

THE ALALITCOM

Selected Works from the Alabama Writers' Conclave

2016

Literary Competition



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Editor

Carol Robbins Hull

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Introduction

**The Alabama Writers' Conclave (AWC) proudly presents
*The Alalitcom 2016***

In August, 1923, an enthusiastic group met on the campus of Alabama College (now the University of Montevallo) with the idea of forming a statewide organization that would support and encourage Alabama writers. Thus the Alabama Writers' Conclave was born. In that early meeting "authors presented their own creative work giving talks on the technique of the writers' art."¹

Now in our ninety-third year, the Alabama Writers' Conclave continues to meet in a yearly conference that provides networking opportunities, lectures, workshop sessions for learning and improving our craft, and recognition of the winners in the AWC writing competition. As insightful as our early founders were, perhaps not even they would have envisioned the reach of our membership and competition entrants. Although most of the entries in the 2016 AWC writing competition came from Alabama and its surrounding states, entries came from across the country and beyond.

Contest categories this year included Short Story, Flash Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, Poetry, Juvenile Fiction, and First Chapter of a Novel. All winners were invited to have their submissions published in this, the 2016 edition of *The Alalitcom*. Thank you to all those who have contributed their writing, and congratulations to all of the winners, and to all who entered our competition this year.

Carol Robbins Hull, Editor

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

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(SS = short story, FF = flash fiction, CNF = creative nonfiction, P = poetry,
JF = juvenile fiction, FCN = first chapter of novel)

Short Story

Elderbeest

Amy Lampe

When I went down to Hollow Point last month to visit my cousin Billy Hearn, I was determined to make him take me along on one of his night hunts. I'd heard tales about the hunts for years, how every Saturday night in the fall he and a bunch of his neighbors—fellows old and young—would meet behind the post office and go off into the forest with their guns to track and kill the Elderbeest.

They would head off at dusk, up the old logging trail that slopes up behind the post office and splits the forest down the middle. At the crest of the trail where the earth meets the sky some would go left and some would go right, into the dark and tangled thickets in search of their prey.

The Elderbeest outfoxed them every time. They never came back with anything more than a few common nocturnal varmints like possums, coons and coyotes. Still they were a determined bunch and kept at it year after year.

“Just what is the Elderbeest?” I asked Billy. I'd asked this question many times before. The answer was always the same, and yet it always intrigued me.

“A stag. I told you already. A gi-normous one. With a rack of antlers twelve feet across. King of the woods—but he doesn't stay there. Comes into our neighborhoods at night, knocks down our fences and plunders our gardens. And he brings bad luck to our town.”

“I want to go with you on your next hunt,” I said.

“No way. Too dangerous for a woman. The Elderbeest will kick and gore with a savage vengeance when cornered.”

“Has he ever been cornered?”

“Not since I’ve been on the hunt, but there’s always a first time.”

I noticed that the women of the community didn’t seem at all worried about their husbands’ safety. In fact, at the grocery store on Saturday afternoon, I overheard some of them chatting lightheartedly about the upcoming hunt.

“They’ll leave at dusk as usual,” said one. “All pumped with expectations.”

“They won’t be home before three,” said another.

“They’ll come in exhausted.”

“Deflated.”

“Boozed up.”

“They’ll just fall into bed, stinkin’ of dirt, sweat, beer and disappointment.”

“We should buy ’em somethin’ special to snack on while they’re trampin’ around out there.”

Billy said “no” again but I went anyway, wearing the hunting gear I’d bought at REI. It’s hard for a short stout female to blend in with a bunch of tall, husky men. Still I gave it a try. Pulling my hat brim low over my face, I joined the group behind the post office at dusk, lurking at the fringes, hoping Billy wouldn’t notice me. Of course, he did.

“Go on back to my house, Lunelle,” he said sternly, without bothering to introduce me to his friends. “And keep Pollyanna company.” Pollyanna was his wife. She’d seemed relieved when I said I was going out for the evening. We have very little in common.

What could I do but pretend to give in? I left the group with head low and shoulders slumped. Went around the side of the building and waited. Soon the men took off in high spirits, heavy hunting boots loudly scrunching on fallen leaves as they headed up the gently sloping trail toward the darkening sky to a full moon faintly rising. Peering around the side of the building I saw them

separate into two groups at the crest, one going left and one going right, into the woods on either side.

Loud thrashing sounds followed for a while, a few lights winked here and there, and then all was silent. Night settled in. The moon rose full and round at the crest of the trail and I considered my options: go left and catch up with Billy's group, go right and join a bunch of trigger-happy strangers.

Or go off on my own to hunt the Elderbeest—not a good option considering the trigger-happy element. Besides my rifle was just for show. It wasn't loaded and even if it was I wouldn't know how to shoot it.

Final option: go home and spend a dull evening with Pollyanna.

Just when I was about to give up and do that, I heard something thrashing about on Billy's side of the trail. A snort, a whinny, and a black horse plunged out from the thicket bearing a tall rider in a dark hooded cloak, a striking silhouette against the moon. The horse danced impatiently as the rider lifted a rack of antlers and carefully placed it on his head. The Elderbeest! Not a stag at all. Whose joke was this, lasting so many years with no one catching on? I stifled a laugh. Sounds carry in the stillness of night, even though I was some distance away, hiding in the shadows behind the post office.

Turns out it was a good thing I kept quiet.

The Elderbeest put a panpipe to his lips and blew a single haunting note. A dozen merry men swarmed out of the woods—mystical men dressed all in green with glowing auras, stunning physiques and uncommonly handsome faces. They hurried down the trail and out onto Hollow Point Road, which runs in front of the post office, past the grocery store and gas station and down to the cluster of homes where Billy and his hunting buddies live.

I cannot swear to what happened next. I couldn't see the action so well in the dark, even with help from the aura-glow. But I know faeries when I see them, and here were a dozen, descending on Billy's neighborhood as if they'd been called for a reason.

I heard an opening of doors, light feminine laughter, and a closing of doors against the loneliness of night. Then all was quiet, except for the soft haunting notes of a panpipe drifting from the edge of the forest.

Amy Lampe is a freelance writer and editor in Decatur, Georgia, with a professional background in corporate marketing and trade journalism. She provides online editorial support and services for clients in a variety of fields. She is the mother of four daughters and the grandmother of seven grandsons and one granddaughter.

Creative Nonfiction

Sunshine and Smoke

Richard Perreault

I was born in the segregated south. Raised to honor the Confederacy and never questioned “colored restrooms,” “colored water fountains,” or special seating instructions on buses directing “colored to the rear.” I never wondered why there were no black people in my school, none in restaurants other than those clearing the tables.

I grew to young adulthood among gentle segregationists who didn’t use that denigrating word beginning with *N* and who tolerated the black boy from the neighborhood on the other side of the woods riding his bicycle down our street as long as he didn’t stop to talk to us. This was our world. All was good and right, and everything made perfect sense. Then came the hot August afternoon in 1966 that changed my life.

The summer of ‘66 fell between the end of my myrmidon days of high school and parental dependence, and heading off to the self-affirming freedom of college. It was the first summer the Braves were in Atlanta. The summer of *Wild Thing*, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, and Emma Peel. A summer when only communists and weirdoes opposed the Vietnam War, and the earliest rumblings of a Beatles breakup were swept away with the release of *Paperback Writer*.

I was working at a suburban Atlanta post office, one of two seasonal employees they’d taken on that summer. The other was a twenty-year-old black college student named Rabbit Warbington. Rabbit and I were to begin our temporary postal careers before dawn on a Monday morning. I was there,

bleary-eyed and fuzzy-brained before 5:00 a.m. Rabbit didn't put in an appearance until almost 9:00. I later learned that "within reason," Rabbit was to be allowed to do pretty much what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. If the *what* was nothing and the *when* never, eight weeks of non-productivity was a preferred alternative to having federal regulators, or worse, civil rights protesters descend on the facility.

Rabbit was one of two black employees at the post office that summer. The other was Rodney Robinson, a mail carrier. Short of stature but long on charm, Rodney was without competition the most well-groomed, well-dressed, and innately cheerful person in the building. He was, as Joe Biden would one day describe candidate Barack Obama, "articulate and clean."

During my eight-week tenure, every time I saw Rodney he offered a cheerful greeting and an upbeat word about the glory of the day. He spent most of his time on his route, but whenever he came into the building, it was like a rainbow coming through the door.

As delightful as Rodney was, the other employees—mostly middle age white men—never asked him to join in their friendly chatter. He was never invited to a birthday celebration or even offered a slice of cake. Any of that would have been considered socializing, something neither blacks nor whites in 1966 Atlanta had grown comfortable with. Behind his back, the workers called him *Smoke*.

Through the middle of August I knew Rodney only as a smiling face passing me in the cluttered corridors of a suburban post office. I endured the hardships of pre-dawn punch-ins at the time clock, split shifts where I would walk the two miles home at 9:00 and walk back to start again at 1:00. I tolerated the perpetual stream of indignities directed at me by the full-timers. As the good-natured, new kid on the block, I was considered fair game. I took it all in stride, and was given the appellation, *Sunshine*.

Then one Sunday night in early August, as I was wrapping up a weekend double shift, a tractor trailer pulled into the loading dock. The weekend supervisor came out of his office and informed me that even though I'd worked

24 hours over the weekend, I would be needed at 5:00 the next morning; for the tractor trailer wasn't just a tractor trailer, it was a treasure ship. Secured within its holds was the holy grail of bulk mail: the Sears Christmas catalogs.

The next morning at 5:00 I began assembling stacks of catalogs on the loading dock, each intended for a particular carrier with a quantity approximating the total number of patrons on his route. Because of the extra burden the catalogs put on the carriers, as many of the full-time mail sorters who could be spared were assigned to ride with carriers and help them deal with the additional work.

Rabbit was assigned to ride with the least liked of the white carriers. As the designated butt of all jokes, it was decided I would ride with Rodney Robinson. "Hey, Sunshine," the shift supervisor called out, "You're going with Smoke."

I was loading catalogs into Rodney's truck when he came outside, bubbling good cheer, offering greetings to everyone. He seemed genuinely pleased to have me riding with him.

The morning was still cool and the work pleasant. I freed catalogs from their bindings and handed them one-by-one to Rodney as he worked them in with the other mail. We played a game of how certain streets got their names, with the frequent declaration, "Look. Here's one that doesn't even mention a peach tree."

By late morning we were bemoaning how the Braves had fallen hopelessly out of pennant contention, but that the exploits of *Hammerin' Hank Aaron* still made them worth following.

The morning passed so swiftly I was surprised when Rodney said it was time for lunch. The temperature had caught up with what was expected of August in Atlanta. The air in the back of the truck was stifling. I had been having too much fun to think about eating, but I was ready for a tall icy Coke and for a chance to stretch my legs.

McDonald's was new in Atlanta but Rodney said it was already his favorite place for lunch. "Quick, and good, and cheap," is how he put it.

The parking lot was crowded, but Rodney found a spot not far from the front door. We got out and were heading up the sidewalk when my pace slowed. I was about to walk into an eating establishment side-by-side with a black man.

We stood in line, waiting our turn to order. We did not speak. I looked around nervously. Rodney was the only black person in the restaurant. I was trembling inside, wondering what would happen when we got our food.

The blessed eraser of time keeps me from recalling which of us started for a particular table and which headed a different way. I wouldn't doubt it was I who made the move to separate seating, or it might have been Rodney, obeying the unwritten code of our culture, not wanting me to feel awkward among diners who had likely never seen a white person and a black person sharing a table.

I remember little of the balance of that day, other than how hot it was in the back of the truck—and how quiet. If Rodney and I spoke, it was only about the task at hand. We returned to the post office, said our farewells, and went our separate ways.

Something changed inside of me that day. What happened at McDonald's fit perfectly into my world, and yet strangely it seemed that world no longer fit. There was something very wrong about what had happened.

That night, as I lay awake in bed rerunning the events of the day, the story of Peter denying Christ came to mind. I of course, was not Peter – nor Rodney – Jesus, and yet I felt the guilt of betrayal. When our newfound friendship was put to the test, I denied it, unable to muster the courage to even sit at the same table with him.

I didn't go out the next day and join a civil rights march, or try to join the Black Panthers. I didn't mention what had happened to anyone. I just kept it, pondered it, nurtured it.

