THE AVENUE

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southern

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to sojourner truth.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Thank you for being here. This is the fourth iteration of *The Avenue*. The theme for this edition of the journal is "Southern," and as such, it makes sense to say something about this theme, this word that can have so many different meanings, depending on who you ask.

Baltimore is a city that sits awkwardly on the north-south divide that seems so comfortable for much of the rest of the East Coast. It's a city whose charm, whose warmth, and whose hospitality could accommodate a southern drawl; a city where neighbors say hello and someone always knows your brother, or your cousin, or your grandma. But it's also a city that has sprung from ships, where steel and factories, railroads and industry shaped streets and outlooks, and opened Baltimore up to the rest of the world. It's a city whose location, too south to be north, and too north to be south, has proved both an asset and a detriment.

When the theme for this edition of *The Avenue* was chosen, there was some discussion about what was intended. What did we, as the staff of *The Avenue*, mean by choosing this theme? Did we want to celebrate "Southern?" Denigrate it? Did we see it as a source of pride? Shame? Did we know what we were getting into? Because it is a theme that could be, as it has been for our city, problematic.

As has been the case with past issues of *The Avenue*, those fears subsided as we read through the work of our contributors. The writers whose work is contained in "Southern" have been bold, and kind, and bewildering, and beautiful in their interpretations of what "southern" is, and what it means to them. In this process, we as a staff have been humbled by the quality of work that has been sent to us, and we leave it to the pieces that are here, in the journal, to speak. We hope that you are delighted, and challenged, and as amazed by these works as we were.

Alexander Stathes

LONE STAR MILLIONS

Chance Lee

Mom cared about only one thing in 1993: the cult of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. She watched every story and read every article on "Wacko, Texas," as she called it. Every summer, we visited my grandmother Mimi and cousin Lauren in Fort Worth. To figure out how close they were to Wacko, I found Texas in my fourth-grade classroom's atlas. With my hand, I measured the distance between the compound under siege and my grandmother's house. Mimi was only a thumb's length away. That seemed awfully close to a cult.

"You know what Waco stands for?" Mom asked after school.

"What?" I responded.

"We Ain't Comin' Out!" Her laughter bounced off the walls.

I laughed too, even though I didn't understand why they wouldn't come out. The compound burned in April, soon after Mom's birthday, killing 76 people inside.

*

In the shallow water, I pretended the plastic pool was so deep that my feet couldn't touch the bottom. Lauren soaked nearby, her face turned toward the midday sun, her eyes hidden behind shades. The back of my neck felt hot. I wanted ice cream to cool me off in a way shallow sun-warmed pool water could not.

I knew Mimi didn't have any ice cream in her freezer. I'd have to go to Roark's, the convenience store down the street, but Mom didn't allow me to leave Mimi's yard, not even with Lauren accompanying me. "The neighborhood has changed since I was girl," Mom had said. "It's dangerous now." I knew she meant I had to watch out for cults.

I stood and stepped out of the pool. The hot concrete burned the bottoms of my feet. Mom and Mimi sat at the kitchen table.

"Would you go to Roark's with us to buy ice cream?" I asked my mom.

She said she would. Lauren and I dried off, then waited outside in the front yard.

Sweat ran down my back. An anthill half as tall as me leaned against a juicy Texas cactus. I disliked the cactus because I'd had a grudge against cacti ever since I threw a beach ball at one when I was four. I'd never had good aim, and the cactus won. But I had no qualms with the ants, although the size of their mound intimidated me. "Everything is bigger in Texas," Mom always said. Even the ants themselves looked bigger. A rivulet of plump black critters dribbled out one of many pinprick holes in the sandy surface, trickling into the tall grass in search of food.

When Mom came outside, the three of us walked to Roark's. Inside the store, I leaned into the long low freezer, the cold air chilling the sweat from my eyebrows, and rummaged through Firecrackers and ice cream sandwiches until I emerged with a Push-Up pop. I tore Fred Flintstone's stupid goofy face from the wrapper, pushed up the soft orange cylinder, and held its cold sweetness on my tongue.

Mom paid for our ice cream, and bought a Star-Telegram with an article about Wacko, Texas. I still didn't understand why the FBI had attacked them. Why did they want those people to come out? "Do you know what Waco stands for?" Mom asked Mr. Roark at the counter.

I knew the punchline, so I wandered around the store looking at candy and capsule machines.

Back at Mimi's, Mom showed us something else she'd bought at Roark's: five little cardboard rectangles. Each one roughly resembled the Texas state flag. "They're scratch lottery tickets," mom said. I'd never seen a scratch ticket before. We didn't have the lottery at home.

"Kids aren't supposed to scratch them," Mom said. "But I'll let you."

She gave two tickets to Lauren, two tickets to me, and she kept one for herself. The lotto's goal was to scratch off the six stars on the card. If three amounts matched, you won the prize. It could be up to a million bucks. If we won the jackpot, Mom would claim it and we would split it. Mom would never have to work again, and I could buy all the video games I ever wanted.

Mom gave us each a quarter, and we got to scratching. The sound of the coin scraping the paper sent shivers through my nerves in a bad way, but the irritation was overruled by the thrill of doing something illegal, and the anticipation of millions.

The stars let me down. Both my tickets went bust. So did mom's. I blew the gray dust off the table and hoped Mimi wouldn't catch me dirtying her carpeted kitchen floor.

Lauren cheered. She won two whole dollars.

"Let's use the money to buy more tickets," Mom said.

Lauren and I were excited. Mom's idea was foolproof. We'd keep buying tickets with our winnings until we hit the jackpot.

"But it's too hot for another walk today," Mom said. We would have to wait to be millionaires.

*

Lauren and I played Slapjack on Mimi's glass-topped kitchen table in front of the air conditioner. I turned over a Jack and she slapped it. She turned over a Jack, I slapped it. I listened to the drone of the a.c. unit as I waited for another Jack to appear. The game wouldn't end.

"I'll teach you to play poker," Mom said. "Texas Hold 'Em."

Lauren retrieved a set of poker chips from her room. Mom shuffled cards and dealt them. We played with our hands face-up until we learned all the combinations and what beats what. Three of a kind plus a pair equals a full house. A flush beats a straight.

We soon played with our cards close to our chests. The plastic discs clattered on the glass as we tossed our bets into a pile on the table. I got excited when I thought I had a winning hand.

"Practice your poker face," Mom said.

We played until the phone rang, and mom got up to answer it. I tried to shuffle the cards, but they shot out of my clumsy hands and scattered on the table. I struggled to pick them up. With my

bitten fingernails, I found it impossible to peel some of them off the glass.

"Ricky died," Mom said after hanging up the phone.

I stopped picking up cards. The only Ricky I knew was Ricky Ricardo from I Love Lucy marathons on Nick at Nite. Mom had told me already Ricky Ricardo was dead. So was Lucy.

"Who's Ricky?" I asked.

Mom said this Ricky was her friend. A friend she'd had when she was my age. I hadn't ever thought of my mom being my age. I looked at my pale knees beneath the glass and ran my fingers along the curly-cue embellishments around the table's edge. Mimi's table was made of a hard, scratchy metal, like iron or steel, rough to the touch. The intricate designs appeared to have no beginning, no end.

"Go play outside," Mom told us.

We left our chips on the table and went into the back yard, sliding the screen shut behind us.

*

On the day of Ricky's funeral, Mom took her blue Hyundai to a car wash then parked it on the curb, away from the crate myrtle tree, which often wept sticky sap and pink petals onto the windshield and hood. I learned later it was actually called crepe myrtle, but I thought everyone said crate myrtle. Crate myrtle made more sense to me then, because crates were wooden things, and wood comes from trees. Crepes were pancakes, thinner versions of the fluffy ones dyed with food coloring that Mimi made us for breakfast on weekends.

I dressed in khaki pants and a button-up shirt and went with Mom to the church.

Ricky's dead body lay inside an open casket. Open casket, I thought, like an open-face sandwich. People lined up to view the body as they would line up for a buffet or salad bar. The only items missing were plastic trays and a sneeze guard over Ricky's corpse.

Mom said I didn't have to look at Ricky, but I decided to take a peek. I'd seen plenty of dead people on TV, and I wondered if a dead person in real life would look the same.

Would he have bugs sticking out of him? Worms or little white maggots? A ghastly look on his face?

We reached the casket and I looked inside. He was a bearded man wearing a simple suit and tie. He looked older than my mom, even though she'd said they were the same age. His eyes were closed. His hands crossed at his chest. A ring with a red gemstone adorned one finger. Another finger was marred by a red scratch on one knuckle. Around his edges, his skin was tinted green, like a cartoon zombie. But he was still and harmless. His expression was flat and still, an eternal poker face.

On the way home, I asked, "Why was Ricky green?"

"Maybe it's because of the embalming."

"What's that?"

"Some sort of chemical to keep him looking like himself," she explained. "But not exactly the same."

I didn't know what he looked like when he was alive, so I had no idea what was different. Or what he would look like if he hadn't been embalmed. I figured he wasn't green when he was alive. Either he turned green in death, or turning green had killed him.

Mom wanted to go out to dinner that evening. I stood by her car and waited for her to unlock the door. When she did, I slid into the backseat and buckled my seatbelt. Mimi and Lauren got in and buckled up too. As Mom cranked the engine, I felt an itch on my ankle. I reached down to scratch myself underneath my white crew socks. My probing finger didn't bring relief. My ankle itched more. Then it burned. I tugged up the cuff of my slacks to look.

Ants!

Ants on my ankles. Ants on my pants. Ants on my shoes. Ants in the ridges of my socks. They buried their thick black heads in the ribbed cotton. Their tenacious jaws chewed through the material to reach my skin.

I screamed. Mimi got out of the car and opened the door. I stuck my legs outside the car, as far away from the rest of my body as possible, while she brushed the ants away. When the ants were cleared away, Mimi returned to the passenger seat. Mom pulled

away from the curb. I sat in the back, my knees pulled up to my chest, my legs away from the handful of angry ants snapping their jaws in the floorboard.

At dinner, Mom told Mimi about Ricky's funeral. He was Mom's age. "Too young to die," they agreed.

"I don't know what that scratch was on his finger," Mom said a few times at the table. "I don't know what that could have been from."

To me, it looked like a paper cut, but to Mom, it was a big mystery, as if that scrape had caused his death. I imagined that he scraped his finger, turned green, and then he died. Or maybe I had it out of order.

I changed clothes after dinner. The red marks on my ankles, left by the ants' jaws, hurt when I tugged off my socks. I decided to poke the anthill. Those ants might not have even been the ones that bit me, but I would still have my revenge.

Beneath the crate myrtle tree I found a stick thinner than my skinny arm, but longer. I creeped toward the anthill as if the ants might hear me and mount a defense. Its sturdy packed dirt appeared to be propping up the cactus. The setting sun cast a slender cactus-shaped shadow on the yard.

I poised myself for the assault, ready to jab and stab if I needed to, and pointed the stick's sharp tip toward the giant mound. It gave no resistance. The dirt crumbled from my tentative poke. Ants gushed out in a liquid stream, a cascade of black blood. The angry creatures spiraled up the stick toward my hand. My mouth gaped open. If I stood there a second longer the ants would cover my arm, flow into my mouth, and eat me from the inside. I'd be embalmed by ants.

I closed my mouth, stifled a scream, dropped the stick, and backed away. The stick began to disappear in the writhing black mass.

At a safe distance on the curb, I realized the ants made no noise. Their hill should buzz like a hive. But the ants surged silently. So many millions swarmed beneath its surface, invisible until I broke the mound.

*

Lauren, Mom, and I walked to Roark's to trade in Lauren's winning two-dollar ticket for two more. She warned us that we couldn't let him know that we were the ones who scratched the tickets. We'd get in trouble if he knew. I wondered if the FBI would descend on Mimi's house like they did in Wacko, hold us hostage, burn the house down with us inside.

On our way to the store, Mom told us a story about herself and her friends who ran down these same streets way back when the world seemed, to me, to be in black and white. Now Ricky was dead. Grey and green.

"Ricky and I went to the store once," Mom said as we walked to Roark's. I wondered if Mr. Roark was there back then, when mom was a girl, his hair fuller and less gray. "I had a nickel. I got a little knife from the toy machine, the one with the little plastic balls in it. A little green plastic knife, couldn't a been more than this big." She held up her hand, a space of about an inch between her thumb and forefinger. "I brought it to school. I was in the first or second grade. And the teacher took it from me. She took my little knife. She put it in her desk. What did she think I would do with it? It was just a little plastic knife. It never would have hurt nobody."

"Where is it now?" Lauren asked.

"She never gave it back. I bet she's still got it," Mom said. I didn't know why the little plastic knife was so important to her.

"Maybe we can find another one," I said.

"I don't want another one. I want mine back," Mom said.

I thought that if Mom still had her lucky knife, she would scratch our tickets and we'd win. I searched the capsule machines at Roark's. They were filled with high-bounce balls, sticky hands, and tiny plastic rings. I found no knives.

Mom cashed in Lauren's winning ticket, trading the two dollars for two more. Lauren and I stood quietly nearby, trying not to let on that we were the ones who'd scratched the ticket. We were the ones who would win the jackpot.

"Have a nice day," he said, handing Mom two new tickets.

He hadn't figured out our secret. We'd tricked him with our poker faces.

Outside the store, Mom clutched the tickets in her hand. I skipped beside her on the road back to Mimi's house. In her yard, I noticed my stick lying in the grass near the dirt mound. The ants had patched the hole and disappeared inside their home as if its walls had never been breached. I decided I wouldn't bother them again, and I hoped they wouldn't hurt me in return.

At Mimi's kitchen table, Lauren and I used our lucky quarters to scrape at our cardboard fortunes. The stars disappeared one by one, revealing numbers beneath. One dollar. One thousand dollars. Ten. None of the amounts matched. Scratching the stars gave us only silver dust on the glass.

SUWANNEE TEARS

Grace Ebner

On April 7 girls
rained from the sky.
Dead like flies,
a plague of bodies.

Falling through the air, they
landed interlocked below the trees.
A plague of bodies,
mosaic of fertile skin.

The Florida forest was covered,
and men gawked
at this mosaic of girls.
They tried to touch but

then men retreated
as lilacs bloomed out of vaginas.
They couldn't touch
the bodies transforming with flowers.

Lilacs bloomed out of eyeballs,
nostrils, mouths, and ears,
the bodies exploding with purple.
Petals so thick, their skin was hidden.

Nostrils, mouths, and ears,
cascaded from the clouds.
Petals so thick, their bodies were protected
and the April rain rhapsodized a promise.

WALKING BACK FROM THE PEPPER TREE IN KNOXILLE, 1987

Kenneth Pobo

I've had three martinis, not drunk
but a bit flouncy, I've smoked
too many Newports, and heard Patsy
sing "Crazy" maybe six times
too many while guys shoot pool
in the room next to where the bar is,
I'm sitting there alone wishing I could
make eye contact, smile, know
I look like "Don't bother him,
he must be grouchy" when I'm just nervous,
not sure why, if only someone would
talk to me, not happening, so I think about
Addams Family reruns, the one where
they go moonbathing, a perfectly fine way
to spend a night, and I pick myself up,
walk home, night air butterfly soft until

a red truck comes by and men yell out
faggot and queer, I quickly turn down
a side street hoping they don't
follow me, they don't this time,
and my apartment looks like an eagle's nest
as I enter it breathing hard
from a sprint.

IN BIRMINGHAM

Lynne Price

In Birmingham
the last Klansmen killed
is killed black

In Birmingham
the last Klansmen killed
is killed black

hear murder
in church
Alabama

speaking out
won't attend

to life
planted outside
Movement

KKK member convicted in Birmingham church bombing up for parole

Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr. is the last surviving Klansmen imprisoned for attack that killed 4 girls in 1963

Alabama's parole board is deciding whether to free a one-time Ku Klux Klansman convicted in a church bombing that killed four black girls more than 50 years ago. Board members have scheduled a Wednesday hearing for Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr.

The 76-year-old Blanton is the last surviving KKK member convicted of murder in the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963.

Alabama marks 50 years since KKK church bombing

Opponents are speaking out against Blanton's possible release after just 15 years in prison. The inmate won't be in attendance during the hearing.

Blanton was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2001 for being part of a group of Klansmen who planted a bomb outside the church during the civil rights movement.

Two other former KKK members were convicted of murder and-died behind bars.

ASHEVILLE SUMMER

Mike Lee

for Donna Rich

A friend of mine that I'd known since second grade died. I got the news from my mother, who took the call and relayed it to me when I returned home from looking all day for a job. Ed died the previous night, exactly at midnight, an interesting ending for a young life lacking in accomplishment, and I felt a little sad about that, but at the same time wondered if the passing had meaning. I was nineteen, and thought like that often enough to think I may make something of myself, unlike Ed, who was one of those kids who remained in the back of everything: the bus to school, in the classroom for the eight years I attended with him, and following that one year in high school, he shuffled through to graduation, finishing fourth from the bottom, and onward to a sacking job at a supermarket until the previous Thursday when he was killed in a car accident, which, typically, occurred while he sat in the back of a car. Thrown against the roof, and pronounced dead for the vultures at midnight on the road where years before we shared the back seat of a school bus for those eight years riding to and from our elementary school on orange buses, changed to yellow in third grade.

The sudden demise of Ed was expected, I thought, when I received the news. I think it was preordained, me being Catholic and all, but I did not cry. Mom did that for me. She didn't like Ed, but it was a nice gesture on her part. He was dead, and what mattered was that someone died, particularly someone who lectured me since childhood not to hang out with losers like him. Mourning the dead even though they were disliked when alive was

also a Catholic thing, and very Irish as well, which added another reason why I should move away from Mom at the first opportunity. This required a paycheck and when I return I resolved to start looking for a job.

Feeling sympathetic, Mom was kind enough to pay for the bus ticket. I was responsible for the expenses, and fortunately I had money saved up from my last job at the gas station, so I took the two-day trip from Austin to Asheville, North Carolina, to say good-bye to my old friend Ed, who in reality I had not spoken to in four years. He didn't write either, but I grew up with the boy, and I wanted to get away from my own grappling with failure and escape into my past, if only ever so briefly. I felt a twinge of guilt at using a death as an excuse to take a break from my frustrating present, but it passed by the time I arrived in North Carolina.

Greyhound takes you everywhere, from bum-ridden station to station, from Austin to Houston, changing buses in New Orleans at the grand art deco bus and train station; from there to Birmingham, Alabama, passing the South both old and new, fleeting images out of the window like Robert Frank photographs in black and white in my mind, the road to Atlanta and from there Greenville, then northeast on Interstate 26 into the mountains, rising until Asheville, Coxe Avenue, and another bum-ridden bus station.

No one was there to greet me. I had to call from the payphone for my great aunt to pick me up, and waited an hour until she arrived in her late model Mercury, taking me from the city to where she lived off of Interstate 40. She and her husband, my great uncle Walter, lived in a two-story garage apartment on a plot of land on the side of a mountain. Next to the house was the mobile home where my grandparents lived. They had the extra room, my old bedroom from when my mother and I once lived with them before we had the money to find another place. I was going to stay there, and I knew the sign on the door remained: "This will always be Mitchell's room." If only it were true.

The days were longer in the mountain summer, and it was light when we arrived. On the way, my great aunt and I talked. I liked her, she was eleven years younger than my grandmother and

unlike her, Aunt Marie was outwardly quiet, and younger than her 70 years. She wasn't the total opposite of my grandmother, who practiced the fine art of passive-aggressive to the point my mother could barely stand her, much less live in the same region, but Aunt Marie still kept her sharp edges honed. I was never sure if she liked me all that much, but validation from my family was a failed aspiration from early childhood. I gave up by age nine without regret.

It was pleasant, not terse, though by the combination of selective dissemination of information, avoiding touchy subjects regarding the relationship with Mom, and outright lies about going to college, Aunt Marie and I had a pretty good drive to their mountainside lair.

Upon arrival, my grandparents were waiting for me, standing on the concrete patio in front of their mobile home. Even though my grandmother was the queen of snipe, she truly loved me, having been the last grandchild, and the closest in attitude to her. However, we had our differences. She spoke five languages fluently; I flunked Latin and barely made it out of introductory Spanish II my junior year. But we shared a thirst for knowledge, and a wicked sense of humor—usually at someone's expense. Schadenfreude would best describe what we found funny. When I was 11, I talked her into buying me a copy of The National Lampoon. She read it, took it away from me, saying I was too young for it, then later I caught her in her worn padded rocking chair laughing her ass off at Son-O-God Meets Zimmerman. We bonded well, that old lady and I; she taught me a few useful survival skills in the time I lived with her.

By contrast, my grandfather was a coronary away from death, and we didn't speak much, though at times I would steal an occasional cigar from him. He stood, nodded in acknowledgement of my existence, and shook my hand. The old man was affable, but he was always wary of me. I surmised I was too much like his wife, which was an issue also with my mother, who alternately was exasperated and sometimes disgusted with me since we moved to Texas four years ago. I think she thought getting her away from my grandmother would spark a great change and spurt of personal

growth. Instead I grew clever in wriggling out of situations I did not like, generally lazier and more independent, the latter of which she could never abide.

After dinner, I began calling my old buddies. In the years after I moved away I had kept in touch with Frank, who got into punk rock with me shortly before I moved away, and ran a fanzine that was inconsistent, even when I wrote for it, so I telephoned him first. The rest of the guys didn't matter to me; in the letters Frank and I exchanged, he generally disparaged them as the same stunted group of freaks we knew as kids. Frank was smarter than the rest, having received a partial scholarship to Emory, and was already getting involved in the music scene and was beginning—he claimed—to establish a reputation there. At least there was someone I could relate to for the next few days. We agreed he would drive over and pick me up in the morning.

After getting off the phone, I went to bed, listening to the sounds of the whippoorwills.

I awoke the next morning at eight and showered. Grandma already made breakfast, my favorite: cheese biscuits with cream gravy and scrambled eggs with bacon. The viewing was set for the afternoon, and I dressed in a vintage charcoal gray suit I bought at a used clothing store in downtown Austin, and black pointed-toe Beatle boots. I was going to look out of place, but cool. When I left Asheville, I had hair past my shoulders, and these days my hair was close-cropped, after the style of Paul Weller of The Jam.

I am not like everyone else, even back in Texas, I am not, I thought, as I straightened my tie. I came out of the bedroom, to see my grandmother shaking her head.

"You look like a hoodlum," she said.

"It would fly in court," I said. She smiled. I knew she didn't mean it, maybe, yet grandma always found something to say to cut me down. Mom, at least, would be complementary even when I knew she did not mean it, but again, I stopped looking for validation from these people. Indeed, I don't think I was in a stage where I looked for it from anyone. No wonder my dad left before I was born. This family was not for the weak-minded; a tough audience to play to, these fucked-up Irish.

I left the trailer, walking the curving downhill gravel track to the I-40 access road and turned east toward the overpass, and waited for Frank to pick me up. We had agreed on 9:30 and I was twenty minutes early. I did not want to hang out with grandma passive-aggressive and aggressively passive grandpa, so I brought a pen, a small notebook and a copy of Doctor Sax by Kerouac to keep me company. I leaned against the stop sign, lit a cigarette, and opened the Kerouac. Mom gave it to me last Christmas; one positive I admitted to regarding my mother was she always managed to come up with the good gifts. On the other hand, though, there was an emotional price to be paid, namely her going on about how hard she worked for it, implying how lazy I am, though I gave her money to help pay the rent since I was fifteen.

As for Doctor Sax, I could understand Jackie's mixing of personal history and the daydream mythmaking of childhood. I did a lot of it while living here in the valley, surrounded by the Blue Ridge. No man in a slouch hat and cape, or a world dream snake, a phoenix coming to the rescue, but I had my fair share of daydreams, and I now seem to have better memories of the fantasies I conjured in my childhood than I had of my actual experiences. The imagination held its power as a balm, and protected me through quite a few lonely years before I began to really make friends. I was a shy boy, indeed, and living in the country, with the nearest child my age at that time almost two miles away, it made it difficult for me to be included in the group. Over time, it changed, but I had my escape with my mind's eye, and as I read Doctor Sax unfold, I felt the tug of my own long-ago little self, wanting to pull me into the woods for fanciful adventure.

But my suit was clean, and Italian tailored. I closed the paperback and stubbed out my cigarette, waiting for Frank to arrive.

*

Frank drove up in his 1976 bicentennial whorehouse red Camero, all red, including the interior. He had described it to me in a letter he wrote a few months before, so I was forewarned, and it was as tacky as I had expected. The family had money, and they indulged. Before I moved to Texas, Frank's family was the wealthiest people

I ever knew, and though they didn't outwardly show it, they certainly lived better than everyone else I grew up with.

That there is a lot of poverty in the area is an understatement. Frank and I went to school with kids who slept on porches in cold water shacks that still had outhouses. They were few, and fewer remaining as we grew up, but they were out there; poor mountaineers who worked at the local Beacon Blankets mill sweeping the floor, or worked occasional day laborer jobs when seasonably available. But many of them were only occasionally employed, and there were a lot of fucked up kids to deal with. One was a raven-haired girl named Cassandra. She was old for her age, and had a thing for Frank in junior high, but I assumed it was because he came from money, and she was dirt poor, coming from the wrongest side of the railroad tracks. Usually, her kind went for the bad boys of her kind, the sons of the truckers, the alcoholic fathers and floor sweepers at the plant, but Cassandra had ambition.

She was smart and a very angry little girl, often prone to rage, which manifested in sudden fits of violence. For example, God forbid you ever called her Cassie. That got Danny Blankenship a scar on his cheek from a vicious scratching in fourth period social studies in eighth grade. I knew she would show up but was going to let Frank do the talking. I wasn't going to ask about her. I really did not want to.

We decided that before picking up an old friend of ours and driving over to the Venus Café to have a trucker's breakfast, we would angle off the highway to the old U.S. 70 to pass by our old elementary school. They were building a new one across the street, and we could see they were about to tear down the old brick annex next to the main building. I had third and fourth grade classes there, and it was where the gymnasium was located. Frank pulled into the macadam driveway and passed slowly by. Behind the trailers where our third grade homeroom remained, and the scaffolding on the old building about to be demolished, we could discern the twin trailers from our eighth grade classes in 1975-76.

We kicked holes in the walls, and remembered when Ed karate-kicked his desk in half during a particularly special moment. Oh,

those were some good memories from those times; not really, but they were there. Cassandra was a big part of them. I remembered her magenta mini dress, with poinsettias, and the big clomping platform heels that she wore with them. It was practically the only thing she wore, besides other jeans and a dashiki she wore well. Frank told me at the time they were dating that they were the only two outfits she owned after she was released from juvenile detention from the Evaluation Center down the road. She lived with her aunt back then, and there was never any money. Frank joked she didn't need clothes, and unlike most of the fuck stories the boys told around the table in the cafeteria, Frank never lied. I didn't either, which is why I spoke next to nothing, nodding along to daring tales of boys bullshitting about their prowess with girls. Yes, boys and girls—never believed a word, but Frank did not talk about Cassandra, other than he referred to her as his tigress, untamed, and that she was.

"Not much to see here, but we may have our first ghost lurking on the baseball field," Frank said, as we turned past it on our right.

"He certainly could throw the ball far," I said. I remembered the hornet's nest that got hit by an errant softball Randy Blankenship hit high into the trees where the stoners toked up. They certainly got the worst of it, running out from behind the trees as the hornets came after them with their very worst. Undaunted, Ed ran into the woods and fetched the ball, and threw it in past the stoners and it bounced into my glove by home plate. Randy couldn't run worth a shit, and almost got him but missed him by a foot, maybe two at the most. Ed had that good of an arm. Never figured out why he failed to try out for the Beacon factory little league; I managed to survive two non-consecutive years and still feel traumatized by being yelled at by the drunken, loser-ass coach the summer after sixth grade. So maybe that was why Ed never played. He was often the sensitive type.

"I now remember why I am grateful for leaving this place," I said.

"I will always remember," said Frank. "Thinking of New York, again?'

"Me? I always do. Not ready to go, though. I have to get my shit together in Austin, first."

"How's the writing going? You owe me some reviews, brother."

"You haven't sent the records to me, yet."

"I have them at my parents' house. Hate to change the subject, but we have to pick up Keith. Get prepared."

"That bad?"

"You'll see," Frank said, chucking a little. "We were the different ones. Keith turned out as well as was expected of him."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah—just be prepared."

We pulled onto US 70 and traveled west toward Asheville. US 70 had been the main drag for years until I-40 was built when we were kids. Already, the highway was in the beginning stages of neglect, despite it being a four-lane highway and the main road for the inhabitants in the Swannanoa valley; cracks appearing in the asphalt resembled spiderwebs created on acid and as I stared out the window, I saw the billboards were aging—they retained the same advertising that I remembered from before I had moved to Texas—and they were old back then. The decrepitude was so noted and I was at once depressed and grateful that I was so lucky to have gone from this place when I did. I do not know how I could have gone to high school in this part of the netherworld of Appalachia—and the sense of nowhere in decline that I now spied out the window of Frank's Camaro. It was just—endless to a vanishing point. Mom did herself a favor losing that last lab technician job, and having had to move us to Texas, where my half-sister lived and had lined Mom up with another gig. Otherwise, it would have been four years of the same last eight years. I wasn't Frank. He had money behind him, and that paved the road out of this place. I had no illusions for myself. Texas gave me a new start and I did okay with it, I suppose.

Frank turned off onto Riceville Road, a winding two-lane blacktop that passed by Warren Wilson College, and occasionally dotted with well-kept ranch style homes with big yards ending in the remaining farms in the area. After we passed the college, the road curved northward to a poorer area. The houses were older,

and I began seeing the mobile homes, already aging though I knew they were relatively recent additions to the area.

Frank knew the way all too well. Keith was his other best friend, though I never understood why. They had nothing in common except dirt weed and Black Sabbath, but I guess that was good enough for both of them. Keith's dad also made moonshine in a still way up on a mountain wood near the elementary school, and I recalled it wasn't bad once you scraped the corn scum from the top of the mason jars before drinking them.

Yes, Keith was very country. The suburban kids called them "grits," a term of derision, that I was on the receiving end of sometimes. However, they knew better than to call us hillbillies. That got your ass handed to you in the worst of ways. I recalled the family descended from the Patton's, who were the earliest settlers of the region. One of the Patton women married Davy Crockett, and she had a memorial stone in the lawn in front our elementary school.

It was silent in the car; neither of us interested in listening to music. As we turned off onto the dirt road, I knew we were stepping deeper into that rural poverty of our former classmates, and friends. Though I was not much better off than people like Keith, there was a difference. I left. He stayed. When we pulled into the driveway and saw the battered old mobile home, I saw what I had left behind and now had returned to. It was painful to witness, and I knew it was only about to get worse. There was nothing quite like staring into the abyss belonging to someone else.

Frank pulled to stop and turned off the ignition.

"I told you to be ready, didn't I?"

*

I never knew where Keith lived before I dropped him off after an all-nighter spent crashing an Owen High football game in eighth grade. I was too drunk to recall. The mobile home was white, with rust, and lacked skirting, with children's toys strewn about the dirt yard. A baby blue mid-60s Ford was parked at the end, its tailgate open, also with spots of rust. The steps were stacked cinderblocks.

We got out and made our way up the rock path leading to the cinderblocks when we heard a crash from inside the house, and the crying of a baby. Oh shit, Keith has a kid, I thought. Probably with Jenny, the tall, pretty girl I heard he was dating after I moved to Texas.

"Jenny?"

"Oh, fuck yeah," said Frank. "She's at work, though, so she isn't coming along. His mother is supposed to watch the child while we're out."

"How old is the kid?"

"I don't know. Eight months, I think." Frank stepped up and knocked hard on the door.

"Hell, I'll be there!" Keith shouted from behind the door. "Gimmie a minute. I'm still getting dressed."

"Take your time," I said.

"I don't want to go inside," said Frank. "I went by yesterday. The place is a real shithole."

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," I said. Keith had potential in sports, but he smoked way too much dope and got caught so many times that I had heard from Frank he wasn't even allowed to try out for the Owen High football team.

"Mama! Where's my tie?"

"It's hanging on the fridge door. It's where you left it after your brothers' bond hearing."

The baby started crying again.

Frank stepped off the cinderblocks and both of us couldn't help snickering. There for the grace of the almighty go I, knowing I would have shared Keith's depressing fate had I stayed in the valley. I was never athletic enough for sports, and academically constantly on the B track. I was in a bad crowd to begin with, and would have fallen into that empty space like so many of the kids I knew then have.

The door opened, and out stepped Keith. He didn't look the part of a complete stoner, and he was what we called courtroom cleaned up enough. He was still trying to finish fixing his tie, with his collar flipped up on one side.

"Hi boys, you know I never could get the hang of this," he said, while he shook Frank's hand.

"Oh, damn. Mitchell, don't tell me you went and gone punk rock, too."

"Yeah."

"I ain't listenin' to that shit in the car, am I?"

No, you won't," Frank said. "You can listen to whatever you want."

"Good, 'cause I positively hate that music." He sounded like a daddy already, I thought.

"Look in the box, Mitchell," said Frank. I opened the plastic case of cassettes nestled between the seats behind the stick shift.

"I come prepared for every occasion," said Frank, as we drove to US 70.

I looked over the selection and picked out Black Sabbath, Volume 4. Black Sabbath was agreeable to everyone, although I had not heard the record in several years. But I knew the music would bring us closer together.

The cassette started on side two with "Snowblind", appropriate for the mood as Tony Iommi's downtuned Gibson SG began grinding out the first notes. It took me somewhat to the shadows of memories from the mid-1970s, when we transitioned from good kids wanting to be bad to just plain bad, in some cases practically feral. Cassandra was one of the latter, along with quite a few others. Keith was just poor white trash, a typical cracker going nowhere, but he wasn't going to throw a cat in a Laundromat dryer or drop microdot into someone's drink. Cassandra did those things, which is why I did not ask Frank about her.

Frank pulled into the Venus Diner for our breakfast. I had already eaten so I ordered a coffee and scammed off their toast. They didn't mind, Frank was paying and ordered extra. For decades, the Venus had been around as a major truck stop for the eighteen-wheelers since before World War II, but was falling into hard times since Interstate 40 was constructed. The food was still good, and it was a great place to hang out before going into town for Ed's viewing. As I looked out the window I remembered back

to when we hung out in the landfill behind the trailer park, before wandering over to the city park and messing around the pool. It was a long walk down Azalea Road, but it was fun wandering, smoking cigarettes, acting goofy. I missed those days sometimes, despite knowing it was all going to end one way or another. We had grown to adulthood: legal to drink and now under Reagan, legal to get killed in a war that will start anytime soon. But I do not discuss politics, particularly with Keith around, but Frank knew what was going on. Always best to hold close to banalities.

The jukebox played Mac Davis. The song evoked a memory of going on vacation with my mother in Charleston. The summer of 1972 was a good time in music: Lou Reed, the Raspberries, the Hollies, Argent, Mouth and MacNeal. Yes, it was a good year. I was ten years old, reading Kamandi, the Last Boy on Earth and Mad. I discovered my favorite short story, There Will Be Soft Rains, by Ray Bradbury, and resolved to become a writer, an aspiration that is proving frustrating. That summer was when I noticed girls for the first time. Maybe ten years old was too young to care, but I am a caring boy growing to be a man. My first crush will likely be at the service, and I hope meeting up will not be complicated. I recall the Mouth and Macneal song: "And now it's not so long ago, that I said I love you, too." Hey, that's what I am living for, sliding back into this past, even for but a week. Not too sure this is a good idea, though.

"I can tell by your trembling smile," was a great line from that Mac Davis song. "Yeah, baby, baby don't get hooked on me." This evoked yet another teen memory, and I glance at Frank, guilt on my mind. I reached over to the pack of cigarettes on the table and lit one, watching as the US 70 traffic passes by.

We finished up, paid the bill and left, us boys in our funeral and criminal court hearing suits on our way to say a few hellos and offer up a final goodbye. Frank sees Cassandra and I see them all and then I am done.

I stared out the car window, silent.

SPELL TO GRANT ACCESS TO THE NEW ORLEANS BLACK HAT SOCIETY

Jacob Budenz

Pale star under black cloud,
flash of lightning framing the Venus fly trap at the north-
facing window, mugwort
to induce the dreams—

the moon is bigger over the Mississippi—

tourists in tortoise-shell
spectacles that traipse agog
through rows of flooded
mausoleums, making a spectacle
of rot. Pink skull on the fireplace,
faces of dybbuks nailed to the wall,

curtains
painted onto drapes
hung from wires wall-to-wall
in a shotgun bedroom (one-part privacy, two-
part glamour).

You step through the crooked door
on the side of the house, hop down
four feet, watch your step, leave
the sea drinking mountains, fall

into place with luck.

GRANDMA VINES

Bryonna Jay

"Pass me those Kents, girl."
Raspy twang dancing in the stale night
Ratty lace on the fringe of her periwinkle slip.

We see in yellow and some kinds of brown.
Struggling light riding on clouds
accompanied
by rich and heavy smoke
lingering in between the next
struck match.

Mama Vines can you tell me a story?

Greensboro, North Carolina
Raised in the sun, a motherless child
You grow up quick in abusive heat
Relearning, unlearning in
that splintered house,
almost swallowed your name.
Innocents stuck in a red mud road
Got a new little Black boy.

Twined a way to
Newport News, Virginia
Found love along the humid tree lines
and six brown babies in 1966.

"A vine's path is more beautiful than its roots, child."

Hey Mama how come you smile so wide?
Camel walkin' your way to concrete, slick brick
East Baltimore row home
Three girls in one room
Three boys in the other.

Grandma Vines, I wanna hear a story.

BILLY'S MOM

Gershon Ben-Avraham

Once the fog brought on by the anesthesia lifted, Mrs. Davis asked the nurse to bring her little Bobby Sherman. The nurse looked puzzled.

"Mrs. Davis, I don't know who Bobby Sherman is. You have a beautiful baby boy name William Lee."

Mrs. Davis had read about this kind of mix-up in hospitals before. Not wanting to face the possibility of having to exchange one child for another one some fifteen or sixteen years down the road, or however long it took the hospital to figure out what they had done wrong, Mrs. Davis repeated her request a little more firmly, and dropped the "please."

The nurse returned to the room with Mr. Davis.

"Billie Faye, I'm sorry, but I just couldn't name a child of ours Sherman, what with all he did in Atlanta and his march to the sea. Dreadful."

Mrs. Davis, somewhat better read than her husband, said, "Ralph, do you know what General Sherman's first name was?"

Ralph looked at the floor briefly, then up at his wife.

"Tecumseh?"

"That was his middle name. His first name was William."

Ralph realized that his attempt to placate his wife for his renaming of their son, by using William as the boy's first name, was a complete failure. He looked at her guiltily and said, "How about we call him Billy?"

In consequence of this betrayal, made worse because he had done it while Billie Faye was under anesthesia, Ralph Davis found

his wife's bed off-limits for several months. However, on New Year's Eve there was a joyful reunion, and in September of the following year a daughter, Linda Faye, was born. She was exactly sixteen months younger than Billy. Ralph did not even think of changing her name.

When Billy was twelve years old, he became a baseball player, third baseman for the Standard Oil Little League team in Jackson. It had not been his idea to play baseball. It had been his mom's. Perhaps she thought he was too studious, too thin, or too pale. Whatever her reason, she signed Billy up. Billy discovered that he liked baseball. He was not particularly good at it, but neither was he bad. He was just an average kid playing an average game of ball.

Billy's mom dutifully took him to every practice and attended every game. She always made sure his uniform was clean before a game. After the game, time permitting, she would take Billy and his sister out for a treat. In the five years that Billy played ball, his mom never missed a game, not one. His dad, on the other hand, never attended one, not even one. Baseball, it seems, was not something in which he had a great interest.

After an especially embarrassing game, in which Billy stopped a line drive with his shin, picked up the ball and threw it over the first baseman's head, over the fence, and out of play, coach Williams suggested to Billy's mom that she have Billy's eyes tested. She did. Two weeks later, riding home sporting a fresh pair of thick-lensed black-rimmed glasses, Billy told his mom that he could see the individual leaves on the trees. She said, "Billy, I'm sorry that it took me so long to find out about your being nearsighted. It must be a little disappointing to you, though, no longer seeing the world like Monet."

The summer he turned fourteen, Billy hit a home run, clean out of the park. Sometimes even ordinary players do extraordinary things. His mom, who was sitting in the top row of the home bleachers, leapt to her feet, began wildly jumping up and down, and shouted Billy's name over and over again. If it had not been for his sister Linda, and Anne, Linda's best friend, holding on to her, Billy's mom might well have fallen out of the bleachers.

It was the custom to give the home-run ball to the boy who hit it. After the game, Billy collected his. He held it during the entire ride home, listening with pride as his mom told the same story a hundred different ways.

When he got home, Billy wrote a note, took it, and the ball, and placed them on his dad's chest of drawers. The note said, "Dad, I hit a home run tonight. I wish you could have seen it. This is the ball. Love, Billy."

The next morning Billy waited for his dad to say something about the ball, or the home run. But he didn't, not that day, nor the next. In fact, he never said anything about them. Over twenty years later, however, Billy's mom could still recall every detail of his home run.

Following their retirement, Billy's parents moved to Florida. They lived on the Gulf side and enjoyed their lives there. His mother took up painting, and especially enjoyed painting the glorious Florida sunsets. She would send Billy photographs from time to time, and he faithfully called her every Sunday afternoon. Each year they would spend Thanksgiving together.

His mother died in Florida when she was seventy-three years old, two weeks before Thanksgiving. Instead of sharing the holiday he had expected with his parents, he attended his mom's funeral. