipped southern Terrebonne Parish on September 8 and landed at Morgan City, Carmen had weakened to Category 1. Still, we were east of landfall, and Carmen gave fits to all those low-lying communities in the parish. While the storm was raging, I drove the newspaper's clunky Mercury Comet around town, dodging a falling traffic light, tree branches and a few flooded streets, to interview locals who were staying in school buildings set up as storm shelters.

"Whatcha doing out there, son?" asked a Terrebonne Parish sheriff's deputy as he opened the door at one shelter.

"I'm a reporter for the Courier," I said, stepping inside.

"No, you're crazy," he said.

I didn't think so, though. My family always stayed for the hurricanes. We stocked up before a storm came, then we'd huddle at home or nearby with some neighbors while it passed. After a storm broke, we'd go outside and help each other replace missing shingles or pick up fallen limbs.

My father and older sister still live in Houma, and they characteristically stayed put as Hurricane Katrina zeroed in.

I learned from early news reports that Houma had been spared the worst of Katrina's wrath; being west of her eye, there would be no storm surge for Terrebonne Parish this time. But I also knew from the same reports that Katrina's winds had battered the old downtown pretty good, and she sure tore up the power grid and phone systems.

As Katrina's remains brushed Birmingham during the night, I could hear the roar I remembered so long ago from Carla - loud and level and for, it seemed, a long, long time.

I cannot imagine how it sounded to those along the Alabama and Mississippi coasts, or west toward Slidell and New Orleans, or farther along to where my father and sister live in Houma.

Four days after Katrina, I finally caught my sister by telephone. The power had been out all week, she said, and the telephone service had just been restored. While her house suffered only minor roof damage and our father's apartment a few blocks away was OK, too much had happened this time, she said, and she wouldn't talk about the wind.

Finally, she said that never again would she stay home for a hurricane. "We were so lucky," she said. "So many people …" Her voice trailed off. I was left wondering how I ever could have thought this an adventure.

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Joey Kennedy, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is an editorial writer and editor of the Sunday Commentary section for The Birmingham News. jkennedy@bhamnews.com.

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HER WEATHER

by Michael Kriesel

Grandma had a hysterectomy when she was 30
after that when thunder grumbled in the west
she'd sit in the Mercury with the engine running
the deed to the farm in the strongbox beside her
her head poked out the window on the lookout
for vanilla scoops of cloud pregnant with tornadoes

when it started getting dark
she'd turn the headlights on
honk the horn and gun the engine
while the cows moaned in the barn
then she'd put the car in gear
spitting gravel everywhere
Grampa said they had insurance
but it didn't matter once the leaves
started flying like receipts

LARUE

by Michael Kriesel

It's not always
what people are

sometimes it's
what they're not

you've been
one less

failure in
my life

your name
a road

only wild
strawberries

growing in ditches
can follow

.....

Winner of the Council for Wisconsin Writers 2004 Lorine Niedecker Poetry Prize, Michael Kriesel currently resides in Aniwa, Wisconsin. He writes reviews for each issue of Small Press Review, and his poems have appeared in over 200 journals, including Chiron Review, Main Street Rag, and Wisconsin Academy Review.

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HOW I MET BUGSY, MY CAT

by Richard Modlin

Winds howled, pushed and buffeted me across the quadrangle toward my apartment. At one o'clock in the morning, the wind-chill reached minus 20 degrees Celsius. I wrapped my parka closer around my body, tightened the hood, and leaned into the wind. I knew I'd be snuggled under a feathered comforter in ten minutes. Besides, my Swedish friends at the film club I attended, insured my survival by plying me with a couple of shots of vodka. "For the road," they said.

"Maa-woow!"

"What the devil's that?" I shouted.

The wail, so shrill, piercing, paralyzed my legs. Its intensity deafened the moan of the winds. The skin on my back and neck tightened. I poked my head out of the hood. A street lamp lighted the path. I looked forward and to the sides. The path, edged with tangled leafless bushes, was empty. "Nothing around, only wind," I mumbled.

I stepped forward, but felt a slight pressure against my left foot. There lying next to my shoe was an emaciated bundle of straggly fur. The kitten could not have been more than a couple of months old. Its large black eyes stared up. Again it tried to muster enough energy to send another soul-wrenching shriek. But, what came out sounded like leaves scratching the air.

"Go home! You're going to freeze," I said, hoping it would leave. I didn't want to feel guilty in the morning, when I found its body frozen on the walkway.

The kitten rubbed against my shoe and fell over. I knew it would not survive in the cold, and maybe, not even if I took it home. It would not leave; just stared up at me, trying to send another meow. I picked up the little fur ball and stuck it under my parka.

We reached my apartment. The kitten warmed, tried to walk, but instead it wobbled about, uncontrolled.

"You're starving," I said and crushed some peanut butter cookies into a bowl of milk and offered the concoction.

The little thing inhaled the gooey paste, but its stomach rejected the offering and sent it to the floor. After a few minutes of fur licking, while I cleaned the mess, the kitten noticed some dregs remaining in the bowl, polished them off, curled onto a pillow and fell asleep.

The next morning I found the refugee coiled on the bed, under the comforter, just behind my knee. When I arose, the kitten arched its back and stretched. Although puny and wasted, this charcoal-colored cat with some white on his face and feet seemed special. It possessed a unique trait, a crosier-like tail. It was as if the little chap could be hung, by its tail, from a clothing rack.

When I asked my Swedish friends, they said that the tail signified a cat of aristocracy. Yeah right, I thought. But I still felt proud, because, if my friends weren't joking, I had saved a cute alley cat that may have royal connections.

I named him Bugsy after the lead character in the movie the film club discussed the night I found him. He and I lived together while I completed my sabbatical in Sweden. We became close friends. When it came time to return to the U.S.A. and Huntsville, AL, Bugsy returned with me.

To legalize Bugsy's immigration, U.S. Customs required official certification from a Swedish International Veterinarian stating that he was healthy and carried no diseases. This accomplished, I bought a cat carrier, paid Delta Airlines $140 for his one-way ticket, and he and I flew across the Atlantic. After affirming, at the request of a U.S. Immigration Official at Kennedy International, that he could meow in English, Bugsy became an American cat. Nowadays, with his shepherd's staff held high, Bugsy patrols Wrensong, his estate. Since that frozen night in Sweden, I have not heard him voice another horrific meow. Ten years has passed since Bugsy's great trans-Atlantic odyssey. I wonder if he still remembers his homeland?

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Richard Modlin edits and writes in Owens Cross Roads Alabama, and serves on the board of the Alabama Writers' Conclave.
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FORGET ME NOT

Acrylic on Canvas
9" x 12"

***Alexandra McDonough** is the resident artist at Parkside Home & Garden in Birmingham, Alabama. Her 2D work is defined by its sculptural qualities. "Art is a continual work in progress." artalex7@hotmail.com.*

A PRAYER FOR WORK WITHOUT HOPE

by Susan Luther

"allroundyou is disaster
of soul on soul gone bad, rotten or rotting
from the edges on in."
Olena Kalytiak Davis

"Dark cloud is at the door.
The trail out of it is dark cloud." – *Navajo Healing Chant*

- - -

Landfall by early morning –
"how can we 'spend time
reading or writing poetry
when humanity and civilization
are being trashed all around us'"

in Beslan, the bloody bodies of a hundred children.

Hurricanes, murders, all around me
Friends die, species die, bombings:
Wars: hatreds unbless the world. And yet

We are called by – waste and grace? Sprinkler rainbows,
child *Labor,* we are called to *labor* – to be offering
the hungry and despairing anything, a widow's mite.

Drivers, window washers, farriers, oncologists –

Instead?
Of bread and flesh?
To choose to have chosen been chosen
By the spell of syllables

for *this?* Plato
exiled poets from the golden city-

God, immensity, whatever's out
there: was he right? - I don't ask

a miracle – a word,

one kind word where words
matter; I don't ask

The Prize – a listener, one
listener who will hear forever

between the lines.

The work, I know, I know
is not forever, is not in being
understood – I know, I know
the signs are all around you, look!

A fly, buzzing behind the blind,
a pencil, schoolbus yellow, rubbersmelling,
tea, hot enough to scorch the tongue –
the *click!* of dishes shifting
in the cupboard; *rrrrr*
of the Xerox, *eee!* of the fax.

The ax's long heft
for the stump, bump of bull
dozer into scrabble, unruly – the unendless –
grunts

of a zillion vehicles traveling the glory road.
The shuttle, exploding on the glory road.

So – we will know the true task
only after every other hope is gone?

Let it go. Let it go. Go, squirm
like any pilgrim in the ashes, let me learn
again again the mercies of the tender skin.
Let the world, the world that needs, let me
Let the lurching world in. As the beetle

suns on the curb, as the savage
hummingbird takes no prisoners –
If I must curse this mortal fate in verse
then let me curse mightily; if I must
cavil, then cavil, to the bone.
If my art is going to

Break on the rock of the world
Then let it break, wholly

wholly;
god of Language o god of the Underworld o god of Life
No no no no you can't say that Oh yes I can

for the sake
of the song in our blood, for the sake
of each platelet, attuned to its job, doing
what it was born to like the others
who flow, and flow on.
The anonymous work of the world, of this house
made of death made by dawn.

.....

**Olena Kalytiak Davis and Neil Astley ("spend time reading…") are quoted from a review in Poetry, CLXXXIV Number 5.*

Susan Luther is a past editor of POEM and a former member of the English faculty at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Widely published, Susan was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, but returned South to her mother's home region some years ago. She has family roots in Barbour and Dale Counties, and along with her brother, still grows trees on the antebellum farm in North Florida homesteaded by one of her great-grandfathers.

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