

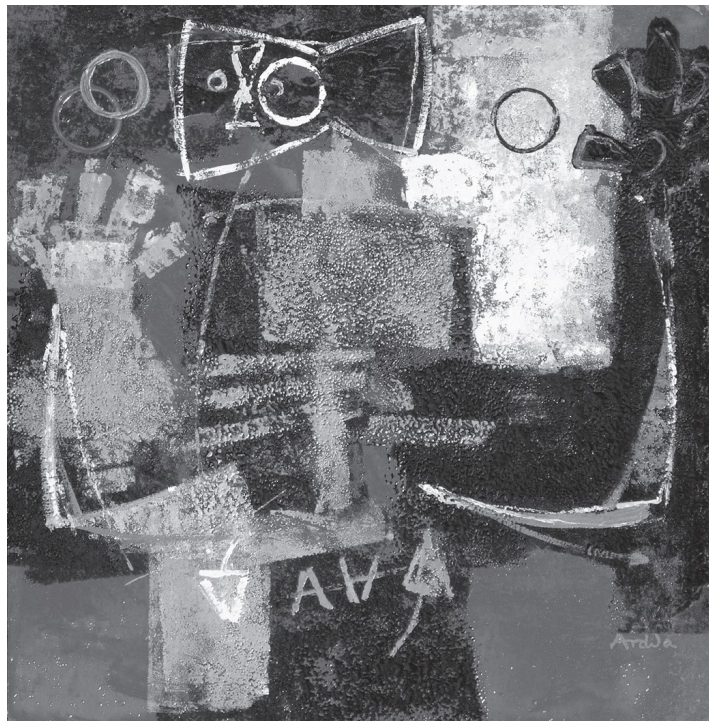
**2012 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE WINNER***Last Retreat to Topsail Island***BY MARK SMITH-SOTO**

—for Bruce, Lyn, Tom, and Vince

So we go down to the beach again, bow heads  
to the regimen of sun and wind, seagulls touching  
wing to wing and shrieking into the waves  
their ragged syllables, to this wide spell of ocean  
that over and over has returned us here to grow  
together, even as we grow old and into literature –  
we think there is a reason why the sunset stamps  
the end of day so prettily, something out of a book,  
all five of us here again, our long walks courting  
the wide camaraderie of the sea.

We drape arms over shoulders into a ritual hug,  
our ritual net against the riptide of the years,  
believing that little we manage to accomplish  
will matter as much as this now, here, held fast,  
days of Rilke, Rumi and Yeats, joking, punning  
ruthlessly, sandpiping along the shore for shells  
to bring home the murmur of the sea, telling  
sad stories on ourselves that laughter punctuates  
and purifies, our silhouettes along the sand  
like stakes of shadow leaning from the pier.

And so, now, here, blue and gold concomitance  
of sea and sand calling to us through the open windows,  
cross-legged on the floor, sprawled on a flowered couch,  
some of us fat and all of us fatuous, full of intentions  
more lordly than likely, we exchange our goodbyes,  
so many Sunday fools kidding, arguing, opining,  
allowing the moment to be happy, never more  
ourselves than right now, rising together to sing old  
songs we long made ours, hurrying down one last time  
to where the horizon blows its kiss over the sea.



*Gnomom* (Lithography, ink on hardboard wood, 15.7x15)  
by Luis German Ardila

Upon selecting Mark Smith-Soto's poem to receive the 2012 James Applewhite Poetry Prize, James Applewhite wrote:

This beach poem brings its conversational, rhythmically measured lines out of an informal context of waves and sand and old friendships. This mix of the casual and the learned especially fits a balancing of things ordinary and things crucial. This group on vacation has been together many times; this "once more" thus seems only usual. Still, there are subtle signs of time passing, a sense on the part of this literate, sophisticated speaker that for all of her or his knowledge, the things taken for granted are really uniquely precious – that those who think of "Rilke, Rumi and Yeats" are like everyone else, subject to endings as well as

beginnings and middles. The conclusion of the poem condenses this synthesis of the quotidian and the artful, with the group singing ". . . old / songs we long made ours . . ." – which may also have been poems. Then the landscape is made almost to mourn. But it is a more loving, a less definitive end than in the pastoral elegy. As the ensemble go down "one last time" toward the surf-line, "to where the horizon blows its kiss over the sea," the sense of this ending is not of the last one, in spite of the poem's title. But the remaining meetings are made wondrous, for not being endless. Like these last lines, the poem as a whole is excellent, beautifully crafted, unselfconsciously eloquent. I am proud to name it as winner of the contest that bears my name."