When I say something inside of me changed, it would be more precise to say, something had been set in motion; like a thaw beginning in an ice-choked river. Only a trickle at first, but what with time would become a flowing river.

That day with Rodney set my life on a different course. A course that ran far broader and deeper than just questioning what I'd been taught about racial divisions. If I had been misled about race, what other flaws were built into the foundation of my beliefs? How many other Rodney's would I have to meet before I could sort it all out? How much more sunshine? How much more smoke?

*This is the sixth straight year **Richard Perreault's** writing has appeared in The Alalitcom. Since turning his writing focus to short fiction in 2011, Richard's stories have won more than 30 awards. He lives in Bryson City, North Carolina, on a mountaintop overlooking the Great Smoky Mountain National Park.*

Short Story

Well Done

Beth Hamer Miles

Wendy unlocked her office and took off her scarf. A paper snowflake on her door read “Autumn Care, Social Director.” Who would’ve guessed she’d work in a nursing home, but here she was, lining up Veteran’s choirs and Elvis impersonators, making sure every possible holiday was celebrated. Friday had ended National Oatmeal Week. National Kazoo Day was tomorrow.

It was early, but some of the residents were already trolling the main hall, scooting their wheel chairs forward with a slow heel-toe motion. She heard Frank and Luther arrive as she sat down at her desk. They parked their chairs outside her office, as usual.

“Morning, fellas!” she called.

“Mornin’,” said Frank. “You got coffee on, yet?”

“In a minute,” she said. “Y’all be nice out there, now.”

Frank and Luther chuckled, seeming to love it when she scolded them. They came every morning to bum coffee and heckle the parade of patients being wheeled from the facility to various doctor appointments.

“Here comes one,” Frank mumbled to Luther as a stretcher approached. “Hey,” called Frank to the paramedic. “He dead?”

“I ain’t dead, Frank,” said Alvin Patterson’s voice from the stretcher. “I just got dialysis.”

Frank and Luther laughed like a pair of asthmatic hyenas.

“Y’all ought to be ashamed,” called Wendy, but she knew they weren’t. She tried not to smile. No telling what the paramedics thought. Most looked to be just out of high school. A skinny one had been standing near her office

reading the activities board when she'd arrived. His thin shoulders were hunched and his white socks were showing under his too-short pants. She hoped Frank would leave him alone.

She ran her finger down the list of today's events. Next door in the Activities Room, her assistant adjusted the television volume for the patients watching Good Morning America. Soon, Elder Watkins would be here for the weekly gospel sing-a-long. Domino Games and Jazzercise were after lunch, but first, Elder Watkins had promised a surprise; He was bringing a secret guest to conduct a cooking show!

Last week, she'd hung posters advertising the anonymous chef. The whole building was buzzing about it. Why, it could be anyone in the Greater Birmingham Area. Maybe a celebrity!

Outside her door, Frank and Luther were talking just loud enough to overhear.

"I'll bet we get fried bologna and a side of ketchup at that fancy cooking show today," Frank told Luther. "'You know how we only get half-assed stuff around here."

Wendy tried to sound stern. "Frank! I saw how much you enjoyed the animals last week." The Birmingham Zoo had brought a chinchilla, a tortoise, and a ferret for a presentation.

Frank pretended not to hear. "You remember when the Zoo came?" he asked Luther.

"Hell, yeah," said Luther.

"They shoulda brought lions and tigers. All they brought was a weasel, a turtle, and a fat squirrel."

"You know it," said Luther. "Damn."

Wendy stood to start the coffee. Frank thought he was so funny. She had to admit he was amusing, but sometimes he took things too far. Last month, he'd knocked Louise Crenshaw's wig off on purpose, gotten in a fistfight with Roger Harris, and called 911 because the nurse hadn't answered his call

button fast enough. She crossed the room to the coffee maker as they debated which staff member on the night shift was fattest.

Suddenly, they got quiet. Wendy looked up to see Gladys Hawkins, the Executive Director, standing in her doorway. Gladys had built a geriatric empire through her expert ability to point out minute employee inadequacies and apply multifaceted levels of shame. She narrowed her kindly eyes at Wendy. “Tell me you’ve followed up with this secret chef business. I’d hate to see you mess things up the way you did with the Girl Scout Cookie Extravaganza,” she said with menacing sweetness.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Wendy. Her face grew hot with the memory of crying Girl Scouts, angry residents, and all those crushed boxes of Thin Mints.

Gladys raised an eyebrow. “I’m praying for you,” she said. It seemed to Wendy that shaming and praying were Gladys’s two favorite managerial tactics. Used simultaneously, they were extremely effective.

As Gladys walked away, Frank made his usual comment about Wendy’s boss. “She run a tight ship,” he whispered to Luther, “but she one mean-ass ol’ lady.” They restrained their laughter to snickering.

Wendy began to panic. What if she’d forgotten something? She darted out of her office and ran down the hall to peek into the dining room. Inside was a banner that said “Gourmet Cooking 101” over a long table complete with cooking supplies. She bit her lip. Everything looked ready. All she needed now was the secret chef and the ingredients.

As she walked back to her office, Elder Watkins rounded the corner. He was wearing his usual three-piece suit, the jacket hanging loose over his stooped frame. He was grinning so that his mouth full of unnaturally straight teeth had no trouble announcing themselves as dentures. “Sister Wendy,” he said in his gasping whisper.

“Oh, Elder Watkins,” she said, reaching to squeeze his long fingers. “We’re so glad you’re here!”

He ducked his head. “Just doing my duties to the Heavenly Kingdom.” Wendy marveled that he could sound both humble and masterful in the same sentence.

He turned to Frank and Luther. “Brother Frank. Brother Luther.”

They sunk down in their seats.

“I trust you’ll join us for the sharing of His Holy Word?”

They looked away. Frank looked particularly uncomfortable. Wendy figured if anyone needed redemption, it was probably Frank, but every week he showed no interest.

Elder Watkins smiled at them and turned towards the Activities Room. The residents were probably already gathering around the piano, waiting for his arrival.

“Oh, wait!” called Wendy. “What time will our secret chef get here?”

Elder Watkins turned back toward her, looking confused, but then his face cleared. “Oh my. I plum forgot about that. I’ll try and remember to ask him for next week.” He flashed his teeth and walked away.

Wendy put a hand to her forehead and leaned against the wall beside the bulletin board. The skinny paramedic was still there. He shifted his feet and squinted at the board like he had an intense desire to make sure Bingo was indeed on Thursdays.

“This is bad,” whispered Wendy.

“You gonna get kilt,” said Frank, sounding worried.

Next door, Elder Watkins began playing the piano. He tended to sing his gospel music on the loud side:

“Redeem yourselves now, you lowest of sinners.

The Pearly Gates are coming, but you will not have to hide.

Redeem yourselves now! It’s time for salvation!

The Pearly Gates are coming, but he’ll take you by his side.”

Frank pointed a finger at the skinny paramedic. “What about him?” he asked over the music.

Wendy shushed him. “He’s on duty,” she said, but Frank had already unlocked his brakes and was heel-toeing over.

“Hey!” barked Frank. The boy jumped and glanced back, showing the whites around his eyes. “How long you here for?” Frank asked.

The boy shrugged. “Th-they said they’d pick me up later. Said there wasn’t room now.”

Wendy frowned. No room in the ambulance for a paramedic?

“You new?” asked Frank.

The boy nodded.

“Ha!” said Frank. “They just sizin’ you up and breakin’ you in.”

“You know it,” said Luther with a nod. “Damn.”

“Listen.” Frank scooted closer “How ‘bout helping out our friend. She needs a chef.”

“Frank!” scolded Wendy.

But the boy cleared his throat. He jerked at the neckband of his shirt with one finger. “Actually,” he said, “My grandmaw showed me how to cook some.”

“Yeah?” asked Frank. “What can you make?”

The boy scratched his chin, pursed his lips, and looked the ceiling. “Soup?” he finally asked.

“Soup!” crowed Frank. He turned to Wendy. “We got a chef’s hat?”

With reluctance, Wendy went into her office and came back with a hat and apron. She pulled the boy across the hall into the dining room, trying hard not to look desperate. Frank and Luther heel-toed behind.

“You got vegetables?” the boy asked “and canned tomatoes?” He put on the hat and began organizing the utensils. Wendy headed towards the kitchen to gather the ingredients.

“Woo-whee,” said Frank. “He in charge, now.”

Across the hall, Elder Watkins reached the third stanza. Wendy paused and watched as Frank cocked his head. He seemed to be listening.

“Redeem yourselves now, you lowest of sinners.

The Pearly Gates are coming but the battle will be won.

Redeem yourselves now! It’s time for salvation!

The Pearly Gates are coming, but he’ll say well done, well done.”

As the song closed to a chorus of amens, Wendy wondered if Frank had finally decided to redeem himself. Had he realized this place was practically the loading dock for the Pearly Gates? She watched his face, marveling that for once he’d done something nice for someone.

Well done, Frank, she thought. Well done, indeed.

But, Frank shook his head as if to clear his mind, then scowled at the boy. “Make sure them vegetable are cooked all the way through,” he demanded. “That soup’ll be nasty if it ain’t well done.”

Wendy sighed.

“You know it,” said Luther. “Damn.”

Beth Hamer Miles is a North Carolina native, who lives in Vestavia Hills, Alabama with her husband and three children. She's currently completing her first novel.

Creative Non-fiction

The Spilt Milk

Stephen Edmondson

We sat quiet at the breakfast table, waiting on coffee to pour over our biscuits. Sprinkled with sugar and some milk added, this bit of browned bread became “soakie,” our early morning meal. In the foothills of the Appalachians, in Northern Alabama just after World War II, there was no selection of cereals. Mushy, sticky oatmeal was an occasional Saturday or Sunday treat. We didn’t think to add fruit to make it more palatable. Anyway, there was none.

We weren’t exactly poor by community standards, we just didn’t have money or anything else. The prosperity of wartime was now gone, and we were back to sharecropping, a cruel existence that benefited few, and certainly not us. We children did our part, working the tender cotton plants in the fields in spring, and picking the fuzzy bolls in the fall. It wasn’t a fun life, but it was all we knew. We accepted it. There was no choice.

Ma came over to the table with a small glass of milk for me and Sister to share, to make our soakie soften in our bitter coffee. She set the glass, an old jelly jar, between us and moved back to the wood-burning stove to get the biscuits.

Pa came in and sat down at the head of the table, with Sister and me to his right side, Sister closer. The table had been made of old lumber left from some past days, and had a linoleum top, easier to wipe clean. Pa slouched down and hollered to Ma.

“When’s my breakfus’ goin’ to be ready?”

“In a minute, Hugh, in a minute,” Ma replied.

And she began to hurry up, not to keep her man waiting. Pa hadn't shaved, that being a more or less every-few-days event. His bib-front blue overalls, worn through at spots, covered a faded red plaid flannel shirt. Hard work shoes were on his feet. Sister and I had on the clothes we had worn yesterday and had slept in, and would keep on today. When Ma could, she would hand-wash us somehow a change of clothes, especially when we went to the little Methodist church on Sunday, or me to Eva Elementary in school time. I was six, sister was four.

Sister and I sat quietly, as we always did, waiting patiently. We couldn't holler for breakfast to be hurried. First, we weren't in a hurry for something we didn't especially like, particularly this hard biscuit soaked in coffee. And second, in our little world of no self-esteem we were afraid to speak up.

Seeing Ma coming with the biscuits, I reached to move the milk glass. In my fear and effort, I bumped the glass, spilling half the milk on the table. I knew immediately I had done seriously wrong. I was to find out shortly how bad wrong I had done.

Pa hollered at me, “What'd you do that for? Ain't you got no sense a'tall? I ought to slap the shit out of you for messin' up my breakfus' now.”

I hung my head, and didn't answer, knowing at this point any reply would be wrong and would enrage him further. Pa begin to turn red in the face.

“How in hell can I eat my breakfus' with you messin' up the table? Why'd you go and do that?”

“Woman, did you see what Stephen did? He messed up my breakfus' and now this damn table is a mess.”

His voice was rising, and Ma knew better than to reply. I looked toward her for some sort of saving help. She looked away, not wanting to enrage her man more.

Pa bellowed again, “Now ain't that a damn mess on the table. Wipe it up, wipe it up right now!”

I had nothing to wipe with, so I tried to swish the spilled milk off the

table with my hands into my lap. That made a bigger mess. I saw Pa almost tremble with rage.

