

Birmingham, Alabama – February 18, 2003

A couple of blocks over from my studio is Morris Avenue, which is a cobbled narrow street, with narrow sidewalks which are also cobbled. It is almost an alley, running between old high medieval looking brick buildings, two or three stories, metal grates on the windows and dark with grime and age. Most of the buildings are empty. Through the dirty windows you can see long narrow empty high ceiling rooms that fifty years ago were someone's tobacco store or shoemaker's shop.

Halfway down the block is the Peanut Depot, which has been around for years. It's just a man and his helper in a big empty storefront with nothing but a wooden counter, half dozen big antique industrial cauldrons in which they roast the nuts, and scattered behind them in the gloom 100 pound bags of raw peanuts. They sell peanuts in brown paper bags to the office workers from around the corner, waiting in line on the bare concrete floors, looking at the grim brick walls until their turn.

One day I walked down there and turning into the street I saw a gaggle of girls dressed in ballerina costumes, sequins and tutus and their hair swept up and pinned to emphasize the graceful line of the neck. I thought 'there must be a dance studio next to the peanut place.'

And as I got closer to the girls, bright and slender on the gray cobblestones, they appeared to be thirteen or fourteen, the half dozen of them in a bright flock. But as I came even closer I saw that they were all smoking cigarettes, and when I finally stood before them I saw the painted faces and raw red lipstick of young women in their twenties, with hard faces and the bodies of adolescents. There was no dance studio next to the peanut store, in fact the building is otherwise empty. I don't know where they came from, there on the street.

I went in to get my bag of dry roasted and I came out and walked through the haze of smoke, through the rouged small crowd of them, catching a mascara-ed eye and then past them and down the street. Before I turned the corner I looked back. They were still there. I don't know where they came from or where they went or why they were there. It was surreal as Fellini, all the more so in this faded industrial southern city

which is nothing if not welded to the reality of time and loss and the reckoning of old sins.

But there they were. I never saw them again, and when I asked the peanut vendors, they looked at each other, shrugged and asked how many bags I wanted.