

2005 muse



CALHOUN
COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

*A collection of works by Calhoun
Community College students,
faculty, staff and alumni.*

muse: def.

muse v. *To ponder or meditate; to consider or deliberate at length. 2. To wonder. N. (Greek Mythology) Any of the nine daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus, each of whom presided over a different act of science. 3. In general, the spirit, or power inspiring and watching over poets, musicians, and all artists; a source of inspiration. 4. (Archaic) a poet.*

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Foreword:

We're very proud of this year's MUSE, partly because of the quality of the submissions and partly because so many hands joined in its creation. For the first time, we've included an SKD Honors student as an editor, Kris Reisz, whose insights and hard work helped shape this year's journal. Our Art/Photography faculty supported us more than ever before by encouraging their students to submit entries. We received submissions from our current students at the Huntsville and Decatur campuses, and some of our favorite entries came from our alumni, who still take time to remember us with their contributions. Last, but not least, our Public Relations Department shared their considerable talents with us through their lay-out and proofreading skills – especially Beth Butler, Lanita Parker, and Janet Kincherlow-Martin. Thanks to all of you, and please remember that students, faculty, and staff past and present are encouraged to send us poems, essays, short stories, artwork, and photography. This journal is, quite literally, nothing without you.

Enjoy!

Jill Chadwick, Editor



Published by the Department of Language and Literature and Sigma Kappa Delta.

Carpe Diem

By B. J. Anderson

I vegetate.

I regurgitate.

I speculate.

I contemplate.

I hesitate.

This is living?

Time for action.

Gut reaction...

Motivation...

Satisfaction...

Time to live.



Photo by Evelyn Houston

Little Girl Dreams

By B. J. Anderson

Little girl dreams die slowly as we age.

Teenaged fantasies get trapped in a cage

Of lost hope and dreams

Cause we get caught up in schemes

And forget our most cherished desires

To live our lives as another aspires.



Photo by V. Rose Dean

What's Another Heartbreak?

By B. J. Anderson

When we've reached a certain phase of life,
What's another heartbreak?

We suffer from the time of understanding
That one can hurt another.

A childhood friend hits, bites,
Making us cry.

A classmate taunts, makes fun,
Calling us unkind names.

A teenage friend thrusts the knife in
By spreading untrue rumors, telling lies.

A lover promises forever
But is gone at the end of the storm.

Well-meaning parents thrash us with tongues or worse
Trying to keep us in line.

Our own children step outside the bounds
Causing us fear and sorrow.

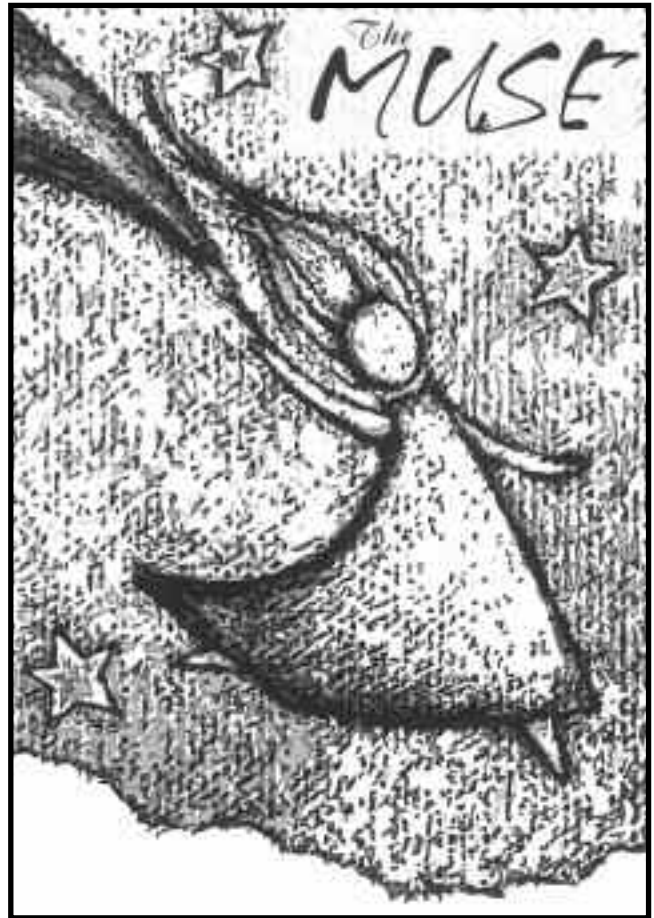
Wife hurts husband; husband hurts wife
And romantic notions burst.

Death takes some we love
While others walk away.

Moments of joy too often give way to
The sorrow we know will come.

In spite of our best efforts,
Our hardened hearts eventually come to wonder

What's another heartbreak?



Artwork by Heidi Phillips

My Muse Is a Humble Muse

By J. LaDon Dendy

My muse is a humble muse.
She serves me late at night.
While the city sleeps,
I wander in from empty streets.
She bends crane-like over eggs and tea;
she knows
no ambrosia.
And she does not walk on clouds;
Instead, she glides most humanly across greasy tiles
wearing Keds she bought at the Dollar Store.
A mere pen serves as her scepter.
Yes, my muse is a humble muse.
She feeds my body and my soul.

Gifts

By Shannon Banks

Strands of a spider web
Petals of a flower
Veins of a leaf
Beauty of nature

Lashes of the eye
Pores of the skin
Beat of the heart
Beauty of nature

Warmth of the sun
Light of the moon
Rain of the clouds
Beauty of nature

Grace of a smile
Love of a heart
Dreams of a soul
Beauty of nature

Comfort of hugs
Hopes of prayers
Beauty of nature
Gifts of God

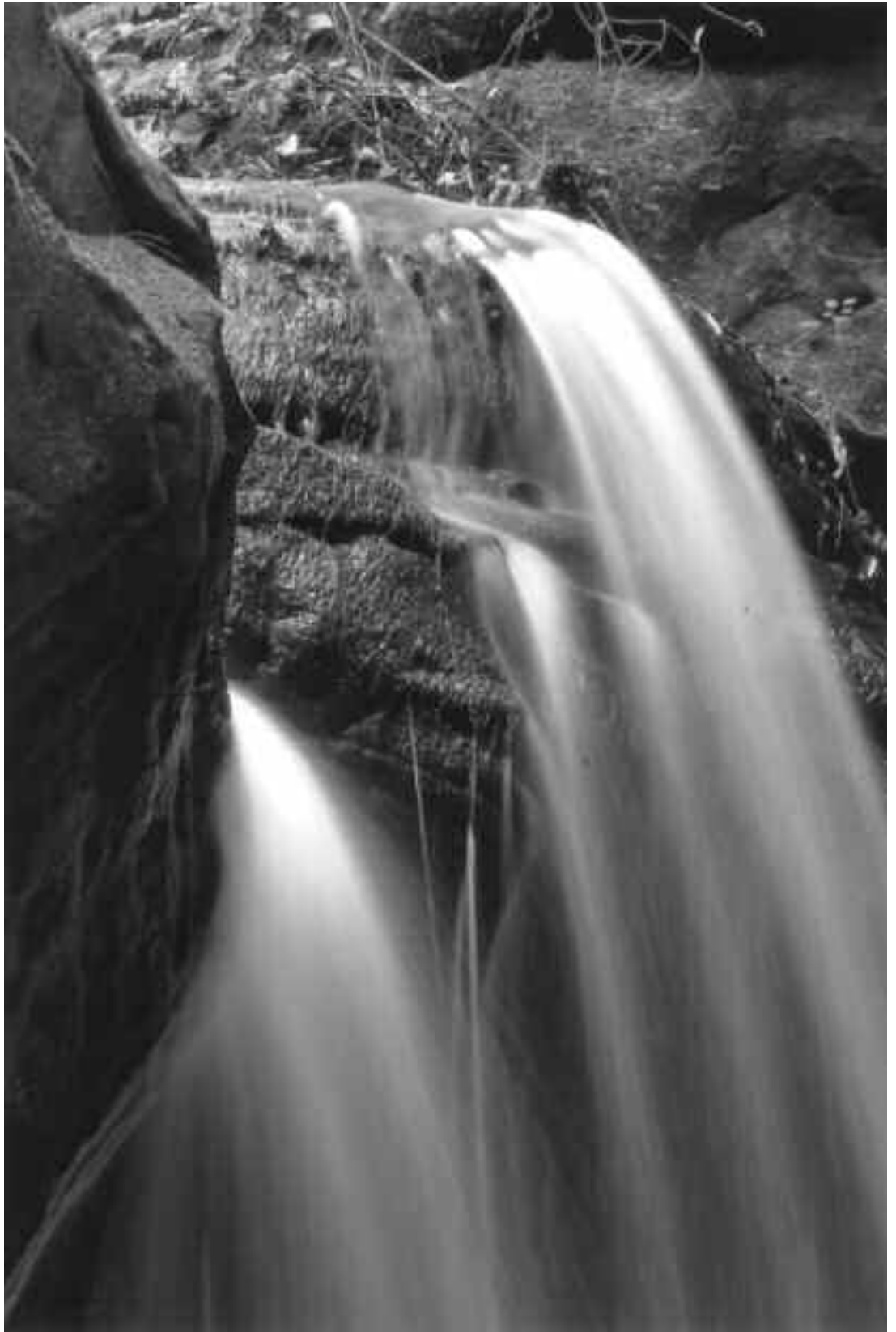


Photo by V. Rose Dean



Photo by Delisa Scheuplein

On the Edge of Darkness

By J. LaDon Dendy

I wonder what it is like to live life
as a fraction of the overall scheme;
to never make a commotion,
to never have a theme.

I wonder what it is like to be an understudy yet never act;
to have your infinite impression on the universe
culminate into four words:

...Mistah Kurtz –he dead.
and be heard from no more.

Time

By Bob Gossett

Forget me now until the day
When you find yourself old and gray
For the memories, then
Will be sweeter, when
It's too late to say goodbye

*Look Out Ladies

By Lori Beth Elliott

Because you'll find how hard it can be
to tell which part of your body sings,
you never should dally with any young man
who does any one of the following things:

walks with a limp to try to be cool;
shakes his glass when he wants more tea;
won't take you shopping the day after Thanksgiving;
when you want a favor makes you beg and plea;

makes prank calls to poor old ladies;
kicks his own dog and won't take in strays;
steals street signs to hang in his room;
avoids keeping you warm on the colder days;

checks out other girls as you walk through the mall;
laughs at the homeless man on the street;
won't give the Wal-Mart Santa a dollar;
skips out on church because he's "too beat";

pressures you to take that first sip;
has more than one tattoo;
answers his phone on a date;
goes out with his friends and forgets about you;

takes canned cokes into a restaurant;
blows smoke right in your face;
has an earring or tongue ring;
talks of dream girls he's rather have in your place;

makes Playstation his top priority;
says bad things about your best friend;
won't dress up with you on Halloween;
says he loves you, but it's just pretend.

You're going to know soon enough
the ones who fail this little test.
Mark them off your list at once
and be very careful of all the rest.

* a parody of distinguished poet Miller Williams'
poem "For a Girl I Know about to Be a Woman" in
honor of his visit to our campus November 2004.

Winner of the
National SKD
Poetry Prize

New York Whirl

By Hameed El-Amin

"Tall facades of marble and iron, proud and passionate, mettlesome mad, extravagant city" - Walt Whitman – Intro. Verb and Reverb - WLRH - July 24, '04

Delta drops yourwheels down
 Out of the rain cloud
 On the Mid city Tarmac
 Next to the Donald's **737**
 Stenciled Metallic Blue/Gold.....**T.R..U..M..P**

Before I can buy my instincts back
 Or my ear catches the accented New York Spanish
 Announcing...**all** flights
 I get bumped...three times
 By a turbaned Hindu, a bearded, suited, black hatted Rabbi
 And a dark skin dude....who fuh show ain't black
 Remember to sling my bag...cover my wallet
 Split my cash in separate pockets
 Remove the shades.....that black out...summers down home

Butter pecan Latinas
 Holding up signs...at the down escalator
 Strike sassy....big-legged poses
 In black waist coats, short black skirts, and chauffeur hats
 Car for hire.....or Limo for Big Joe
 And Red Hot Momma.....flight 44 — **AT L**

Chinese girls poppin' gum with black attitude
 At the Delta carousel.....Cincinnati flight: 638
 Get the Big City hook up
 From a bow leg brother.....fronting big business
 On his blackberry cell

Out in the humming New York whirl
 A Carolina girl in hip huggin pants
 Flash dances a greeting,.....to her down home man
 In the pick-up lane

Spaghetti twist streets
 Traffic circles, narrow houses
 Cars parked on the steps
 Parks you don't dare, walk a bad dog in
 Flash.....round the Marriott shuttle

Fifteen minutes in this New York whirl
 To buy your instincts back
 When Delta drops you.....
 Wheels down.....out of the rain cloud....

Grandma Speaks

By Hameed El-Amin

"Live enough life to learn from"

Grandmama speaks ...
 Naming babies
 Made moments ago
 For who they'll favor

Grandmama speaks ...
 With backhand slaps
 For sassy talk
Saying she'll shoot you
 To save you from yourself

Grandmama speaks..
 In whispers
 To twisted soap opera plots
 In silent serpentine eyes

Grandmama speaks...
 Natural born wisdom
 And hissing evil...
Stops!



Photo by Alan Shero

For Just A Moment

By Marty Kellum

I searched the faces of people I passed,
Looking for something. Anything.
All I found was emptiness and melancholy.
These things I have.

I searched the faces of people I met,
Looking for something. Anything.
All I found was loneliness and despair.
These things I have.

I searched the faces of people I know,
Looking for something. Anything.
All I found was contempt and longing.
These things I have.

I searched the faces of people I love,
Looking for something. Anything.
All I found was heartache and sorrow.
These things I have.

I searched the face I found in the mirror.
Looking for something. Anything.
I saw it all, and for just a moment,
I knew what it was like to be God.



Photo by Joy Parker

*For my Son Looking for just the Right One

By Lisa King

There will always be women who make your heart beat fast
who will tempt the limits of your control,
to find the one that is going to last
be sure to avoid the one who will chew up your soul.

Avoid the one who would cheat to be with you,
the one who must constantly diet,
the one for whom your best will never do,
the one whose outfits could cause riots

Avoid the one who respects only those with wealth,
and the one whose car costs more than the rent
also avoid those who shun the elderly in ill health
or the one who will use any excuse to vent

Look for the woman who really loves to live,
the one who will stay the course,
with loving praise to give
and the one who abhors divorce.

Search for the one who will stay true to her vows,
whose pride is her intellect
the one for whom your heart allows
no room for neglect

Finally, understand the size of a man
is only truly measured in the greatness of his heart,
the length of his patience,
and the strength through the hardships he has weathered.
Oh my son, I want you to have a good life
I just want to make sure you choose the right wife!