Come around here, boy. I'm a'gonna show you about spillin' milk at my breakfus' so's you'll remember."

Sister and I looked at each other, terrified, even though we had been through many similar events as this. Our quiet looks at each other were of desperation, "what to do?"

Pa continued, "Get over here!"

Always quiet little sister now spoke, and to this day I don't know where she got the nerve, considering the gravity of our situation. Her voice shook and was quiet, almost a whisper.

"Pa, it warn't Stephen. I knocked over the milk. I didn't mean to, and I won't ever do it again. Don't hurt Stephen."

Before I could appreciate what she had done for me to get me out of my predicament, Pa blew up, and with his big carpenter's hammer-swinging hand, he swung toward Sister and with the back of his hand knocked her off our little bench to the floor. I began to cry, but Sister didn't, being too afraid.

"Shut up, boy, before I slap the shit out of you too!"

And I shut up and sister just sat on the floor. Pa says, almost calmly,

"Woman, pour my coffee in my tin cup. I gotta go find some work."

And with that, he arose from the spilt-milk breakfast table and left abruptly, nothing else being said. When he was safely out the door and out of sight and hearing, Ma came over and picked Sister up and held her close, and reached for me to hold me. I was too confused with the moment, and not knowing where I stood with anyone, I held back, and went back to the dark and dank bedroom we all shared. I crawled up on our bed and lay across it, and I cried. I pulled the cover over my head, and I don't know if I cried for myself, or for my sister, but I cried quietly. And I wished I could hide from everybody forever. Maybe I have a large portion of my life, finding a safe hiding place to avoid more spilt milk.

A scared and scarred little boy, in over his head, with terrible fear and

apprehension and loneliness, and much mixed emotions, confused, not knowing where or when the next slap comes. Sometimes now I might spill a little creamer preparing to pour it in my coffee, and I freeze, looking somewhere to Sister and Pa, having that fear wash over me again of an imminent slap by that huge hand, and I hold back the tears, then, now. And I want to reach and hold my Sister, or have her hold me in reassurance. And I wish somehow I could repay her for that moment long ago.

I still hear Sister, "It warn't Stephen, Pa. I knocked over the milk."

Stephen Edmondson lives and writes in Homewood. His stories cover most of his life, and near all are based on actual occurrences. They are meant to capture the times told of, for generations to come. Some are tender, some are hard, some have a psychological twist to them. All are meant as honest representations.

Poetry

Shorebirds

Carol Grametbauer

At dawn clusters of sanderlings bustle back and forth
along the wet beach just ahead of the rolling waves,

narrow dark legs a scissoring blur, probing
the bubbling burrows of tiny ghost crabs for food.

A quarter-mile downshore, as the morning deepens,
shrieking children dart in and out of the surf, dash

from water's edge to parents' beach towels and back,
brown legs flashing in the sunlight, prancing across

the hot sand as if they were made of air. And the air
trembles with the excited squeals of the children

and the calls of their parents and the wheezing
squawks of white gulls wheeling overhead, all mixing

with seafoam and mist-rainbows and a chaos
of footprints five- and three-toed, a bright prayer
under the searing August sky.

Carol Grametbauer lives in Kingston, Tennessee. Her poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals, including Appalachian Heritage, Appalachian Journal, Connecticut River Review, Still, Fluent, and drafthorse; her chapbook, Now & Then, was released by Finishing Line Press in 2014. Her work was nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize.

Creative Nonfiction

An Unsatisfactory Death

Larry Wilson

Vern died the day after Easter. I was glad when I heard he had held out until Monday rather than dying on Easter Sunday so the day of his death would stand as a holiday all to itself.

He died of a neurological disease called Ataxia Telangiectasia, a rare inherited disorder that affects the nervous system, immune system, and other body systems. Over more than 30 years, it slowly took his muscle control while leaving his mind completely intact to the very end. It was a gradual, relentless deterioration. The last time I saw him he was totally immobile, strapped in a wheelchair, his head lolling to the right side. Snot dripped from his nose and dangled briefly like an icicle before falling to his lap. Drool ran endlessly out of his mouth, trickling down over his chin and onto his shirt.

He still had full control of only his eyes, and when he stared at me I could see the confusion and despair in those eyes. I stood in front of him with my arm around his wife's shoulders, a woman who had also been my wife in a time long ago, and smiled.

I'd seriously considered killing Vern over forty years before. What a mistake it would have been, I thought, to have killed him so long ago. What a shame it would have been for him to have died easily and missed all this suffering.

Vern was once one of my closest friends. We were career Air Force officers during the Vietnam years and had been stationed in Europe together as well as at two stateside bases. Our final assignment together was in Virginia at

Langley Air Force base on the Chesapeake Bay. We worked together, we partied together, our children played together, and we even owned a boat together. The boat was an old 30 foot wood cabin cruiser that was long on personality but short on practicality. Its name was *Folly II*, a name that seem seemed painfully ironic after I learned Vern and I were not only sharing a boat but also my wife.

I've read that wives having affairs with their husband's best friend is not uncommon, while having affairs with the foes of their husband is relatively rare. I suppose that having an affair with your husband's enemy would be in extremely poor taste, however it seems like a much better idea. When your wife sleeps with your friend, you tend to lose both your friend and your wife, but retain your enemy.

Over the years I forgave my ex-wife. Looking back I saw plenty of reasons for her loneliness and unhappiness. My long absences which military life required, my obsession with my career, and worst of all, the strange macho thing that kept me from letting her know just how important she was to me. I loved her and I think she loved me and after her affair we tried to put the marriage back together. Our best efforts failed though. It was like trying to assemble a jigsaw puzzle which consisted of a collection of pieces randomly selected from many different puzzles. In the end we divorced and she married Vern.

But forgiveness was impossible for the man I called my friend. He was a comrade in arms, a fellow warrior who I would have trusted with my life, not just my wife. Loyalty like that is a bond which once broken can never be repaired.

I'm glad he suffered, I'm glad he's dead. I cannot forgive him for the affair with my wife, for driving me from a woman I loved, for wreaking havoc in the lives of his children and mine, none of whom ever fully recovered from the divorces.

Yet on the night I learned of his death I walked outside into a spring rain carrying a glass of bourbon and stood looking out into the darkness and listening to the sound of thunder in the distance. Raindrops ran down my face,

soaked my clothes, and chilled my body. I had expected to feel some pleasure in Vern's death but I felt none. In the end I had still lost a marriage and a friend and a pain remained inside me that neither his death nor the alcohol could drive 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 is president of Montgomery Creative Writers. He writes primarily short fiction, but if sufficiently depressed, an occasional poem sneaks out.

Creative Nonfiction

Abandoned

Dianne C. Teague

“O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.”

Thomas Wolfe

Look Homeward Angel

Just beyond the Tuscaloosa city limits a ruin stands. A ruin that long ago began its descent into the relentless madness of Southern thickets and persistent vandalism grown more malignant by the year. “Old Bryce” is the name it goes by among the boys who employ its fearsome decay to terrorize pledges in their fraternities at The University of Alabama, just across the Black Warrior River. Brought over in the dead of night with pillowcases over their drunken heads and then set loose like unwanted mongrels they will awaken for years screaming out of a fear they can’t forget. But Old Bryce is just a scary story for these boys. Its truth is another story and one that we can never know fully.

Originally named the State Farm Colony for Negroes, the facility was constructed in 1939 for African-Americans suffering from mental illness and other disturbances – emotional and physical. Across the river another hospital, now known simply as Bryce, designated for treatment of the mentally ill had been completed in 1861 and was founded on the concept of humane treatment set forth by Dorothea Dix—compassion and respect for the patients. But those were mostly white patients. And although their circumstances may have been unimaginably awful before being sent to Bryce, or the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane as it originally was named, their situation was addressed

decades before anyone thought to provide specifically for black Alabamians. An array of illnesses existed within those walls at Bryce. The persistent disease of pellagra that developed from the corn-based diet of countless poor Alabamians and caused dementia, sent many a man and woman there. A friend tells the story of a female relative who lived out her days in Bryce because her post-partum depression lingered too long. Her husband took her there and never came back. Tuberculosis was endemic and indeed entire wards were dedicated to the treatment of the tubercular mentally ill.

The Negro Colony, as it became known, was a well-constructed three-story residential building with an imposing main entrance of inevitable white columns setting off the classic red brick exterior. A stately oak-lined driveway took a leisurely route to the building which was situated on the former site of a great plantation house belonging to the Jemison Family who sold the land to the state for construction of the facility and indeed, Mr. Jemison was a vocal and active advocate for the necessity of such a facility. The 4,000 acre plantation had been known as Crab Orchard in its heyday and doubtless thrived due to the toil of slaves owned by the Jemison Family. One of the several names the facility went by in earlier days was The Jemison Building.

When my husband and I moved to Tuscaloosa in 1981, Old Bryce had been closed since 1977 and was still in pretty good shape. We stumbled upon it during one of our rambles around town and felt like we'd uncovered some local secret too shameful to discuss with us. We'd been thoroughly briefed on all of Tuscaloosa's numerous mental health facilities and yet here was something unmentioned. Clearly abandoned, the arresting main structure loomed at the end of a paved drive overhung with heavy-boughed oaks which had been planted for the original plantation. A rusting water tower tilted precariously near the derelict structure and a series of unattractive flat-roofed residential and classroom buildings clung to the south side of the grounds, and in those buildings the few remaining patients and clients were being treated at that time. Yet another name had been assigned to those facilities, the S. D. Allen Nursing Facility.

Even in that first encounter with Old Bryce I felt drawn to it by a force I couldn't explain and that my husband didn't perceive. There was certainly something melancholy in the air as we drove around the large building; something palpable, almost. It didn't seem decent to say "haunted," for that would have slighted those souls who came to live out their lives and die there. In what I've been able to find out it seems I've found out little. There are volumes of history regarding the treatment facilities across the river – Bryce Hospital, and all the offspring of Bryce—Partlow, Alice Kidd, and others—but virtually nothing about Old Bryce, apart from it being a state work farm for able-bodied mentally ill African-American men and women and where other tasks such as weaving and mending were carried out. It's an erasure of sorts, this lack of historical commentary. Apart from the superintendent's yearly summary of physical additions and changes there seems to be virtually nothing about this well-intended undertaking.

Nature certainly played a part in the ongoing erasure. In the early 80s incipient signs of natural decay were evident; kudzu trailed almost kindly up the crumbling bricks, espalier-like, while other creepers—poison ivy, English Ivy—clung to the foundation. Slumping boxwoods grew out of control in ungainly masses at the structure's corners, reminders of a long-ago landscaping effort, and the remnants of an orchard with diseased pear, apple and peach trees stood bleakly to the west waiting out inevitable death. It was oddly quiet out there; no birdsong, no highway noise from the ever-busy Highway 82 to Columbus, Mississippi just across the weed-filled fields. I have visited the site in all seasons of the year and the quiet is pervasive. And although my husband didn't share my longing to visit the place from time to time, he accompanied me and listened as I tried to parse the ruins.

A friend of ours, now retired from the UA faculty, grew up close by Old Bryce; his father's land adjoining the old Crab Orchard acres. As a child he went down to the fields where the men were working at their tasks of planting, cultivating, and harvesting, and there he found willing playmates. Grown and old men who allowed him to wander among them, as he played the made-up

games of boyhood. They would hide and scare each other, run foot races in the soft earth of early spring, climb the oaks and swing on scuppernong vines. He said his father sent him down there to give the men some recreation during their toil. And he gladly went. He said it was fun and he never thought a thing of it. This white boy and those black men.

My husband and I visited the site this spring of 2016. It was the first time we'd been there in years. The oak-lined drive had long given up the pavement to tree roots and potholes the size of graves. A gate once erected to keep out vandals had been thoroughly vandalized and lay sideways in the ditch like a forgotten drunk. As we drew closer it was clear that the ruin was fast slipping away. A fire had gutted the main building bringing down what had remained of the roof and all the windows gaped black and hollow, their glass long gone to rocks hurled by moonlight. Last summer's kudzu had tried to hide this shame but failed to make it past the first floor. Muddy water puddled everywhere and a soft spring rain abetted the wood rot and its taint in the air. We drove cautiously around the property through a tangle of blackberry briars and privet that was a more effective deterrent than the gate had ever been. It would all be gone soon—The Negro Colony, the Jemison Building, Old Bryce, S. D. Allen Nursing Facility—all the names it ever went by, and ones we would never know. Finally realizing that Nature was succeeding in her takeover, I knew this would be our last pilgrimage. We just couldn't get through the thickets choking the roads.

As we drove away something caught my eye in the dense orchard grass alongside the road—spot of bright yellow—like something dropped and forgotten. Getting out of the truck and parting the thick, matted grass I found a clump of daffodils, the kind you find at old home places out in the country—Butter and Egg daffodils, they are called. Passed from neighbor to neighbor and handed down in families, they have endured. Healthy and vigorous, they were pushing their golden heads up through the grass as relentlessly as the grass was trying to smother them. From where I stood outside the truck I could see there were more. So many more. And they were not there by accident; there

was a pattern—they marched in a straight line alongside the dirt road – hundreds of them. After everything else had been defaced or destroyed these flowers remained and would continue to bloom year after year. Suddenly, I realized I was getting wet standing out in the rain. I got back in the truck and told my husband, “Somebody thought to plant flowers.”

Dianne C. Teague was born in western North Carolina and grew up in the foothills of the Appalachians. She and her husband came to Tuscaloosa in 1981; both of them working for The University of Alabama where Dianne also earned a B.A. in Theatre and an M.A. in English.

Poetry

Babel

Jeff Santosuosso

I collaborate with ghostwriters
privately describing anonymity.
We encode into ciphers we've never shared.
We write cryptograms with invisible ink
in caves beneath the seas
diving without tanks,
delirious, dizzy-headed,
breath bursting bronchioles,
eyelids clenched as if holding our last oxygen.
We dabble in Cyrillic and serifs
quill pen calligraphy,
arthritic knuckles dragging smears across
ink on paper
nearly torn by stalactites just beneath
our skin.
Standing on our heads
we shout backwards in sandstorms,
our tongues dried, dangling.
We semaphore under new moons,
gesturing in straitjackets,
straining at the bindings.

Jeff Santosuosso lives in Pensacola, FL. A member of the Florida State Poets Society, he is co-editor of panoplyzine.com, dedicated to poetry and short prose. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in San Pedro River Review (summer, 2016), Illya's Honey, Texas Poetry Calendar, Alalitcom, and elsewhere.

Short Story

Holding Hands with the Clock

Richard Perreault

The house was long and narrow, what in another place might be called a *shotgun house*, though along Florida's east coast the design stood testimony to the high cost of beachfront property; the primacy of being near the sea. In every room there was a clock, each progressively earlier than the one in the room before as you moved from the front door toward the ocean. It was as though, had the house been long enough, you could walk into yesterday.

Standing by the window overlooking the shoreline, as far into the past as the house and the clocks allowed, Cynthia watched the tide go slack; the surf indecisive, gentle in transition. Above the expanse of gray-green Atlantic to the east the sky was apricot, wide and flat as if smoothed by a rolling pin. To the north, copper bottom clouds hinted at another day of intermittent showers. Intermittent showers in what for Cynthia had become an intermittent life; starting, stopping, sputtering between calls from the oncologist. Anxious days and tormented nights, seasoned with dashes of optimism, dollops of despair, all simmered in a thick, dark roux of resignation. She was expecting the next call at 9:00 and had mapped a strategy to avoid it. When the clock showed 8:59 in the seaward room, she would rush to the front of the house where it would already be past the hour.

Inviting her mind to drift anywhere away from the here and now, she considered the curious environs surrounding the beach house, on loan from a friend in Ohio. The modest clapboard dwelling perched at the northern

boundary of the Canaveral National Seashore; a protected area known for its pristine seascapes, exotic wildlife, and for Playalinda Beach, one of Florida's few clothing optional stretches of coastline. Further south, protruding into the Atlantic like a Roman nose, stood the cape that had endured not only seasonal lashings of wind and tide, but also the whims of political nomenclature – Canaveral to Kennedy and back again. Sixty miles southwest was the whimsical mouseopolis of Orlando. Cynthia couldn't stop from smiling at the thought of archaeologists thousands of years in the future coming across the ruins of the Magic Kingdom, puzzling over what sort of people worshiped a giant four-fingered rodent and an equally anatomically implausible duck in a sailor suit.

Near Orlando, and far to the south, were oval tracks where dogs cut lean as strips of eye round steak chased imaginary rabbits; a metaphor for how Cynthia saw her life and the lives of most everyone she knew. In frenetic pursuit of something they would never catch. Something that even if it could be caught would be no better than an imitation, not at all what it had appeared to be when the chase began.

From the Bose speakers Glen Frey's easy voice laid the soundtrack to her thoughts: *What can you do when your dreams come true and it's not quite like you planned?* She'd seen The Eagles in concert when she was in her early thirties and again twenty years later. Now Frey, younger than her by a decade, was gone, victim of medication that had stopped something else from killing him.

The shadows of a flock of pelicans gliding overhead brought her back to the moment. For no connected reason, she remembered the idea for a story she wished she were clever enough to write. A priest diagnosed with a terminal disease completely loses his faith, rejecting everything he once held sacred and true. Angered and resentful over the years he believes he has wasted, armed with decades of details gleaned from the confessional, he sets about informing those who have been wronged of the dastardly deeds he has heard were done to them. What the priest stands to gain from these betrayals hasn't come clear in

Cynthia's mind, but she relishes the possibilities of the devilishly entertaining mayhem that would certainly ensue.

It was there the storyline always splintered, leading simultaneously down a half-dozen unrelated paths, out into the weeds, until one path circled back to the act of confession; the attempt to unburden one's mind and soul through the inconsequential act of admitting the wrongdoing to an impartial third person. To count for something, shouldn't the confession be made to the person who was wronged? Or was absolution found merely in the act of contrition? For at the root of every confession wasn't there at least the seed of regret?

As for her own regrets, which did Cynthia cling to now that the end of her story was being written? A moment here, an instant there, where she wished she'd said or done something differently? Countless, no doubt, but lingering on them was as ultimately useless as confession to an irresolute priest. And her greatest regret, the one that endured, was something over which she'd had no control or even influence. Over which choosing a different course of action or making a different decision would have changed nothing. What could anyone do to change the misfortune of never having loved or been loved as they'd wanted? It was called "falling in love *with*," wasn't it? Not falling in love *to*, or *at*, or *by*, but *WITH*. The requirement was a mutual, emotional mania. A shared plunge into the abyss of total surrender. In her life, when she had been at the precipice, the Other had not. When the Other had been there, she had not. That was her true regret: a life gone by without a single *magic in the moonlight* moment to which she believed everyone was, or at least should be entitled. That moment when one's future calves away from the glacier of one's past, changing forever the contours of life.

A single car pulling into the Playalinda Beach parking lot caught her attention. *There* was a regret she could do something about: having never swum naked. A small regret, so small in fact she'd only realized it at this moment. It had always seemed a shameful thing to her, too decadent for

someone of her upbringing and social standing. Now that she had become invisible in the physical world, what could it matter? Who would notice? Who would care?

As she was deciding – if she would or would not go to the beach that very afternoon to erase the skinny dipping regret forever – she realized doing so might give birth to a much deeper regret. Once she had done it, dropped her shift onto the sand, the sun and breeze caressing her in places neither had ever touched before, wouldn't she regret she had not done it sooner? Done it in the days when people would have noticed. When women would have gazed with envious eyes and men could not turn away as they muttered, "Good job, God," or called out vulgar yet affirming suggestions.

It would have been *such* a moment. And wasn't that all a life really was? Moments. Brief, fleeting, indelible occurrences, woven together with the inexorable multi-hued threads of time spent or wasted?

She heard them then, sounds she'd never noticed above the cacophony of living. The thunder of calendar pages falling away. The dragon-wing roar of the minutes rushing by. And now, the *plink-plink-plink* of seconds dripping from the shallow reservoir of her life, as she stood holding hands with the clock.

In a room toward the front of the house the telephone jingled, summoning her to come and learn the measure of her future. Whether she answered or not, the truth would be the same. The remainder of her life splintering into one of two directions. The difference in those directions was stark, as simple as the *yes or no* of binary code, yet subtle, like the difference in an anchor chain and a kite string.

*This is the sixth straight year **Richard Perreault's** writing has appeared in The Alalitcom. Since turning his writing focus to short fiction in 2011, Richard's stories have won more than 30 awards. He lives in Bryson City, North Carolina, on a mountaintop overlooking the Great Smoky Mountain National Park.*

Flash Fiction

Mission to Mars

Linda F. Willing

Are you okay with never coming back? That is the first thing they ask at the interview. You're sitting there by yourself in front of the committee and they come right out and say it. The first people who go to Mars are never coming back. If you think you'll just be visiting or exploring, then walk away now. Only those who want a one way ticket will be chosen for this mission.

Of course everyone says they would be okay with it. They've come this far in the process; they're not likely to end it like that. But simply saying it isn't enough for the committee. You have to convince them.

So I tell them about my grandparents, who came to the United States from Greece in 1919. The ship that brought them here nearly sank. They spoke no English. An immigration official changed their name at Ellis Island. They lived for two years in a New York City apartment with no plumbing before moving to Detroit. My grandfather worked in a factory; later he opened a restaurant and all of his seven sons worked there most of their lives. My grandparents came from the mountains, they herded sheep, but once they crossed the ocean to America, they made a life in a country as unfamiliar to them as another planet.

And they never returned. Not even when the sons pooled their money and offered to send them back to Greece for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. My grandfather told them to save their money. There was no other place but here.

I see the committee members nodding to one another. There is nothing like an immigrant story to inspire those who have no knowledge of what it is really like.

I don't tell them that my grandfather's family lost their land when he was a teenager. That he was running from certain conscription into the army to go fight the Turks in another pointless war. That my grandmother was pregnant before she married, and that she was shamed and shunned by her parents.

My grandparents never went back, but they never let go either. In sixty years, neither of them learned to read or write in English. My grandmother never saw her two sisters again. But she wrote letters in crumbling Greek to them every week for nearly fifty years. Searching for words. Trying to explain. Wanting to be forgiven.

I say nothing of loss, of betrayal, of anger and anguish. Instead I speak of adventure and opportunity and challenge. New beginnings.

The committee chairman stands up as I leave. It looks good, very good, he says, smiling.

I shake his hand. I don't tell him that what I really seek is a place where there is no language.

Linda F. Willing lives and writes in Gulf Shores, Alabama and the mountains of Colorado. In a former life she was a career firefighter and is the author of the book On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories.

Creative Nonfiction

In the Dark

Faith Garbin

I. Journal Entry: At night, the house is a womb with two hearts beating.

Peering through the venetian blinds, I watched scrub pines bend in submission to the wind. Chimney stacks, roof shingles, and tree limbs littered the yard. Across the street, the roof on the fire station peeled off like the cover on a tin can. I was describing this scene to my mother when the phone went dead.

Hurricane Katrina was barreling down on those of us who remained on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We had lost power earlier that morning, and the wind was blowing debris and curtains of rain across the yard.

Why had I stayed? And why had I placed my teenaged daughter, Katie, in jeopardy?

The wind howled, slamming debris against the house. Katie and I played board games, ate peanut butter sandwiches, and attempted to ignore the occasional thud. I imagined inert piles of squirrel bodies, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

Evening encroached; darkness surrounded us like a tomb. I switched on the camp lantern and tried to find a radio station, any radio station. Static. After several attempts, I reluctantly turned off the radio and the lantern to conserve batteries.

Bored, Katie went to bed, flashlight in hand. I remained on the living room couch—the darkness as pervasive as the suffocating heat. I couldn't

sleep. My thoughts tumbled over one another: Was Katie's father alive? What about my friends who lived near water? Where had Katrina made landfall?

Eventually, I must have dozed, because I jerked awake at the sound of voices. Was I dreaming? I strained to hear against the wind. Looking through the blinds, I struggled to see against the blackness. Who was out there? I heard a male voice shouting, his voice strong yet fading in and out with the wind: "Is anyone at this house? Make sure, man. Make sure."

Looters!

Frantically, my fingers searched the top of the coffee table. I felt the slight heft of metal in my right hand. Pointing the flashlight like a gun, I aimed a beam of light through the window.

"Come on, man! Let's go! Someone's at this house."

I listened as the voices retreated down the street. Our looters were "polite," searching for homes without their owners. The hours dragged by; I stayed on the couch, listening, trying to differentiate between the wind, looters, and my vivid imagination.

I thought of my daughter in the back room, and imagined the whoosh of her blood coursing through my veins—it sounded like fear, like love.

II. Journal Entry: Robert Frost would be alarmed at the state of our fences.

Morning slowly overpowered the darkness, and the wind lost its intensity as the enormous Katrina moved northward.

Katie and I stepped outside to survey the damage. The gas tank from a truck had floated into the yard, resembling the bloated belly of a whale. Our privacy fence no longer afforded us any privacy, its boards toppled like dominoes. And our roof resembled the Scrabble board spread open on the dining room table. We picked up debris, placing it in lawn bags.

We talked to the few neighbors who had also stayed behind. Some offered what would prove to be reliable information, while others repeated rumors. As the heat-infested days crawled by, we heard that looters from Biloxi

were headed our way; we heard that casinos were missing or found miles from shore; we heard that bridges had crumbled as if from an earthquake; we heard that thousands of people had died. Ironically, everyone outside of Katrina's devastation knew more about her destruction than we did.

And each night, after the waning sun slipped below the horizon, I turned on the lantern, its light pulsating in the dark—a darkness as palpable as the Mississippi heat.

And each night, when I turned off the lantern, I felt like a blind woman, my sense of hearing heightening in direct proportion to my imagination. The sound of my daughter's breathing was amplified, and I could hear the soft step of her bare feet on the tile floor. A bug tap-tapped across the wall. Stepping outside, hoping to feel a breeze, I could have sworn I heard stars dying.

III. Journal Entry: I felt the nakedness of being human as dead stars winked at our plight.

One evening, Katie and I walked the few blocks to a friend's house. He owned a post-hurricane prized possession, a generator, which was cooling his elderly mother's bedroom. We welcomed the reprieve. But upon leaving, we realized that we had miscalculated the time. The moonless night was a dark hole, and the sky, salted with stars, stretched over us. We stared in awe at the winking slivers of light. With over three million people without power, the sky resembled a black canvas, one that had been painted with a star-spattered brush.

Gazing at the charcoal sky, I was suddenly aware that I was walking on the surface of a planet. Somehow, gravity still held us to the earth, shaken, perhaps, but unrelenting. I thought of our ancestors experiencing this same weight; I imagined them studying these same dead stars. Stumbling, I felt as though I were falling off the edge of the earth. So this is what it was like in the beginning—before humans shaped their world with fire, with light.

IV. Journal Entry: My dreams are a reflection of this post-Katrina world.

As Katie and I groped our way home, bright lights swept over us, interrupting my reverie. We heard the thwack, thwack, thwack of helicopter blades as search lights scanned the area. I was unsure as to how to respond. What was the protocol for search helicopters? Should we wave, or would they think we needed help? Should we run and hide, or would they think we were looters? Were we breaking the law—a curfew? After a moment, we ignored them and continued walking home. This was simply one more surreal scene—like the heavy presence of the National Guard, the long lines for ice, and the overnight appearance of tent cities.

That night, I had disturbing dreams. I was on an alien planet, running from ghastly creatures that hunted me like prey—their jaws snapping, eyes illuminating the gloom.

In another, I was a Jew during the Holocaust, hiding from the Nazis as I searched for food—my ribs jutting through my skin. I awakened clutching a flashlight, a talisman in my hand.

V. Journal Entry: I'm still bearing the scars of all that darkness.

The inky void of each successive night slowed the passage of time. My inability to contact loved ones who lived out of state frustrated me. I agonized over the certainty that my elderly mother was assuming the worst. And I worried about my other daughter who had just started her freshman year of college in Memphis. How was she coping, 400 miles away from home, not knowing if her family was dead or alive?

Coupled with the extreme heat and humidity, these ruminations made sleep impossible, and with the darkness came the strange inability to mark time. Although neither of us can pinpoint the exact date, Katie and I remember the night we were awakened by light. Blinking like moles, we stumbled into the hallway. I had left every possible source of light in the “on” position, eager to

know the exact moment the power was reconnected. I soon realized that it hadn't been necessary. I was acutely aware of the hum of the refrigerator, the whir of the ceiling fan, the click of the air conditioner, and the clink of ice dropping into the bin.

And then I heard another sound—one that seemed strange and out of place—laughter. We were laughing.

Ever since Katrina, I keep several flashlights in every room, and I no longer have blinds on the windows facing my rebuilt privacy fence.

And every year on the anniversary of her arrival, I am reminded of the pervasive darkness that descended like a curtain each night. I am reminded of death and loss and lack. I am reminded of how a familiar landscape became foreign.

But I am also reminded of kindness and generosity and compassion. What would we have done without others—without the light they brought to the Gulf Coast?

Even now, almost 11 years later, I dread moonless nights when the dark presses down like a heavy hand—when the stars stare coldly from a never-ending sky.

Faith Garbin lives in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. She writes poetry and creative nonfiction. Her poetry collection, How We Bury Our Dead, was just released by Negative Capability Press. Her work has appeared in: Negative Capability Journal, Katrina Memories, and The Awakenings Review, among others. She studied English at Virginia Tech.

Creative Nonfiction

A Chance Encounter

Stephen Edmondson

I was coming back from Chattanooga, to Birmingham, I was unemployed, had just lost a new job prospect earlier that day. I was low. I was down, I was discouraged, not suicidal yet, but not your favorite Sunday morning clown either.

I was cruising south along on I-59, beyond the upper edge of the speed limit, my mind drifting, feeling sorry for myself, hating to go home to my anxious wife and admit another failure. It had been two years since I was wiped out in the construction and real estate industry, wiped out by a joint effort of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Double-digit inflation, sixteen percent interest rates and mass unemployment had left me high and dry. I had spent almost everything on two years of court reporter training and had yet to pass the certification tests. The light at the end of the tunnel had been dark a long time. Sometimes I felt the Devil had maybe blown out that lamp.

Somewhere before Fort Payne I came upon a dilapidated Ford station wagon, slumped beside the interstate. As I whizzed by, I noticed a lanky man, perhaps in his late 40's, standing at the right rear, looking at the flat tire. As I cruised on down the road, I thought about the man. He looked like I felt, defeated.

A mile or so down the road, I came upon one of those illegal dirt crossovers from one side of the interstate to the other. On a whim, I slowed sharply, looked for the Troopers, and made a lumpy and bumpy reversal, back

toward Chattanooga. As I passed the guy again, now on the other side of the freeway, I could see he was still standing there. It wasn't far to the next legal turnaround, the one where you see the big signs about the steam train motel and Incline Mountain. Maybe even still a classic See Rock City on a large barn roof.

In a couple of minutes, I was pulling in behind the stranded wagon. The guy was still standing there, looking down at a seriously flat tire. In the wagon was a woman, most likely his wife. They looked sort of country, like most of my family.

"How you doing?" I asked, though I could plainly see this wasn't his best day.

"I ain't a'doin' so good. Got a flat tire, looks blowed out, can't be fixed. Ain't got a good spare tire."

"Well, it's not far on down the road to Gadsden. Hop in and we'll go get your spare fixed."

He didn't know just how much free time I did have.

"Ain't got no spare to get fixed. Just go on, ain't nothin' you can do."

I couldn't just drive away.

"Pull that wheel off right quick. We'll go to Gadsden and get you a used tire and get you going again."

"Ain't got no money to buy a tire. I'm just up shit creek, Feller."

He hesitated a moment.

"But, I really need to get to Gadsden. Been out of work six months, about broke. Well, I am broke, flat broke. Wife's been sick. My brother-in-law put in a good word for me at the Goodyear Tire Plant. I was a'headed that way to apply for a job there. Thought I had a pretty good chance, what with John Ed standing for me."

"Well, dern it, let's get that wheel off and get the move on. We gotta get you to Goodyear."

I could see the stress on the wife's face, worried concern when she looked at her man. She was thin and pale, but nodded a yes to him, for them to go

with me. I knew he was eager to do good today, get that job, take care of his family, take care of those he loved. Country folk mostly don't show emotion outwardly, especially in front of strangers, but I could see theirs was a quiet but honest love.

In minutes we had the tire off and in my car trunk. We loaded up and we were all on the way to Gadsden. The plan was to get him to his brother-in-law's place, drop his wife off and we'd go to the job interview, then to a service station and buy a cheap used tire good enough to get him home. I figured maybe a \$10 tire and he'd pay me back someday. Didn't really matter. We were both about at the end of our ropes.

He had on clean, freshly-ironed blue jeans and a long-sleeved plain white cotton shirt. Cuffs that didn't quite reach his wrists. He was clean shaven, and his thinning hair was combed straight back. He had the eyes of a worried man, but at the same time, of an honest man. I guessed he looked alright for the occasion.

The job application and interview didn't take him very long, and soon we were back with the kinfolks. I gave him the \$10 for a tire and brother-in-law's wife took over from there. I was free to go home. I guess he was about the most appreciative person I had ever seen. He was so apologetic about taking so much of my time, but that was all I had, was time, plenty of time. Oh, the damn time I did have.

He asked for my address, said he would somehow pay me back. I believed him, told him not to worry about it. Then as I was leaving, he reached to shake my hand, as honest country folk do. A man that is going to beat you out of \$10 won't shake hands with you, not look you in the eye at the same time.

He hesitated a moment, and then, "How did you know I didn't have no spare?"

"I just knew it."

"Well, I am sure glad you did."

It was the way he was standing, I reckon. His slumped shoulders reminded me of my own thoughts of defeat.

“Feller, I’m much obliged.”

And then I was gone, out of his life, home to explain there was no job in Chattanooga. I wasn’t sure what the morrow would bring. I reckoned I was up shit creek also.

When I got home, there was a message from a Birmingham firm I had applied to, “Come on down, work part-time while you finish your training and test preparation,” it said. I started the next morning, and never looking back, haven’t missed a day in the decades since.

About two or three weeks after the roadside encounter, I got a letter from my flat tire friends. His wife had written on his behalf. “John got the job. He’s done got his first paycheck. Here is your ten dollars. Mister, we really appreciate your help that day. I thought it was all lost, and we’d have to go back home and try again for day work. I didn’t tell John, but I prayed real hard for an angel to come help us that day. And the Lord sent you right along. I thank him ever day for you. And I prayed for you too, for helping us, for the Lord to help you. You was our Angel.”

In the envelope was not \$10, but \$12. I smiled. I had my first paycheck, too.

Oh, that \$10.00, a flat tire, a prayer for an angel. That chance encounter beside a lonely road, never to be forgotten. A new life for both our families.

Who was whose angel? I guess their wings fluttered all about that day.

Stephen Edmondson lives and writes in Homewood. His stories cover most of his life, and nearly all are based on actual occurrences. They are meant to capture the times told of, for generations to come. Some are tender, some are hard, some have a psychological twist to them. All are meant as honest representations.

Poetry

Mermaids of Morrison Springs

A ghazal for Patricia Smith

Jennifer Grant

*There is a wilderness within a wilderness...
I saw the *[desert] and remembered home.
— Ghalib * [springs]*

*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
— T.S. Eliot
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Gotta love us redneck girls. We ain't afraid of searing shade nor skin
Swarming the springs, lips painted frosty pink wearing mermaid fins.
Fresh-water sirens, we frolic to flute music under mournful shrouds,
clouds of dark hair, almond eyes, disguised crackers baring jade fins.
Our existence, intimates linked to this glass, flaking emeralds that cast
an age-old, southern song. Lungs, voices echoing: *Wade-in fins.*
A shock to the body, this crisp seventy-two (frigid on our *hoo-haas*, too).
Bodacious bobbers between paddleboards, we swerve to evade fins.
Gotta love us small town gals gathered 'round Cypress knees in summer,
aquanauts all. Spellbound children, we share daring, handmade fins.
Find your fearlessness, *Jenn-fur Lynn – get in and swim.* Kick blue painted
toes, forget mid-life. Embrace skinny-dipping. Persuade yourself: *Grow fins!*

Jennifer Grant writes tiny curiosities and teaches yoga in Gainesville, FL. Her poetry and flash fiction have appeared in publications such as Apollo's Lyre, Bacopa Literary Review, Flashquake, Mixitini Matrix, Negative Capability and upcoming in Zoetic Press. Her first poetry collection, Good Form, is slated for publication with Negative Capability this year. Follow her musings at jennifergrantwrites.com.

Short Story

Desert Frost

Larry Wilson

When Darlene smiled, when she laughed, the years fell away, more than fifty of them, as if a time capsule opened and we were young again. I sipped my coffee and watched her with a silly grin on my face I couldn't seem to wipe off.

"What?" she said, breaking the silence.

"I was just marveling how little you've changed."

"Bull, you know that's not true."

"Yes it is. To me, this morning, you're the same person I was madly in love with in high school. We're older but you're still the same."

We were sitting by the window in the Hangar Café overlooking the east/west runway at Deer Valley Airport, outside of Phoenix. To the North desert mountains were thatched with tan boulders, speckled with Palo Verde trees sporting their yellow spring blossoms, mesquite trees, greasewood bushes and an occasional saguaro cactus with its arms raised as if in prayer. The mountains marked the north end of the Valley of the Sun and the beginning of the climb toward Prescott and Flagstaff.

The waitress brought our breakfasts. One egg scrambled and a slice of whole wheat toast for her, no wonder she was still as slim as I remembered, and my 'airport special'—too much of everything.

"Did you come here with Jon often?" I asked. Breakfast at the airport had been her idea.

“It was his favorite place. He kept his plane here when he was able to fly and when he couldn’t fly he came back to watch.”

“It never totally goes away, like the memory of your first love, flying haunts us forever.”

She ignored the ‘first love’ comment and scooped up the last bite of her scrambled egg while I worked on finishing my artery clogging breakfast. The sound of a Cessna taking off barely made it into the café through the double paned glass of the window and we watched the pilot dip the wings in farewell to someone left behind.

“Was your wife a pilot? Jon wanted me to learn but I was happy just tagging along.”

“She had no desire to learn and the last few years she seldom flew with me. I loved short flights around the airport but she’d had enough of looking out the window at the same old scenery. There’s an enormous difference between piloting a plane and being along for the ride.” She nodded and I signaled for the check.

We climbed up the stairs to the observation deck and watched a plane come in from the north and land. “I’m committed to dinner at my niece’s tonight,” I said.

“I’ve got plans too, and you’re leaving tomorrow.”

“The early flight to Omaha. My granddaughter’s high school graduation is the next day.”

“You can’t miss that, can you?”

“High school graduation only happens once. Too many things only happen once.”

We walked down the stairs, away from the world of soaring things, into the parking lot, into the feet planted firmly on the ground world, the world of gravity and reality. At her car we stood awkwardly looking at each other.

“It was great; can we do it again sometime?” I fought back a tear which was trying to escape from of my right eye.

“Sure, but can we make it sooner next time? I’m not sure we can wait another 55 years.”

“No I don’t think we can. Amazing how long good memories last isn’t it?”

“And they were good memories,” she said.

I moved forward and she gave me a tentative, almost kiss, and a hug that felt very real, got into her car without saying good bye, and drove out of the parking lot and back out of my life.

At 8:05 the next morning my 737 lifted off from Phoenix’s Sky Harbor Airport, climbing toward 33,000 feet, and heading nonstop to Omaha. There were a few empty seats, and I was lucky enough to have one between myself and a woman in business attire frantically going through a half inch thick report and entering data into a spread sheet on a lap top computer. She said, “God damn it,” quietly, changed an entry, and flipped pages frantically. Obviously, she was a woman on the way up the corporate ladder, with no time for idle chatter.

Below the clear desert air was dotted with puffy white clouds which gradually merged to form a sea of total white. I leaned back, closed my eyes, and fought the feeling of sadness that had settled over me after my breakfast with Darlene the day before. It grew during a boring dinner with my niece and her family, expanded further during a night of restless sleep, hanging like a yoke on my shoulders as I parked my rental car, and became nearly overpowering as I cleared security and boarded my plane.

Behind me a young boy, perhaps four, with red hair and countless freckles fussed nonstop and periodically kicked my seat back while his mother fought a valiant but losing fight to keep him still. The passenger in front of me leaned his seat all the way back without warning, smashing it against my arthritic knee so hard I yelled in pain, a sound he ignored but which earned me a glare from the woman working next to me. A flight attendant, looking like she’d had a very bad night, or perhaps a very good one, handed me a cup of weak, lukewarm coffee and a miniscule bag of pretzels. The pretzels were at

least salty and there aren't many Starbucks at 33,000 feet so the coffee would have to do.

Off to the right we passed a cloud mosaic looking for all the world like a giant had fallen on his back, waved his arms and legs and made snow angels. The thought of snow dredged up and old memory from my high school senior English class. Our teacher, a skinny, nervous, twit of a man with a repaired hair lip and its resultant lisp had made us memorize two things; our choice of a short scene from Shakespeare's Macbeth and one of three Robert Frost poems. My choice of the Robert Frost poem was "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and it is as clear in my mind as it was all those years ago.

*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

At 33,000 feet, somewhere over Colorado, with a kid kicking my seat back, a throbbing knee, and a rising young executive swearing softly next to me, I sorted out my sadness.

Frost should have stayed and watched the woods fill up with snow. I should have canceled dinner with my niece and convinced Darlene to cancel

her plans for the evening. We should have dined well, drunk elegant wine, listened to music, relived old memories and perhaps created a few new ones.

Frost is long gone and will watch no more snow fall. My reflection in the window, Boeing 737 windows are brutally honest, was of a man with snow white hair and the trials of over 70 years of life etched in his face. I might not pass this way again and, like Frost, I gave in to promises to keep.

Frost and I were wrong.

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 is president of Montgomery Creative Writers. He writes primarily short fiction, but if sufficiently depressed, an occasional poem sneaks out.

Flash Fiction

Autumn Care

Beth Hamer Miles

Every day, on her drive to Autumn Care, she wondered who hadn't made it overnight. These patients were the lucky ones though, the ones who'd lived into their golden years, the ones waiting to close the books on involuntary acts of bodily function, because enough already. The passing of human life is solemn and final, but they'd made it this far. She liked to think of them as lucky.

She clocked-in and gathered her therapy materials. She would need the puzzle with the oversized pieces to work on retaining attention, following directions, keeping the dogs of dementia at bay. She would need the picture cards to combat damage to the language cortexes of their brains. An apple is not called a duck, and ducks aren't pencils.

It was after four when she finally reached her last patient. "He's off the chain today," said the nursing assistant with a raised eyebrow, nodding towards Mr. Russell's room. That wasn't surprising, but maybe she could help. She'd work on spatial and temporal orientation, help him remember where he was. He could get a little better, couldn't he? Second shift staff here had no hope. Their mantra was, "Why'd he push that call light again? He don't never need anything." The bumper stickers she'd read during traffic jams on the interstate said to be kind, that everyone was fighting a hard battle. Maybe the afternoon staff just hadn't been paying attention to the right car bumpers.

Mr. Russell clutched the white sheet up to his chin over his emaciated chest, his eyes shut tight. His lips worked a pursing pattern, like he was trying

to solve a complicated word problem and couldn't do the math, much less find the words.

"How are you today, Mr. Russell?" she asked, loud and cheerful.

He frowned, twisted his long fingers into the sheet. His brown skin contrasted with the soft pink undersides of his fingertips, graceful as octopus legs in ballet, repulsive yet mesmerizing in their agitation.

She patted his bony leg with reassurance so he'd know someone was there, someone who cared. "Mr. Russell?" she called, gentle but firm. They had work to do.

He opened his mouth. "I see..." he murmured.

She chuckled. "You can't see, Mr. Russell. Your eyes are closed!"

His breath escaped in a long, slow sigh, the sunken chest drew even further towards the mattress. "I see the light..." he whispered on his breathy exhale.

She grabbed his skinny wrists with horror and gave them a shake. Not on her watch, by God! "Mr. Russell! Don't go to the light!"

His eyes blinked open. "Well, okay," he said and smacked his lips twice as if tasting the flavor of the words. "It's done gone anyhow."

She sank to the chair beside the bed and rested her forehead in her hand.

"He okay?" asked the nurse, pausing in the doorway.

"Yes!" she snapped.

And she thought about knowing when someone's time was up, about how she maybe could've beaten the afternoon traffic if it had been his.

Beth Hamer Miles is a North Carolina native, who lives in Vestavia Hills, Alabama with her husband and three children. She's currently completing her first novel.

Short Story

Final Ride

Larry Williamson

I knew this would be our last ride together, but I couldn't admit it.

She knew it, too, and was courageous enough to accept it.

"You really want to go?" was my surprised response to her suggestion.

She was barely strong enough to walk, never mind ride a bicycle. "You sure?"

She managed a smile. "Sure I'm sure. Let's do it."

The disease had weakened her to a fraction of her previous strength. Her weight had fallen at least thirty pounds. Though she tried, food was difficult. Sipping water required great effort, but she constantly struggled with it to stave off dehydration.

She had always been top gun. Valedictorian in high school, *summa cum laude* and number one in her college graduation class. An exceptional athlete in multiple sports. Even elected Homecoming Queen her senior year. A valued, ultra-productive professional employee after earning two additional degrees, one a master's. A magnet attracting hundreds of friends. Always a leader. Always the best.

Three years previous she visited her doctor for a routine checkup. The doc didn't like the blood analysis, so sent her to a specialist. His examination yielded bleak results, a devastating diagnosis. Never having experienced an unhealthy time, she was shocked, but determined. Four months of radiation and chemo treatment, then rehab, knocked the ball out of the park and

restored her perfect self. No sign remained of the unhappy malady. Life resumed.

Then last year the monster returned. This time, treatment was only partially successful. She continued the fight of her life, a fight *for* life. She had always won at everything, but this devil was relentless, unyielding. A colossal struggle! Doctors, nurses, and medical technicians fought with her, as hard as she.

I helped her into the truck before racking the bikes onto the carrier at the rear. Then we were off to the park, her forcing a smile the entire way.

We made hundreds of bike trips together. Bicycling had been her favorite activity since college. We often rode twenty, thirty, fifty miles on Saturday mornings or sunny Sunday afternoons. She excelled as a cyclist, and always outrode mediocre me. Every long trip drubbed me into a physical wreck, but she never looked tired or grimy.

Whether around home or on some exotic route, we would race the last several hundred yards, and I never won. Not even close. Once, we raced for the last mile heading home. When I finally pulled up, sweating and wheezing, she stood dismounted waiting in the driveway, laughing at me. She delighted in reminding me of that incident. Often.

While she remained in the truck, I unloaded the bikes. Then I helped her out and stood by as she strapped on her helmet, the one she proudly decorated years ago with her university's colors and logo. She had pedaled thousands of miles beneath that sacred bonnet.

Bearing the pain, she struggled to straddle her bike while I held onto her. When settled, she grinned, then sighed. "I'm ready," she blurted as enthusiastically as she could muster. "Let's go. I'll race you."

I laughed and, with one hand pushing on the seat and the other on her arm to steady her, I ran along helping her gain enough speed to maintain

balance. When she was in control I ran back to my bike and rode to catch up. I fell in beside her, alert for any hint of trouble, as we inched along the outer park trail. Her delight defied her pain.

We did one slow lap, perhaps a mile and a half, her having to stop twice to regain strength. We used to turn a dozen or more laps on many late afternoons, which may have consumed less time and effort than this single one.

Arriving back at the truck, I helped her dismount. Her happy grin masked a grimace. She leaned against the truck as I again stowed the bikes on the rear. I opened her door and reached to lift her in, but she declined the offer.

“Let’s not go yet,” she said. “I want to stay a while and sit in the sun.” We found a nice spot near a big oak tree. As I moved to spread the blanket I kept in the truck, she waved it off. “No, no. Let’s sit on the grass.”

We sat for over an hour, sharing remembrances, good and bad, mostly good. We laughed at ourselves and our antics of the past, and at the capers of friends we had known. Ball games were recalled, trips together, beach parties, weddings, graduations, social protests and political endeavors. Some things had become dormant to our memory, but were now revived. We talked of old friends and where they now were and what they were doing, and how many kids they had. She teased me about our bike races, but insisted I had won my share of them; she lied. We agreed how rich our lives had been.

I drove slow going home. I didn’t want this excursion to end, and I knew she didn’t either. End it must, however, as pleasant as it had been. Our last ride had finished.

I helped her from the truck and supported her all the way to her bed. She swallowed her several mega-doses of pain and nausea medicines with as much water as she could manage, then wrapped in a blanket for a nap. I watched her until I thought she was asleep, then began to ease the door shut.

“Wait,” she said, barely audible. I turned to face her. She struggled to look at me, and to speak. “This has been the best day. Thank you.” She dropped her head and fell asleep.

Through cloudy tears I stared at her for a long time before closing the door on a beautiful, courageous life.

Larry Williamson of Tallassee, Alabama, is the author of two historical novels, Tallapoosa and Legend of the Tallassee Carbine: A Civil War Mystery, plus Over the River, Long Ago, a volume of stories about growing up in his hometown.

Juvenile Fiction

Uncle Bartholomew and the Biscuit Angel

Ramey Channell

Summary:

As he waits for the vegetables to grow in his garden, an old man named Uncle Bartholomew has nothing in his house to eat but one single biscuit. Before the old man can eat this biscuit, he is visited by a series of hungry travelers. What will he do? And how will he be repaid for his generosity?

Uncle Bartholomew lived all alone in a little wooden house on the edge of town. Spring was just around the corner, and Uncle Bartholomew was hoping for a big crop of tomatoes from his tiny garden. As he waited for the plants to grow, he found himself to be very hungry. In his dusty cupboard, he found just enough flour to make one single biscuit.

When evening came, he put the freshly baked biscuit on a cracked china plate, put the plate on his little old wooden table, and sat down alone to eat the crusty hot biscuit.

But before he could take the first bite, there was a soft knock-knock-knocking on the door.

Upon opening the door, the old man saw a scrawny sad-eyed hound dog, looking about as miserable as a hound dog can look.

“Master,” said the dog, hanging his head in a most pitiful way. “I have traveled far, I’m tired, and I have no one to care for me. I’m lonely, and hungry, and I do believe I’m lost, just as sure as I’m standing here.”

The dog raised his head a little and sniffed the air inquisitively.

“I’m old,” he sighed, “and worn out ...and ... I smell something wonderful!”

“Old and worn out!” Uncle Bartholomew exclaimed, eyeing the mangy looking dog. “Well, that makes two of us! And that wonderful smell is the biscuit I just cooked! Come on in, and I’ll share the biscuit with you. It is all I have.”

The bony dog thanked him and took a seat at the wooden table.

The poor old man found a dull old knife amid the clutter in his pantry. Just as he prepared to cut the biscuit into two pieces, a scritch-scratch-scratching commenced at the door.

Uncle Bartholomew dropped the knife noisily onto the table, startling the dog who yelped a note of wild dismay.

The old man opened the door just a crack, and in wobbled a musty, dusty possum with tail a-dragging.

“As I live and breathe!” Uncle Bartholomew exclaimed. “Mr. Possum, you get right back out the way you came in!”

A great glossy tear gleamed in the possum’s eye. He rolled drearily onto his back, with all four feet hoisted into the air.

“Now, you get up from there!” Uncle Bartholomew demanded.

The possum gazed at the old man.

“I beg your pardon most humbly,” he sniffed. “But I was sitting in the persimmon tree outside your door, and suddenly I smelled a wonderful smell! There’s nary a persimmon in that old tree, and I’m so hungry, I fell to the ground and have no strength to get back up onto the limb ... which is as bare as my tail.”

Uncle Bartholomew looked first at the possum on the floor, whose tail was indeed bare, then he looked at the hound dog sitting at the table. The possum wiped a tear from his little black eye.

“Oh, mercy sakes alive!” Uncle Bartholomew sighed, shaking his head slowly. “Come on in. You can share our biscuit. It is all I have to offer.”

The pitiful possum thanked him and took a seat at the wooden table. Just as the poor old man once again prepared to cut the biscuit into three pieces, a tap-tap-tapping rattled the front door.

Uncle Bartholomew threw his hands into the air, and the old knife fell to the floor with a clatter.

“Now what?” Uncle Bartholomew fretted. “Just the wind, mayhaps?”

The old man opened the door once again, and there he beheld a tall glowing figure.

“What the Dickens?” gasped the old man. “Who are you?”

The humble dog crept beneath the table, where he whined miserably. The possum’s mouth dropped open.

“I am an angel,” the strange figure replied as he swept through the doorway. His wings reached the ceiling of the dark little room, and they stirred the air gently as he moved closer to the table.

“I was just on my way to help some troubled people on the other side of town,” he spoke, glancing casually around the cluttered room. “I grew tired along the way. My wings are heavy and sore, and I’m feeling a bit peckish.” The tall beautiful angel spread his hands out toward the table. “And I smelled this wonderful aroma!”

The astonished man, his eyes wide with awe, gazed at the angel before him.

“It’s a biscuit!” he quaked. “Here, you may certainly have it.” And with one trembling finger, he pushed the plate closer to the glowing angel.

“Thank you,” said the angel, and he ate the biscuit without further delay.

“Tell me,” the seraph spoke while brushing crumbs from the front of his white gown. “Is this your dog beneath the table? Why is he hiding? And why is he whining?”

“He is but a poor lost stray, with neither family nor home. He is old and thin, and he came to me hungry, just as you did. So I invited him to share my biscuit, which you have just eaten.”

“Huh! Well, then! Why did you give it all to me?” the angel asked impatiently.

“Because,” Uncle Bartholomew replied, “you are on your way to help others who may be in a worse fix than I am. This wretched dog has journeyed far and is quite alone. But you have traveled much farther than our meager minds can guess, and you must be lonely so far from the gates of your home. And your wings surely do look big and heavy. And, I sure wouldn’t want to get into it with a peckish angel!”

The beautiful angel smiled upon the poor old man, bringing a tender warmth into the dreary room. The dusty dog crept onto a chair and wagged his flea-bitten tail a pitiful stroke.

“You are a kind and gentle man,” the angel softly said. “I can see you have made ready to share your meager meal with this stray dog, and this ... large rat.”

“Possum,” Uncle Bartholomew corrected.

The beautiful angel eyed the possum for a moment, then lifted the furry gray animal up from the wobbly wooden chair, and gazed quietly into the small animal’s beady little black eyes.

“Hmm!” the angel grunted, then plopped the possum back onto the wooden chair.

“When I return home, I will speak well of you, and you will be rewarded in good time.”

With that, he spread his glorious wings beyond the ceiling and disappeared thoroughly into the night.

The room felt cold and drafty. Uncle Bartholomew sighed, and sat down heavily. The dog’s tail drooped behind him. The possum began to cry in earnest.

“Well, I’ll be John Brown,” Uncle Bartholomew remarked. He reached to pat the dog’s head with one hand, and gently placed his other palm on the possum’s scruffy gray head. “I guess that’s that!”

But then, what do you think they saw upon the table on the cracked china plate? The poor old man and the poor old dog and the poor old possum saw a stack of steaming biscuits, as soft and brown as any could be.

“What the Dickens!” Uncle Bartholomew exclaimed.

“Woof!” the hound dog snuffled.

“Smack!” the possum slurped.

“As I live and breathe!” the old man declared. “It comes in good time, just as he said!”

The happy old man and the tired old dog and the scruffy old possum ate the biscuits with great delight, then they all slept peacefully through the night.

And at dawn, the sun rose on a beautiful spring day. Cherry trees bloomed, pear trees blossomed, the persimmon tree was filled with little star-shaped persimmon buds, and Uncle Bartholomew’s garden sprouted the finest, fattest, reddest, ripest tomatoes you’ve ever seen!

*Growing up in rural Alabama, **Ramey Channell** was spellbound by family stories of extraordinary beings and peculiar visitors. Her award winning poetry and stories have appeared in *Aura Literary Arts Review*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and many other journals and collections. Her first novel is *Sweet Music on Moonlight Ridge*.*

First Chapter of a Novel

Viking ***the Green Land***

Katie Aiken Ritter

SEA

West coast of Ísland, spring equinox, circa 980 A.D.

Cast Off

“Leave! Little time is left! They must leave now!” The headman’s voice rang out over a pounding surf as the setting sun sank into the waves and the sky began to darken. At his words, seventeen chained men and one woman were pulled along the shoreline and their hoods were removed.

They were right to chain us, Tiller muttered to himself.

He stood on the shoreline, shackled with the other men, and stared at the ship that waited for them. The sight of it silenced the boasts on their lips about coming home heroes to all the fame and fortune they could want. Facing the far-likelier prospect of dying at sea, they knew fear.

Even Tiller, so much at one with the waves, felt the same dread. *Too late to escape our fate now,* he thought, filled with bitterness. But as he looked over the smooth curves of the waiting vessel, Tiller also realized with a sudden shock that he knew this ship, even though he had never seen it before.

What had he said, so long ago? *“Build her like a young woman: give her the speed and power of a warship, but the carrying capacity of a merchant’s knörr, to hold the things they’ll need for life. Make her beautiful. Whoever takes the voyage you describe will need to feel proud. It’ll give them strength and courage.”*

The headman called again. This time, the crew was herded into the water and shoved up the boarding plank. One by one, the men lifted their wrists for the manacles to be unlocked and the watching crowd cheered, but as the irons rattled off, the crew began to argue loudly, shoving at one other.

The woman was pushed aboard last, her wrists chained as well. She would serve as their fishgirl – part cook, part healer, and crew’s helper – for the voyage. As the torches flickered on her face, Tiller could clearly see wet tracks of tears.

“Stop fighting!” the headman shouted at the crew. “Look east...the moon has almost cleared the hills already! Get to your oars! Your ship is heavy and the surf is high, and you will have to row hard! Be ready!”

He turned to the man who counted the moons and seasons. “Kalendar, you be ready as well, to call the rope-release!”

The Kalendar nodded. He had prepared for this exact moment for months, watching carefully across the winter as the length of daylight drew equal to the night. “Only one or two more days,” he had reported yesterday to the headman. “Spring is almost upon us, *Gothi*.”

“And the moon?” the *gothi* had asked.

“Full tomorrow night. It will rise just after Sól sets in the sea.” Kalendar had hesitated, the briefest pause, before he continued. “Such a rare thing...and to nearly coincide with the *even-day-and-night* that brings spring and starts our year? Inconceivable! It foretells a remarkable voyage.”

“Ready the ship and the men!” the headman had cried. “They will sail at moonrise tomorrow!”

Last to be unlocked, Tiller watched the men who would be his crewmates for the next three years. All were seasoned in the ways of the sea, and like him, all were outlaws. Beyond that, they were as different from one another as any crew might be; some were tall, some short, some were disfigured by scars and others handsome. Some seemed talkative and others stayed morosely silent. Tiller saw all of humanity in their faces: strength, weakness, greed, fairness, brutality, and humor. What did they see in his own face? Did they see the uncertainty in him? The willingness to risk their lives to prove himself right?

The fishgirl-woman looked desperately from face to face of the people on the shore, but no one would meet her gaze. She did not watch the headman as he unlocked her wrist irons, but stared only at the face of the moon-god rising over the shoreline hills, and her face filled with dread.

How old? Tiller wondered. She looked to be about twenty-five. *And still no finger-ring for marriage?* For certain, not because of her looks. The entire crew was eyeing her. Any fool could see trouble coming. Was that the reason for the oath they'd been made to swear? *To protect her, at all cost, until they find land...?*

More importantly, why was she on this voyage at all? Women usually served as fishgirl for crews on short journeys, a couple of weeks or a month at most. Had anyone told this woman how long they'd be gone, and how terribly small their chances of returning were? Unlike the men, she did not carry the mark of an outlaw. What would compel her to come with them?

"Rowers, ready oars!"

Strong hands gripped the long oak poles, and the crew prepared to pull the ship through the surf.

Tiller held the steering oar. Through it, he could feel the waves frothing against the strong hull. The ship bucked against the ropes holding her, and exhilaration knifed through Tiller, reckless and hard. Those sweeping timbers longed to be free of land, and he in turn longed to feel the strength of them surging through the open sea.

"Almost ready!" the headman shouted. "Release the ropes on my command!" He cleared his throat.

Oh, gods, he was going to give a speech.

"You on this voyage are headed straight into the heart of danger. We pray that your courage will set us all free..."

"We're not brave! We're dead men!" shouted one of the rowers. "What difference does it make, at sea or on land?"

The headman frowned and continued his speech, his words of hope in stark contrast with the grim faces on board, and Tiller's thoughts drifted.

He had not murdered anyone, but no one else from the fight had survived to say so. Men he had counted as friends had tumbled to the ground and bled out, their open eyes as colorless as the sky. With them went testimony that might have saved him. *Guilty*, the Council had said at the trials at the quarterly trials at Thornes Thing. *Three years outside the law*.

Being outlawed might as well be a death sentence. Outlaws enjoyed no protections that the law had once offered to them: take an outlaw's tools, and he could complain to no headman about the theft. Take his fox-traps and the furs he had prepared to sell, take his last rind of cheese, his last crust of bread, and give them to your own sons and daughters, and no one would stop you from letting him starve. Take his cloak for your own, and let the rain drench him, and there was no one to whom he could turn for recourse...and giving an outlaw shelter and food meant risking the same fate. Convicted men who could afford passage and bribes left for other lands. Those less fortunate gnawed hard barley grains and hid in hillside crevices in freezing cold, not daring to risk a fire.

At the country-wide mid-summer Althing trials, Tiller's law-speaker had pled his case again, but the council had affirmed the guilty verdict. To Tiller's surprise, one of the *gothi*-councilman had later appeared at the jail-pens. Gold threads embroidered through his rich cloak glittered in the light of the sun, and he lifted it carefully above the muddy ground.

"Come over here." He had beckoned with his free hand. "I have a proposition for you."

Tiller's heart had beat hard, but he kept his face quiet.

"The rumors that have spread throughout this Althing. I assume you've heard them?"

Tiller had hardly dared to believe they might be true. He nodded.

The *gothi* continued. "Everyone knows the situation here in Ísland. In the time of the Great Settlement, people came here in great numbers, and almost immediately, all of the good land was claimed. Then the forests were cleared, and even poor land was settled. For four or five generations, there has been no more land available. No more farms to feed the grandchildren and great-grandchildren

of the families who settled here, yet more mouths are born every day, and more slaves are bought and brought here. They, too, have children who must be fed. The terrible truth is that far more food is needed from too few fields.” He rubbed his hand across a forehead lined with worry. “With the crop failures these past years, even the people with good land are struggling. You know what is happening to those whose farms are worked on thin soil.”

The dreaded word *famine* had at first been whispered. Now, every meeting along the roadway brought news of places where people were starving, and the mounting deaths.

The councilman cleared his throat awkwardly. “It’s been almost ten years since anyone went *viking* to look for Gunnbjörn’s skerries.”

At those words, Tiller knew that the rumors were true.

Gunnbjörn’s skerries. Maybe land, maybe not; a *something* in the sea far to the west, barely glimpsed by Gunnbjörn Ulfsson’s crew nearly a hundred years ago, after a disastrous storm.

“You want us to make another attempt to find them,” Tiller said flatly. “Because outlaws are desperate, and expendable.”

“Not want, Thorvaldsson. Need.” The councilman was almost pleading. “Every headman here at the Althing brings the same problem. Their people are dying for want of fields and food. If there’s even a *chance* that an empty land is somewhere out there, can you imagine what that would mean to our people? We must try! That means an opportunity for you. A ship is being built, a specially-designed one. We need a crew who will go to search for whatever Gunnbjörn’s men glimpsed.”

Tiller had remembered then, too, the elderly shipbuilder who had asked *How would you design a vessel for an incomprehensibly long voyage?* The old

man had been vague about the reasons, but had listened carefully to Tiller's ideas, and had disappeared into the crowd again.

How long had the council been planning this? How long had they been watching him?

The councilman eyed Tiller to gauge the condemned man's reaction. Fury built in Tiller, but he held it in check.

"I know what you are thinking," the *gothi* continued. "You have the means to buy your way to another country and try to ride out your three years...and you know as well as I do that anyone who goes on this voyage will likely die on the sea. There will be storms, bitter cold, fights on board. You may starve, or perish of thirst. And to go so far out into the sea..." The councilman shuddered. "Freakish things live out there, they say. Monsters in the waves who swallow ships that sail too far from land." He forced a laugh. "But your odds may be just as bad on land. Too many traders know your name, if not your face. Show up in Dublin or Danmörk and someone will turn you over to us for the reward-silver that will be offered. Where could you not be found and hunted down? Do you want to live as a fugitive running and hiding for three years, or go searching for glory? Find a land where we can send people to live, and you'll have everything you could want: gold, silver, slaves, silks, furs, fame...and freedom."

Tiller had heard the stories of Gunnbjörn's skerries since childhood. After a disastrous voyage, Gunnbjörn Ulfsson had finally steered his battered ship back home, all but sinking and with most of the crew gone. The few *vikingers* who had survived told frightening tales. "*We were steering for the North Way, but we were blown west by a terrible storm. Hideous, a man-killer. A ship-sinker. We took down the sail. Not one of us believed we'd survive it. Waves...*" Their faces would still go ashen remembering the horror of that night. "*The sea tore at us like an enormous animal, berserk, clawing and screaming from every direction. Maybe the sea-goddess Rán wanted to punish us for being so far west. She pulled most of our crew overboard. Swallowed men whole in her great mouth.*"

The ship had wandered, lost. Fog had swirled around them. *“That fog was as thick as cream, unnaturally warm, a feeling of something unhealthy. Were we even still alive? Maybe we were already dead, and Loki’s daughter Hel was pulling us to Niflheim.”* Niflheim, the *nothing-home* that lay at the very edge of the world, was a place hidden by clouds and mist. Those not chosen at death for Valhalla went there, where giants of ice guarded Hel’s gates.

The storyteller would hesitate, his haunted eyes remembering. The fog had suddenly lifted. They had seen something hulking in the water, gray and white, something enormous of stone and ice. Should they sail closer? They had barely survived so far. Why tempt Hel’s ogres, or perhaps some huge sleeping sea-beast? If those were the actual gates to Niflheim, would there be sharp terrible rocks, tearing what was left of their hull? Would they become slaves for the dead?

Fearing for their lives, Gunnbjörn’s crew had turned the ship in the opposite direction. They prayed with every passing wave to see the shores of home again, and vowed to carry a warning to others. *“The sea-goddess Rán spared us for a reason! We tell others, so that they do not go where the seas end. That place belongs to Hel. All must stay away.”*

The warnings of Gunnbjörn’s crew had fallen on deaf ears. Many ships went in search of those shapes in the sea. Most never returned, and the voyages had diminished over luckless years. The last attempt several years ago had ended in horror.

Going in search of Gunnbjörn’s skerries was little different than being outlawed: both usually meant death.

“What’s your decision?” The Althing councilman had interrupted Tiller’s thoughts. “Everyone knows your reputation as a steersman. Will you go?”

Bitterness ate into Tiller’s gut. “When my neighbor Thorgest accused me of murdering his sons, everyone knew the truth. He had stolen from me, and I only took what was mine: those high-seat pillars belonged to me. I never wanted

the fight, never intended for anyone to be hurt – and I trusted in the law, certain I'd be found innocent. Now I know why all of you on the Althing Council ignored my law-arguer. You convicted me because you needed me.”

“What difference does it make? However you got here, you're an outlaw now. Be practical.”

“Do I really have a choice? You'll find one way or another to get me on your ship. I'll save you the trouble. Sea dangers don't cut a man as deep as deception from those he trusts.”

But as he spoke, premonition had swept over Tiller. Gunnbjorn's skerries were where he had always longed to go. He was meant to find them.

Katie Aiken Ritter knew almost nothing about Erik the Red and Viking seafarers when she received a startling epiphany directing her to write a story about them. Writing has literally been a leap of faith. Nine years of painstaking research later, her debut novel **VIKING: THE GREEN LAND** is on Amazon. *Onward!*

Poetry

Stopping at the Quaker House on a Stormy Night

Ramey Channell

I know this much is true; the storm descended from a heavy sky,
the autumn night was dark, and wild winds tearing trees apart
made sounds like human voices, moaning, mourning, lost.

I do not know anything more, but that the storm flew down from the midnight sky,
wind tearing like a wild beast till I believed the torrent would devour me.

The ribbon of shadowed road winds past the Quaker house, old and empty, long forsaken,
surrounded that night by spectral trees, twisting against rain, twisting against wind,
like dark angels or lost souls, tortured, tossed by savage forces upon that stormy night.

I can only say I looked for shelter from the storm, and I went in.

The darkness of that shadowed empty place closed down around me,
rain beat upon the blackened windows with such force, I imagined that the glass would break.
“Someone is here,” I whispered into the darkened room,
the sound of my own whispered voice as frightful as the wind.

“Yes,” his voice replied. “I too wait for storms to pass, and watch clouds as they fly.”

“I found one candle by the door,” he said, “but I have no flint for fire.”

I found matches in my pocket, and the flame burst forth between us, lighting his face and mine.
His face was pale. Thunder crashed outside and lightning broke the darkness
for one searing second, and his pale eyes gleamed.

“See how the fire burns the candle,” he murmured, “and the candle feeds the flame.

Let us put the candle here,” he said, “upon the floor between us, to mark a boundary.”

“Do you come here for meeting?” I asked.

He looked at me, and moved his head only slightly, perhaps a nod, but maybe not.

“Do you live near here?” I questioned. “Do you live nearby?”

This house has been empty for years,” I ventured.

“What you say means nothing to me,” he said.

“I know only that the storm rages, and that the candle feeds the flame.”

I know this much is true; the storm outside was tearing the world apart.

The wind screamed and roared like no wind I had ever heard before,

and I thought the old house would come down around us.

The rafters creaked and groaned, the trees bent and thrashed,

then all grew quiet, and the candle still burned between us.

“Come closer,” he whispered. “See how the fire burns the candle,

and the candle feeds the flame.”

I blew out the candle and left the empty house

alone in the shifting dark, and never went back.

Yet, he is with me still.

And the fire burns the candle,

and the candle feeds the flame.

Ramey Channell's inspiration springs from a world where Alabama backwoods and backyards are visited by numinous creatures, and gardens are filled with echoes of enchanted song and laughter. Her award winning stories and poems have appeared in many journals and collections. Her first novel is Sweet Music on Moonlight Ridge.

2016 AWC Writing Contest

List of Winners

Short Story

Judge: Cate McGowin

1. Amy Lampe	Elderbeest	Decatur, GA
2. Beth Hamer Miles	Well Done	Birmingham, AL
3. Richard Perreault	Holding Hands with the Clock	Bryson City, NC
HM. Larry Williamson	Final Ride	Tallasse, AL
HM. Larry Wilson	Desert Frost	Wetumpka, AL

Alabama Flash Fiction

Judge: Katy Yocom

1. Beth Hamer Miles	Autumn Care	Birmingham, AL
2. Linda F. Willing	Mission to Mars	Gulf Shores, AL
3. Glenda Slater	Well, if You're Sure the Time's Up	Spanish Fort, AL

Jim Reed Creative Nonfiction Awards

Judge: Roy Hoffman

1. Richard Perreault	Sunshine and Smoke	Bryson City, NC
2. Dianne C. Teague	Abandoned	Tuscaloosa, AL
3. Stephen Edmondson	A Chance Encounter	Homewood, AL
HM. Stephen Edmondson	The Spilt Milk	Homewood, AL
HM. Faith Garbin	In the Dark	Ocean Springs, MS
HM. Larry Wilson	An Unsatisfactory Death	Wetumpka, AL

Alabama Poetry Society Poetry Awards

Judge: Pat Schneider

1. Carol A. Grametbauer	Shorebirds	Kingston, TN
2. Jennifer Grant	Mermaids of Morrison Springs	Gainesville, FL
3. Ramey Channell	Stopping by the Quaker House on a Stormy Night	Leeds, AL
HM. Jeff Santosuosso	Babel	Pensacola, FL

Juvenile Fiction Awards**Judge: Rae Ann Parker**

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|----------------------|--|----------------|
| 1. Kathleen Thompson | Blame it on the Moon | Birmingham, AL |
| 2. Ramey Channell | Uncle Bartholomew and the
Biscuit Angel | Leeds, AL |
| 3. Barbara Gold | The Moonlight Bandit | Stamford, CT |

Dorothy M. Lobman First Chapter of a Novel**Judge: Laura Mc Neill**

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|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Kathleen Thompson | Remembering Fire: A Novel | Birmingham, AL |
| 2. Katie Aiken Ritter | Viking: The Green Land | Monkton, MD |
| 3. Bonnie Faye Dunn | Mary Ann's Dress | Banks, AL |
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