** a parody of distinguished poet Miller Williams'
poem "For a Girl I Know about to Be a Woman" in
honor of his visit to our campus November 2004.*



Photo by Evelyn Houston

Cemetery of Lovers

By Matthew Nolan

My funeral procession rolls up regret mountain,
a straight march in the seam of a purple sky,
atop awaits my cemetery of lovers,
in tombs each awake and wondering why

My body slides as the hearse turns her last corner
to deposit me in my cell to think,
dirt in increments separate me from my lovers,
whose petty issues wormed their mouths from breath

Entombed they scribble on cement walls,
complaints of hurt, time, and space,
that specific occasion where I said something,
don't they know they are now dead with all erased

I feel being lowered, sunk in the dark—
on my casket fingerprints of betrayal,
from broken promises of forever, which now will pre-
vail,
as we all lie awake in these solitude of cells

Fertile soil separates us from touch
and old smiles together the sun can't reach,
looking back on it now was it all worth it—
did our heartbreak set you free,
or did it buy you a plot in my cemetery of lovers,
that individuality you wanted is now next to me,
so full of regret, good food for a tree

Sylvy Anne

By Matthew Nolan

Once I stood in the room where Poe wrote *Annabel
Lee*,
a dingy cottage suffocated by urban madness,
formerly an asylum from the city like the name Sylvy,
now from the Bronx, Poe echos on,
keeping me up to write my love a song

Sylvy Anne beams light in this darkest hour,
apart from her and her from me,
these high ceilings that mock and tower,
whispering down her name from blushing brides to
be

Her words melt candles and stop black cats from
crossing,
her beauty chases time and men with wine,
from that surety of love, I see her waiting,
with outstretched arms, God's gift is mine

She fills my hours and steals my days,
a still, deep heart, my Sylvy Anne,
who parades around in faces unknowing,
I feel the stone behind the sand

Love and knowledge dispatch all rules,
when Sylvy Anne is called to play,
in my attention to her I see her growing,
away from keeping love at bay

Instead she blossoms in untimely weather,
in this time apart from her and her from me,
where I write drowned in a sunken mansion,
in this New Orleans Kingdom under the Sea

Black Marbles

By Matthew Nolan

I could hear the commotion of people in the furry
backdrop of her phone message from London professing
her love like a dead jar of pickles,
something green but not like crowded grass,
more like soup she made with too few peas floating,
escaping my spoon by bobbing so thrifty

The boys around her do somersaults before
the concluded eyes of an American princess,
they can melt her if they work their way from the back
through her spine when she leans into the mirror
applying the planets of mascara across her soured face,
building fences of eyelashes,
rows and rows of eyelash fences

The distance is too many cracked streets and wet trees
crowding her cat head,
providing cover for her stealth love, polite and pleasing,
compromised truth behind a soggy leaf pile,
too much to shovel,
a chorus of kittens from the ends of branches meow for
her to do it right or suffer the fatal consequence of
imperfection

Her dinner is Paris lights,
I got the postcard here in New Orleans,
a version of something like hearing the clatter of boys in
the backdrop on the London phone message and feeling
the swoosh of her doubt splashing through my Swiss
cheese heart and hotdog head

Water reflections in Italy are no match
for my red thoughts
skipping across a dry pool of shiny black marbles,
unbreakable so I want to eat them to know their center,
the things that I can and can't see that are killing me

My Life As A Book

By Travis Parker

Chapters do not end
They bleed into the next
They live forever
And a book can never be put down
Its words linger for a lifetime
In the back of my mind
As do yours
And as my chapter of you will not end
And as I try to put you on the shelf
It's the casual handshakes
That break my spine
It's the thought of you
That binds me
Though to you I seem nothing more than a blurb
And I burn to know if that were true
And I would shatter like brittle leaves if it were
Yet I still script your name
And forge your memory
Though I don't know what to do with it
And I can't put you down
So I'm left with imaginary sequels
That are not that good



Photo by Heather Daniels

Warning To My New Lover

By Travis Parker

For anyone who ever tried to move on too soon...

This is my warning
 I will pester you
 I will pester you
 I will pester you
 I will pester you
 I will pester you until you are mad
 I will show you new meanings of the words
 Clingy
 Overbearing
 Jealous
 I will make you sick with love
 And you will regurgitate all that you once held
 dear for me
 I am a poison that will ravish your body and spirit
 Sometimes quickly
 Sometimes throughout the course of months
 YEARS
 You will never want to gaze upon my sweet face
 once you have seen
 the hurt
 and the anger
 and the vengefulness
 That it hides
 I will make you pay for the crimes of my lost loves
 I will burn you at the stake for even thinking to be
 kind to me
 Or for telling me the truth when you said you were
 honest
 Or for having values
 Or for having a heart
 AND GIVING IT TO ME
 I will rip it out and crush it in my hand
 And show you it means nothing to me
 Because I know the way of the world
 And I will call you a FOOL for thinking me
 pretty
 And I will cry a thousand tears for doing so
 And for my shame I will never be able to gaze upon your sweet face again
 Because I will have hunted you down
 And burned you at the stake
 For loving me
 How dare you
 You fool



Photo by Jason Connell

There is No Friend Like a Brother

By Sue Pumphrey

for Charlie and for the 1960s

The night one of my little brothers ran away
into the stormy night
the other kids just settled back
into the drone of the Flintstones cartoon,
or maybe it was a Speed Racer episode.
But anyway, the argument and the teasing were over.
I followed him, crying, after seeing him running up the
basement stairs,
and the echoes of his sobbing
drowned out the laughter of their teasing
because he stuttered so so so
since he only wanted to be heard heard heard.
But did they even care
that he had gone,
that he was not perfect enough for them,
that he had decided it was best to run away,
to start anew somewhere else?

The lightning flashed across the dark skies,
and I ran, looking for him.
I remember his brown curly hair,
his front tooth just a bit different
from what you'd expect,
his brown eyes,
his caring ways.

"Charlie!" I cried out,
and beyond the thunders of memory,
he heard me needing him so.
He cried out that he could never go back,
and I did not hear a stutter in his words.
I held his two hands in my own, facing him in the night.
The rain was washing the grubby dirt of a young boy away,
but his heartaches spread into my own.
"Then I don't want to, either," I cried over the crash of thunder,
and I squeezed his two small hands in my own.
"Our family is not a family without you in it."
Did I say it or did he.
Who can say, but as we wiped our eyes,
we went back, slowly through the winds and rains of the stormy night
and in, to await the storms once again.
Tomorrow the sun will sparkle and shine,
and always, there is no friend like a brother.



Photo by Larkin Morris

Being Neighborly in the Twenty-First Century

By Sue Pumphrey

While the moon rose higher behind the massive oak trees,
 none of us knew that the lady two doors away
 hung lifeless from a ceiling in the quiet stillness of her home.
 We found out, soon enough.
 “Did you know that lady who lived there killed herself?
 She was fighting off the cancer,
 because it came back. She must’ve grown so tired,
 fighting it all over again. It must’ve been the only way she could win
 in the battle against it.” Quietly, I wondered why I couldn’t recall her name.
 “That lady? She was crazy! She wanted to take me to court.
 She said I was overcharging her for when I mowed the lawn.”
 Surely she would have won, I muttered to myself.
 You don’t even have a city license. In my day, we helped
 neighbors who needed help by bein’ neighborly.
 “What was that?”
 “Never mind,” I called out, “It’s apparently not important any longer.”
 He planted a vine near the property line,
 saying it was from a friend of his who worked
 at a local nursery. “I knew him first at the university,
 but then the university kicked me out of school.
 We took a class in horticulture once. Do you
 know what horticulture is,” he asked when
 I commented about the beauty of the plant.
 Can you spell cactus plant, I almost said,
 but I turned away, silent, and as I went
 inside
 I thought I heard him mutter to his son,
 “She’s just crazy.”



Photo by Alan Shero

Something Bestilled

By Nicholas Rives

What Have I set free?
but.....
something bestilled inside of me
could it be,
this hollow shell is real
dried blood, I'm incandescent, feel
she of wings soars searing my soul
and I'm open, bruised and exposed

Such a wonderful feeling,
breath
and lie beside in death
our sleep,
of lovers delight together
meshed, mingle in dirt forever
crisp and new dancing in the light
subdued and flightless in disguise

You see through me as I do you
casting phosphorescent shadows blue
the illusions of thought press on our eye
trespassing to God, nigh
something bestilled inside of me
is what I came to merely set free



Photo by Christine Byrd-Harris

Oh, How I Invoke Thee

By Nicholas Rives

Oh, how I invoke thee
to fill my soul with immortal words
to change the thought of wounded prey
to say the miraculous life-changing verse

Should I stay on bent knees in prayer
for those who don't listen shouldn't shed a tear
blessings be in forms that deserve a care
blessings be in forms of those whom fear

Endorphin-pumping hearts change in time of need
fallen angels trumpet their way to the golden gate
stomping the pressed ground destroying lively seed
pressure of powerlessness seeps in shapes of hate

Oh, how I invoked thee
a failure in words of immortality
breathless is the void you made me
beautiful are the thoughts in this brutality

A Picture

By Nicholas Rives

A picture isn't worth a thousand words.
 A picture is a thief, capturing one's soul in a
 moment forever.
 Pictures never reveal the truth, lying through
 its teeth as it bites down.

A soul will wander on its own behalf leaving
 everything behind.
 A picture holds ones soul prisoner trying to
 keep face value.
 A picture is for the eyes only.

A material possession without an excuse.
 A reason to cry.
 A picture holds down the hopeful mind, keep-
 ing one in that moment forever.

A picture is an unopenable window.
 No true thought can come through, revealing
 the lies within.
 A picture will hurt the lost and broken.

A picture has crushed dreams, feeding the
 enviously hungry; a war within.
 Taking pictures can be greedy, lustful over pre-
 serving beauty that doesn't deserve immor-
 tality.
 A picture retains a luster, a glow to distract one
 from the truth; like a mask to make
 believe.

A thousand pictures are worth only one word:



Photo by Evelyn Houston

*For My Son....Some Advice on Dating

By Misty Schultz

Son...because you may wear your heart on your sleeve and may
 have a difficult time choosing, take some advice on girls to
 avoid:

Avoid girls who think that buffalo wings come from buffaloes and
 Chicken of the Sea is really chicken;

Be leery of girls who think Bush is simply beer and Kerry is the car
 from the movie that hates all women; who thinks Paris is a tall
 blonde girl with bad hair extensions;

Be cautious of girls that smile and their faces don't move and in
 conversation say things like....as if....and like really....

And if all else fails, use this simple test. Ask her to count to ten and
 if she pauses after three...she's obviously not the brightest light
 on the tree and please don't introduce her to me.

* a parody of distinguished poet Miller Williams' poem "For a Girl I
 Know about to Be a Woman" in honor of his visit to our campus
 November 2004.

A day at the Beach

By Angie Thom

We walked out into the emerald waters,
my father and I.
Past the frothy bubbles tickling the shore
where my little brother played happily with a bucket
building sandcastles for the waves.
We waded through the dancing whitecaps
breaking at the sandbar
and splashing up into my face
as I tried to jump each one to avoid being knocked over.
We swam smoothly over the thunderous green mountains,
until my arms grew weary and I scrambled onto Dad's
coconut scented back
content, for a while, to ride like a sea princess
perched upon a mighty dolphin.
We swam into the setting sun
until the shore looked as endless as the sea.
Mom waved frantically, a tiny doll wearing green
standing on the blinding white sand.
She beckoned us back to the safety of the shallows
but Dad never looked back
so intent was he on swimming
and I pretended not to see her.
Silly woman!
To think that we might get hurt.
Doesn't she know nothing will happen
while I'm here with my Dad?
He's invincible, indestructible, immortal
Nothing out here would dare.

Wake Up

By Jeremy West

An economy seeming to go awry,
and the stock market appears to be dry.
Exemptions for the wealthy makes their money grow,
while poverty spreads in abundance and spirits hit a low.
In addition our national deficit is so red, it glows.

Our country is divided even further,
further than the days of our past.
Jobs twice needed are given to others,
to others for a cheaper price than the last.
His cabinet dissipates from his administration,
yet somehow he's elected to a second occupation.

A country of brave who will fight to save the free day,
being misused in a severely grave way.
A man of money shouldn't lead a world power, not even
for a day.

For the rest of us will all surely have to pay.
When the bush did burn the people were soon led free.
Does Bush really have to burn before everyone will see,
See the great injustices being set on thee?



Photo by Jennifer Giannelli

*My Water Still Runs at Midnight

Olivia Augustus

Had I but coffee and cream enough, and bath bubbles, this lingering would not be a crime. By my procrastination, I could sit, soak, and splash, and then sip from my hot cup of comfort. All the while, I would steep, absorbing the much needed rest for my chaotic mind. My children's voices would echo with symphonies, void of any urgency. There would be no need to clamber, nor would I struggle, for a towel, for my warm lovely linens laced in gold would be held open for me by eternity. For I know this lingering is what I deserve, and I am owed nothing less.

But in my mind, I hear the ticking of my old grandfather clock, each tick consuming the next moment of pleasure. Its chiming is nothing more than a mockery of my foolish, but deserving, intentions. Now, I must release the lukewarm water and with it the swirling melodies of my anticipated rest. The voices of the children, three and eleven, bellow with the blowing of the school bus' horn. On the floor, I have a towel, now five days old, cold and barren, waiting to wrap me up like a tomb.

Now, therefore, while I am able with the soundness of mind, I must choose to move forward or lag behind. Though it is midnight, the morning really has just begun, so steal away to my alcove, I must. With black coffee in hand, I will soak enmeshed in bubbles for all of the six hours, until the alarm goes off again. Then, with my spry youthful glow, I will dart to the dryer to find a towel, not even a day old. Soon the patter of little feet, mixed with an occasional yawn, will call out with the subtle tone of rhythm and blues to greet the dawn. Thus, I cannot prevent the rising of the sun; however, at midnight my bath water will still run.

* inspired by Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"



Photo by James O. Marble

Through Old Ground

By Dr. Randy Cross

Mr. Andy Landers' entrance into town was always the same. Town, for Mr. Landers, was Raleigh Green's grocery store, just across the road from our house. He didn't own a car, so he traveled wherever he went by tractor—an ancient, once-red Farmall "A" bleached pink by too many years in the Tennessee sun. It suited Andy Landers. We could see him every day, about an hour after dinner, as he topped the hill where the switch track crossed the road: Mr. Landers sitting solemn in the seat, Trigger and Old Eller fully harnessed and tied loose-reined behind the tractor's drawbar hitch. He always brought his mules to rent to people in town who had no other way to plow their gardens. But he wouldn't rent to just anybody.

My father was one of his regular renters. Daddy would use Old Eller throughout the spring and summer to break, cultivate, and finally lay by the field behind our house. "Nothing," Daddy would say, "plows as good as a mule, and I never saw a better one than Old Eller. She understands more about making a crop than most men I know."

Daddy would plow, and I would walk alongside and listen to the ringing of the trace chains, the pleasant squeak of leather against leather and hame against collar. Over all these sounds were Old Eller's steady breathing and Daddy's gentle instructions to her: "whoap," "haw back," "come up," "gee," haw now," the cotton lines draped around his waist.

After half an hour or so, Mr. Landers always arrived with something in his hand: a Pay Day candy bar for Old Eller. Daddy would unhitch the plow and the single tree from the traces and guide Old Eller to the shade of the white oak at the south end of the field. By the time he removed the bridle, Mr. Landers would be there saying quietly, almost apologetically, what he always said: "Old Eller's old like me, and she gets tired." Then he would unwrap the candy and offer it to her in one piece on the flat of his palm. The long green- and brown-stained teeth would chew, and the thick tongue and lips would smack at the sticky, sugary caramel. Through it all, Mr. Landers stood silent, stroking Old Eller's sweat-darkened neck.



Photo by Patti Duncan

Years later, at Mr. Landers' funeral, the undertakers placed green pine branches on top of his casket once it was lowered into the grave. Malcolm, Mr. Landers' son, explained why. "Daddy wanted us to do it," he said, "so Mama wouldn't have to hear the dirt hit the top of the coffin."

I don't think Mr. Landers ever knew my name. I was just a little boy walking beside his daddy and Old Eller in the field. But even now, the memory of those days sometimes eases through my mind like a good, slow mule pulling a turning plow through old ground.

Black

By Adrian Hambrick

What is black: black is the darkest color. Black is full of anger, filled with hostility. Black is hopeless, so depressing as to end all hope. Black is evil or associated with evil. Black is dirty, covered with mud, soil, or any other dark substance. Black is me. I sit in my room and wonder to myself, what is black? I really can't think because my thoughts are all black. So what is black? Black is what they say my skin color is and decide to let it also be my race.

They also say black is beautiful, but I don't feel that way. Black makes me feel like I'm still behind time. Black makes me feel like death, already in my black suit, laying in my black casket, watching all these black people looking at a black shell, crying black tears that one day will stop dropping from their black eyes. Because black makes them forget after a week or so. Inside my body there is a black heart and it pumps black blood. They say that sin is black. I really don't understand why.

I try to find love in black, but for some reason that's farther away than I thought. I can't even love a black woman because of my black thoughts, in my black mind, my black eyes that look out of a black heart that beats and what comes out of my black mouth won't let me love my black woman. To top it off, I just found out that the black woman whom I wanted as a black friend goes with another black dude. Damn, what is this black world coming to?

I would love to take my black woman or my black friends to my black house but I'm ashamed of my black home. Not on the outside because it looks like every other black neighbor. Inside my black home, it's different. The doorknobs are black, the walls are black, and my living room is very nasty and smells like oil and let's not forget the color of oil (yep, it's black). When I turn on the light there are black spots on the light bulb, and I see little black critters crawling, I mean running from the light. But remember, my light bulb is black. But you don't have to worry about that because that little black light bulb with those little black spots just blew out. I can't see, but I can hear a black woman in black darkness on her black knees, praying a black prayer to the man upstairs. And I wonder to myself, is he black himself.



Photo by Rose Dean

But all in all, I'm a black child that will have to one day walk this black journey. I also realize, after a while, that black isn't so bad after all. Black is the color that goes with every other color. Black also absorbs heat and is the incorporation of all colors into one. Black stands out among the crowd. Black is the color of my hair. Black is who I am and if nigger, nigga, and negro is black, then black is me.

A Man at the Woods

By Evelyn Houston

In early August of 1978, the four-month search for my missing Uncle Ricky ended unsuccessfully, and my family tried to regroup at my grandmother's trailer to make sense of the disappearance. Trying to escape Granny's confusing and forlorn sobbing, my brother and I retreated to the backyard. Granny's field lay fallow that year, so we used it as a giant sandbox for our Hot Wheels games. Our play clothes, not yet dirty, (his orange Sunkist Soda t-shirt with cut-off shorts and my yellow-daisy sundress with a missing button) beacons our location in the open field. Afar, I heard a train whistle blow; I looked up from the miniature General Lee and patrol car chase to see a strange man standing at the far end of the field not two hundred feet from my brother and me. Dressed in a red and black plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a red cap, he stood out against the thirty acres of forest behind him. Even at seven years old, I knew something was wrong. I jumped from my knees and sprinted barefoot around the left side of Granny's faded green and white mobile home to the front porch. "Momma, Momma," my brother and I yelled, "There's a man at the woods!"

"I told y'all Bobby did it, and now he's a watchin the house" my Aunt Ruth bellowed as she jumble-jogged her two-hundred forty-five pound mass onto the porch. Previously picking blackberries on the other side of the chicken coop and parallel to the field, she had seen the man, too. Confusion followed briefly until Dad retrieved his .357 Magnum from the truck dash and said, "Let's shoot some cans at the edge of the field." Aunt Ruth grinned, nodded, and pulled her snub-nosed .38 from her bright-yellow purse in the trailer. But the man vanished into the forest leaving only boot prints in the tilled and empty earth.

Ten years later, a shiny-blue Buick drove into the yard, and two men with white-starched shirts knocked on Granny's screen door. They flashed shiny badges and introduced themselves as Investigators Gasket and Green from the homicide division in Birmingham. Granny sighed, looked at me, and said, "Neicy, get these men some tea." The somber men told my grandmother they had information about Ricky's disappearance and asked if she knew a man named Bobby Bates. Granny closed her Bible and replied, "Bobby was my boy's best friend; they grew up together." In the living room, with Jimmy Swaggart on the television and beneath the slow-spinning ceiling fan, the investigators explained Bobby had died

Winner of the National SKD Literary Essay Prize

recently and left a library of journals under the floor in his house. Bobby's wife found the journals and called the police.

Green said the journal entries, dated almost to the hour of each event, revealed that Bobby meddled in everything illegal. Prostitution, pornography, gunrunning, and gambling started his list, and my uncle Ricky, although mildly retarded, knew too much about Bobby's schemes. Bobby cut the brake lines of Ricky's car, but when that plan failed with only a bent fender, the journal explained the need for a more aggressive method. Two weeks of entries organized the centricities of Bobby's plan. The brakes were fixed at the repair shop, and Bobby, always the smiling friend, gave Ricky a ride to pick up the car. The journal said Bobby drove exactly three miles from the trailer and pulled his truck onto the gravel shoulder near a wooded area close to the railroad tracks. As Bobby absently stuffed a three foot-long piece of cotton rope into his pocket, he told Ricky he wanted to show him the new drop point. Ricky naively followed him thirty yards into the woods, and then Bobby suddenly turned and sprang on him winding the rope twice around Ricky's small neck. Bobby maliciously described the disbelief and confusion in Ricky's eyes at his friend's actions. Finally, the journal said Bobby left the body, but he watched it deteriorate as he smirked at our search parties. Bobby's notes claimed, "They almost found the body once, but soon there would not be anything left to find—the animals and worms demand their share."

The disappearance of her son came back to my grandmother with a crushing force as she listened to the investigators' story, and with watery eyes and a quivering bottom lip, she gripped her Bible, thanked the men, and told me, "Neicy, their tea glasses are empty." Investigator Gasket said further journal entries commented on watching the trailer, but one stood out among these—Bobby approached the back field from the woods and watched two small children playing in the dirt. He contemplated which would be the easier to snatch away—the orange soda or a fist full of daisies.

The Perfect Snowman

By Evelyn Houston

Northern winters seem long and bitterly cold, yet my brother and I spent our childhood years occasionally knee-deep in Montana snow. Winter differences between Montana and Alabama are completely polar. The only similarity linking here and there is the children's excitement at the imagined thoughts of snow angels, snowball fights, and erecting the perfect snowman.

My little brother and I could not wait for the first good snow. With any luck, good snow (not too moist and not too dry) measured at least six inches or more. Anxiously we watched the daunting half-inch flakes leisurely dance and tumble to the ground. Impatience made waiting seem like forever; and I remember thinking, "Stupid snow, fall faster, or it will be too late, and Mom won't let us go." Finally, Mom gave us her slow nod, and my brother and I frantically scrambled to thrust on our winter garb. I sported hot pink ski pants, a matching jacket with a neon-green stripe, and two pairs of mittens; my brother correspondingly wore electric blue and green. With our hoods drawn tight and tied under our chins and our feet shoved into the cumbersome white snow boots, we stood tall for our inspection, although we must have looked like disco-dipped Eskimos. Mom unzipped, straightened, and re-zipped our jackets while brooding over us, "Come in if you get too cold." My brother and I looked at each other as if to reply, "Yeah, right." She and we both knew that we would not be back in until she made us.

Like racehorses released at the starting gate bell, my brother and I

bolted out the front door, with one or both falling down the icy front steps. "Hurry before Mom sees," I hissed, because she would surely call us back in to check for boo-boos. We romped and ran, kicked and collided until we fell down giggling in the eight inches of cold, cottony snow. Our snow angels flew into the yard on glorious white wings, yet I always managed to get snow in my pants. My brother, thinking this hilarious, looked much better with my snowball in his grinning teeth.

"So there!" I yelled at him, sticking out my tongue and daring him to do something about it. The battle lines clearly drawn, he returned fire. With the snow-fort foxholes dug, the snowball grenades whistled and exploded on target. Fortified with an endless supply of ammo, World War III ensued. The porch icicles served as swords in our clamoring combat; my inferior sibling must surrender by any means necessary. Then Mom yelled from the window, "Kids, play nice."

"Ahhh, Mom" we complained in unison, dropping our weapons of choice and conceding to the mightier force of Mom. Staring at the ground and pouting a bit, I recognized the last thing to do.

I took one of my snowball bullets and thrust it deep into the snow to pack it tight, and the snowman slowly grew. I rolled and packed, rolled and packed, until the snowball became the size of a truck tire. My brother, persuaded only by my threats, decided he could help me rotate the huge white boulder into position. We argued over who would make the coveted head, and finally I bribed this all important job

from him. Besides, the head had to be perfect, and no bratty little brother could accomplish this task. He managed to construct the middle snow boulder, and together we situated it on our solid base; then I carefully and proudly lofted the perfectly symmetrical head into place. Two stick arms, stones for the eyes and nose, my mitten yarn for the mouth, and an empty ice-cream bucket for the top hat completed our frozen friend. Standing back to marvel at our making, my brother asked, "How come snowmen are always fat?"

"Because, dummy," I said, "They all look like Dad."

In Alabama, we occasionally get the promised half-inch dusting of snow, and my children carefully listen to the weatherman for that magic word. Then they hug the window with hopeful faces and gleaming eyes and beg me to tell them again how deep the Montana snow got and how Uncle David and I built the perfect snowman.

Grandma's Quilts

By Evelyn Houston

Judging outward appearances harshly is counter-productive. We miss out on wonderful people and their abilities by passing them off as less than perfect. I spent hours on the living room floor, with my chin in my hands, watching Granny at her antique sewing machine. My grandma was a crumpled, old, age-defeated woman, but her charismatic spirit and ageless heart would never let her body defeat her.

Her hands worked the magic of her stitching, moving lightly over and around the black monster that she called Ms. Molly. Twisted and bent, her hands looked like crooked dead tree limbs, yet they pulled the fabric with the fluid grace and elegance of a swan. Amazingly, Granny's cruelly curved fingers and swollen joints didn't inhibit her ability to create the comforting quilts that she unselfishly gave away.

Granny's eyes held the secrets of her intricate soul and reflected this in the patterns of her quilts. The heavy-wrinkled skin and sparse lashes all but hid the opaque spheres, yet her eyes sparkled like citrine-blue sapphires when the needle danced. Granny pieced her quilt puzzles together from a pile of scrap cloth by selecting each piece at a knowing glance. And sometimes she turned her head from the sharp needle to give me a quick wink.

The workhorse of Granny's quilting plow was her feet. Although purplish, swollen, and stumpy, Granny's feet rocked a rhythm on the sewing machine pedal that would outdistance the most relentless metronome. Seeming callused and cumbersome, her feet worked in counter-time to the undulating nee-

dle and pumped an infinite humming beat that became hard to discern from the strumming in my own chest. Like floppy goose-feet, Granny's toes spread to better grip the pedal, yet her touch was sparrow-light.

Not unlike the pile of discarded fabrics or a tired old woman, most things don't always seem beautiful at first. But Granny could magically mold those scraps with her crippled hands, transforming them into dazzling patterns that appeared to move and shift like a flock of tiny black birds in the sun. And with an echoing beat, the world through her eyes became clearer as another quilt was given life and then given away.



Photo by Jennifer Giannelli

Jealousy

By Kristopher Reisz

I'm a pizza boy. It's not a bad job. I waste a couple nights every week driving around, listening to the stereo and swapping dirty jokes with Dawn, the cute girl at work with the pierced tongue and a country twang. I get paid \$5.25 an hour plus tips, which I can stretch to cover rent and tuition. I'm doing all right. The only problem is I'm a pizza boy.

Friends I graduated high school with are engineers now. My sister-in-law is a year away from the bar exam, and my cousin is an architect in Edinburgh. I wear a name tag to work and drain rancid cheese-water out of the make line. If you're a twenty-four year old pizza boy, it's hard not to look into the mirror and think, "Oh, yeah. You've made some bad life decisions, haven't you?"

One day, I made a delivery to an address in Point Mallard Estates. Point Mallard is the wealthiest neighborhood in Decatur, with houses so big it looks like rows of Catholic churches lining the streets.

Pulling into the driveway behind an SUV a little smaller than my apartment, I walked up and rang the doorbell. The man who answered was a few years older than me, maybe in his early thirties.

"Hey there," I said. "How are y—"

"How much?"

"Um, eighteen thirty-four."

He dropped a twenty on top of the warmer bag. "Keep it."

"Thanks." I pulled his dinner out of the bag while he stood two feet in front of me, staring off to the side at

nothing. "There you go. Have a nice night, all right?"

"Yeah." Vanishing back inside and yet to have actually looked at me, he shut the door and flipped off the porch light.

Walking back to my truck, I adjusted my name tag and eyed the shiny gray SUV in his driveway. I was getting off work at one. He'd be asleep then. I thought about coming back. I thought about the lug wrench behind my driver's side seat, and I thought about him finding his rear windshield smashed out in the morning.

I didn't do it. I probably never would, but that guy and his dismissive tone chewed at me the rest of the night. Mopping the prep floor, listening to the squeal in my brakes that I didn't have the money to fix, thinking about having to work late, then get up early for school, I couldn't stop thinking about his nice house, his nice car, and the fact that whatever his job was, it didn't involve buckets of rancid cheese-water.

I wanted what he had and twisted my guts into a knot thinking about it. Hanging out with Dawn, the cute girl with the pierced tongue and country twang, didn't help. Seeing a fat guy pedaling a bicycle down Eleventh Street didn't help. The only thing that felt good was mulling over my nihilistic daydreams— smashing up his car or playing some mailbox baseball. I imagined spinning doughnuts across his crisp green lawn. Mud splashing everywhere, running over his garden statues, just picturing it made me smile.



Photo by Evelyn Houston

It's hard admitting you're jealous, even to yourself. By admitting you're jealous of somebody, you admit *ipso facto* that he's better than you. That's too much for most people to stomach, so jealousy becomes a parasite. It attaches itself to other emotions and rides them up to the surface to feed. Pride makes a good host, so do righteous indignation, prejudice, and any type of ideology. Even anger is more palatable than jealousy. At least you can say you hate somebody without insulting yourself in the same breath.

The truth is, none of my fantasies that night ended with that guy looking at the tire tracks in his flowerbed and resolving to treat everyone, even the pizza boy, with more respect. They were about destruction and avenging my bruised ego. They were about not being happy where I was and simmering at the fact that he wasn't there, too. He'd acted like he was better than me; what I couldn't stand was thinking maybe he was right.

The deeper you dig into your miseries, the more you'll always find. By the end of my shift, standing on the sidewalk while Dawn locked up the store, I couldn't see anything except the doubts, worries, and passed-up chances. The rent was due. My brakes were going bad. Why hadn't I gone to college right out of high school? When was it going to be my turn?

"Ever notice Orion has a dick?" Dawn asked.

"What?"

Looking up at the sky, she pointed to the constellation with her cigarette. "Look. There's his shoulders



Photo by Jennifer Giannelli

and legs, right? There's his belt. And right below them, see those two stars? He's got a wang."

I looked up. Sure enough, Orion is anatomically correct.

"So, why's he wearing a belt, then?" I asked. "Since he's not wearing any pants, what's the belt for?"

Dawn thought for a second. "Must be chaps."

The conversation got progressively worse, so I won't get into it. The main thing is that, afterwards, I didn't go to the man's house with a baseball bat. I laughed until my sides hurt and forgot all about him.

There was no great change in fortune. I still have to hold my breath when I empty out the cheese-water bucket. My brakes are still making an awful squealing noise, and that guy is still a jackass. I just found something better to think about.

Life isn't fair. I'll rot away if I dwell on it too much. My only protection is to laugh at it, to outright ridicule it sometimes, and I hope that's enough to get me through. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, I may be in the gutter, but I can still look up at the stars.

Fragility

By Kim Staines

The room fills with the sweet smell of fresh grasses and crisp mountain air as the soft cotton curtains dance lazily in the breeze over the bedroom windowsill. It had rained the night before. It wasn't a heavy rain but what I like to call a cleansing shower. Throughout the night it played hypnotically upon the tin roof of our cabin. That evening, we had sat in the porch swing together watching the droplets fall as the sun sleepily disappeared behind the mountains. The sky transformed to darkness displaying a shadowed alabaster moon that lit up the edges of the silver-gray clouds. Now, that the rain has departed with the sunrise a mist rises from under the canopy of the treetops and settles as glistening beads upon the slender needles of the giant pines.

The air is thick with life as if purified by the rain. Sounds of morning filter in through the window and enter my dreams as the cobwebs start to clear from my waking mind. I breathe the first deep breath of the day filling my lungs with the sweet scents of evergreens and of the Rhododendrons that have turned the mountain side shades of red and pink. This is my favorite time of the year. The crispness of the air reminds me of freshly starched cotton and life seems to wind down from the summer drawing its last bit of energy from the earth.

I burrow further under the quilts. There I find the warmth of his body against my back as a strong arm slips around me pulling me close. The mixture of the cool air and the warmth of his breath upon my neck send shivers through me. My eyes

close as the corners of my mouth turn up slightly with a contented smile.

I've never considered myself a religious person. But being in this place, this oasis we have created away from the cold, hard walls of the concrete world has reminded me of a calming spirituality that I possess and of the important things in my life. Listening to his steady breathing, I wonder what dreams are drifting through his mind. I lie there for a moment wishing I could enter them and share what I was feeling at this moment. Possibly I am there already.

A small beam of sunlight peeks through the division of the curtains and rests upon the edge of the bed beside me. I look at it for a long time analyzing the shadows it formed upon the sheets. Reaching out my hand, I carefully capture the ray in my palm turning my hand slowly allowing the bright play of light and warmth to dance across my skin. It amazes me that such beauty holds such incredible power. It can bring forth life, nurture it and strengthen it as it grows. It can brighten the darkest recesses and warm the coldest shadows. It is life. Am I the only person in the world to see its significance and view it for what it really is? I'm convinced that the average person is too busy to notice and most have not even considered the thought. It is those people ... the ones who live beyond the walls of my world where the only power they know of or desire is the one that can only be purchased. They blindly go through their existence in a naive bliss taking their fragile world around them for granted. Sadly, I

realize that the power that flows across my palm at this moment is just as fragile as theirs. The difference, however, is once theirs has gone it is possible to restore.

In these times of exploration of my spirituality, I often wonder about the existence of heaven and what it would be like. But, as I listen to the sweet sounds that ride the mountain breeze and feel the warm embrace of the only man that I have ever loved, I couldn't imagine heaven being anything different from the place I am in right at this moment. This is my heaven. But instead of experiencing it in death, life springs forth from it and fills my heart and soul with strength and happiness.

If “ifs” And “buts” Were Candy And Nuts ...

By Kim Staines

The time of the year has come once again for Christmas to fill the air. Santa appears at the mall. Store shelves are packed with lights, globes, stockings and things. The sounds of “White Christmas” and “Jingle Bells” drift through my radio for the entire weekend. The calendar says ... OCTOBER. Did I miss something?

When I was a little girl, granted that was back in 19 ... (we won't go there), I remember my mom, my aunts and my grandma all going Christmas shopping together after our usual family Thanksgiving gathering. They would leave the men at my grandma's watching the ballgames on TV or just napping off that third slice of pumpkin pie, pile into one car and “hit the sales”. There was always a “white sale”, “clearance sale”, “Thanksgiving sale”, “red tag sale”, “grand opening sale” or some other kind of shopping encouragement going on that day. It was a tradition that marked the official start of the Christmas season. Now, I'm a grown woman with grandchildren of my own. I hate to think that I'm so out of touch that I've not noticed before what seems so apparent to be happening. The “official start of the season” seems to be coming a little earlier with each passing year. What got me really thinking about this is something I saw during the last week of October that struck me as very odd. Driving past one of our local retailers, I noticed that the big Halloween pumpkins that were for sale outside on the curb had a backdrop of beautifully lit Christmas trees in the window. The following week, Santa made his first appearance in the local mall ... three weeks

BEFORE Thanksgiving. Even before all of the Halloween candy has been eaten, Thanksgiving and Christmas is blending together into a collage of turkey and Santa Claus. I'm convinced that before too long, you will be able to buy your beach towels and twinkle lights off of the same shelf. There will be no “Merry Christmas”; it will be “Merry Holiday Season”. How did this happen, and you have to ask yourself ... WHY?

I hear my grandmother speak of her Christmas as a child. Her father would go out and choose just the right tree for their hand-made ornaments. She and her sisters and brothers would string popcorn for garland. Decorating the tree was a family affair. Before they went to bed on Christmas Eve, her father would always read them *The Night Before Christmas* and then tell them a story about a child in a manger. She awoke to fruit and chestnuts in her stocking. A single hand-made rag doll with a pretty blue apron was under the tree with her name on it. I'm afraid this type of family celebration may be lost forever. These days, if children wake up to the same, I'm afraid they would consider it child abuse.

So, when you ask yourself why the Christmas season is starting earlier with each passing year consider this answer. The true meaning of Christmas is being absorbed by a fast-paced, fast food, fast-credit type of society that has given birth to high-dollar, high-tech and high-prestige type of people. Status and vanity have taken the place of tradition and humility. It is getting buried in our society's voracious hunger for excess. Our retail industry has seen this and has turned predator in a

materialistic jungle and we are the prey.

We ignore our loss of tradition. We make excuses for our excess. We make excuses for our excuses! We make more. We spend more. We save less. We have forgotten the meanings of giving, unselfishness and gratitude. A good deed and simple acts of kindness have long fallen by the way side. What kind of example are we setting for our children?

My husband once told me an old adage that he picked up as a child. It goes, “If ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ were candy and nuts, it would be Christmas all year round.” It makes me think there may be something to this. Have we turned into a country of “ifs” and “buts”? Maybe we have made one too many excuses for our behavior. It seems to be catching up to us fast.

The Heart of the Matter

By Dr. Sheila Byrd

Late one brisk mid-November afternoon — “post-harvest” we used to call it— I was walking on the new track beside my old elementary school. I had walked there from my mother’s house around the corner. Alone on the track, I walked, not briskly, but in somberness, noting the many changes in the landscape around my childhood school and hometown. So much had changed: the school was a new, modern building; the old gymnasium was gone; rows and rows of elegant new houses now stood where cotton fields had once been. I had no nostalgia, no sentimentality for these scenes. I had an infinite, definite longing for the past: I wanted it all back.

I walked in solitude with fits and starts of sobbing. My mood was a direct result of the year I had just experienced: caring for and nursing my mother-in-law through a fatal illness. Once we laid her to rest, my husband and I spent the next month nursing my weakening father-in-law, and we lost that battle, too. A mere five weeks after my mother-in-law’s burial, my father-in-law joined his wife of 59 years in death. This powerful act of love, my father-in-law’s incessant longing to be with his wife, stunned my husband and me and filled us both with awe and grief. These deaths brought back the horror of my own father’s final days from three years before and my close watch over my mother as she slowly recovered from losing the love of her life.

Now, only three weeks after the traumatic loss of my in-laws, I was at my mother’s house caring for her following a minor surgery. After witnessing the fragility of life and the reality of death, I could not keep myself from worrying about mother’s health although she was progressing nicely. She was, after all, my third attempt at care giving, and my success record was not encouraging. I somehow felt responsible.

As I walked, I kept reliving moments of desperation when I had to accept that my father and my in-laws were doomed to the way of all flesh. I kept meditating on the dreadful burden of love, of life, of death.

At the moment of my deepest despair, I spotted a big buck come from the woods along the edge of the far road. He stood stately—erect and alert— and looked me in the eye.

Immediately, I was filled with a spontaneous Wordsworthian joy. I watched until the deer turned and

headed back into the woods, back to nature, back home. I began reciting Wordsworth’s “My heart leaps Up When I Behold a Rainbow in the Sky” and completely understood the poet’s meaning. I thought of the many times I have introduced the Romantic notion of nature’s comfort to my literature students and the times I have preached the transcendentalist notion of solitude in nature as a healing power, but at that moment, I felt it to the depth of my heart. It was not an epiphany because it was less heady than that. It was all about my heart. It was that feeling that has come so seldom to me and is more potent than knowledge: an emotional impact that my best words fail to describe.

I walked on thinking about the small spots of joy that occur in a lifetime and how they are so similar to the scraps of sunlight I look for during the cold, dark winter months. And then I remembered a Shakespearean line, “Now is the Winter of our discontent,” but coupled with it came Shelley’s “Oh Wind, If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”



Photo by Sharon Clark

Vor Vollen Schusseln or “In Front of Full Bowls”

By J. LaDon Dendy

*We have lingered in the
chambers of the sea,*

*By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed
red and brown*

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.
-T.S. Eliot

Last Christmas I got a bike. It had one of those silver pegs on the rear wheel so I could jump if I wanted to. I didn't jump any, but it was there if I wanted to one day. I was settin' outside when Deddy came home. I heard someone yellin' and looked. The boys out by the road were playing rough with Ernie again. Ernie was yelling at them to let him have his shoe back, and Deddy says those kids are bastards, and their parents couldn't raise a damn kid for nothing. They are loud. And it sure is cold outside. I remember last year around Christmas, school let out and Deddy said that trashmen didn't run for a week. He said they need to do their job, or he oughta quit paying them to do it. I reckon they don't ever work. I never see them around here anyways. "Give Ernie his damn shoe back!" I yelled. Ernie is my brother. Momma said God made him special, and that's why he has his fits in church. God's gonna get mad one day if Momma don't go easier on Ernie. Sometimes she's just plain mean to him. He can't help it. He learnt to tie his shoes! I reckon that's what he was doing when the big kids took one from him. "Give Ernie his damn shoe!" I yelled again. "He's gonna have one of his fits!" Momma gets upset when Ernie has a fit. She says those kids oughta be nicer to someone God made special. She said Ernie couldn't take care of hisself, so that's why we've got to keep a spe-

cial eye on him, and that God sent Ernie to teach us a lesson on being nice.

I ran into the street then. I knowed them kids was bigger than me, but I hit the black one in the nuts like Deddy taught me to do if someone was picking on Ernie. I gave Ernie his shoe back and took him in the house. It sure was cold outside and it's so warm in the house. You could almost smell how warm it was in the livin' room. Then Deddy and Momma started yellin' about something to do with Deddy's work. He said nobody was building houses this time of year because it was so cold, and no one wanted to build a house around Christmas time. Then Momma said that he had two kids he had to buy Christmas for, and how are they gonna afford it after the rent went up two months ago. Momma started crying then. She was talking about how Aunt Erma Jean said that she would take care of us if she needed her to. I think they were talkin' about Santa Claus. I don't believe in him no more, but Ernie still thinks he fills his sock with candy on Christmas day. I don't think anybody would want to leave anything in Ernie's socks; especially candy or something somebody might want to eat later on. Then Deddy said he was going to see Paul; that was his boss at work. I seen Paul before. Deddy always picked up his check on Friday, and he let me ride with him to Paul's to pick it up. Paul always had suckers on his coffee table. They were in this glass bowl with prickly glass triangles on top that tickled when you ran your hand across it. He had the good suckers too, like the ones you get at Buddy Johnson's for ten cents. I

asked Deddy if I could go with him, and he said yeah. So I got into the car. It was a big Buick, and Deddy said it was a v-8 so it had some pick-up. When I got in it still had mud in the floor-board. You could smell it, too. You could smell the mud and the rain and sweat and I had to move Deddy's tool belt to set down. It was heavy, and the nails jingled. When Deddy pulled out of the driveway I found his tape measure in the glove compartment. I played with it to see how hard it would be to bend over and when it did it would snap and Deddy said I needed to quit and sometimes I needed my tail whooped. I didn't think it needed whooped. I remember one time Momma caught me spittin' on Ernie, and she whooped the tar out of me and told me that God didn't like kids to pick on his special children. So now I turned over a new leaf. I put up Deddy's tape measure and started looking out the window at the cars going by. I saw a firetruck in one fellow's yard. It looked like the big red truck Aunt Erma Jean gave me on my birthday last year. But it won't be long and I'll be too old to play with toys, Momma said. She said I would be turning nine in February. Deddy lit a cigarette and the smoke was going up my nose and I told him and he said he would crack a window but that never helped. It tasted so dry and made me cough. Deddy said damn it and rolled down the window and threw it out. There are those hills I like to look at when we drive to Paul's. They remind me of waves, but these are green, and they are all lumpy and covered in what Deddy calls "folage." It don't look pretty now, though. It's so cold and

gray and wet outside. It makes my fingers numb when it's this cold. I bet Ernie's foot got cold whallago. Those damn kids oughta not pick on him. Or Momma oughta whoop them, too. It ain't fair.

I wasn't looking, but you could feel it when the car pulled into Paul's driveway. You can feel the rocks roll under the tires like when you step on a pile of rocks in your shoes on the playground at school. They all scrub together, and you can feel it through the shoe. You can see the goats around Paul's trailer. He's got them fenced in but they still make it stink. This whole holler smells like goats. Deddy said to stay in the car and I said that Paul had the good suckers and Deddy cussed and said he would get me one if I would just sit still for a minute. He slammed the car door when he got out; the car felt so empty then. The seats felt so cold when I ran my hand across them. I saw that fancy ruler with the green water and the bubble in it in his side of the floor board. I started to get it, but I was afraid Deddy would come back and not give me a sucker. So I looked around Paul's trailer. There were birds in the trees, and one flew past the hood and by the windshield and scared me. There's a crack in the dashboard by the vent, too. It has this brown stuff in it and it feels all fuzzy when you run your finger across it. It's so cold outside. I bet those goats get cold, too. Deddy says they got fur on them like Bruno and that's why they can stay outside at Christmas, but I don't see how they can't be cold. Even Bruno gets ice on him sometimes. He's a chow and Deddy says he's full blooded, and that's why he's got a purple belly. Then I saw Deddy come out of Paul's door and slam the storm door back so hard it made a scraping sound on

the trailer. He got back in the car and I asked him if he got me a sucker and he said Paul was a son of a bitch and no he didn't. Momma don't get mad when Deddy cusses, but she'll whoop me with her flip-flop if I do it. She says that Ernie might start sayin' it like he said "fun" that time. He must have said that fifty times a day last year. Momma said she's glad he grew out of it, and I am, too. Deddy was looking real mean, and he wasn't saying much to me now. I hope I didn't make him mad when I asked for a sucker. I like Paul, though. He's always nice to me. I asked him why he's mad at Paul, and then Deddy said he's got a damn good mind to beat the hell out of him. He said that it's because he won't let him borrow some Christmas money. He said that it would be a cold day when Erma Jean bought us Christmas. But I don't see why he's so mad; my fingers are still numb. Then Deddy got real quiet again. He must've not said anything for five whole minutes. All I could hear was the tires and that noise under the hood that Deddy called a rod knocking; he was thinking. Then he started talking again and asked me real nice if I wanted to get a coke and a candy bar and I told him yeah if we stopped I wanted a Dr. Pepper. He said we would stop at Buddy Johnson's on the way to the house. Then a couple of minutes later Deddy pulled into the parking lot of the store. Then he did something real strange. He put his hand on my head and it was so hard and big and cold and almost fit over my head just about. Then he told me he loved me, and looked me straight in the eyes for a long time. He reached under the seat and got something, but he already opened the door and was getting' out before I could see it. Deddy sure was gone for a long

time. It was so long I think we were the only ones there. Everyone else was probably at home in front of the heater. When he came back he got right in the car and put his hammer under the seat. I wonder if he built Mr. Buddy some cabinets like he did Uncle Steve. He got my Dr. Pepper and candy bar out of a real crinky brown paper bag. It was real big, and you could smell the fresh paper sack when he opened it. There was a fifty dollar bill stuck to the side of the Dr. Pepper -he snatched it off real quick. I never seen Deddy with that much money before. But I didn't drink the Dr. Pepper right away. It was already so cold out and my hands were already numb and the bottle was wet. Deddy pulled up our driveway and parked by the lawn mower. I got out and saw all the grass clippings on it. It was all caked up in a puddle of water on the part that covers the blade and then Deddy said not to get my good pants dirty so I went on in the house with him. I went back to me and Ernie's room and got out that firetruck to play with. I could hear Ernie in Momma's room. I could see him through the doorway; he was playing with some army men he got out of the toy box. Then I heard someone beating on the door. Momma opened the door and I could hear a radio talking and he was calling her m'am and it sure was cold with the door open. I think that it was a D.A.R.E. officer like officer Jim at school. He started talking to Momma real serious and then she started yelling at Deddy and he was yelling at Momma and Ernie was screaming and biting on the back of his hand and I put my firetruck up and then it got real quiet, and all I could hear was Momma crying.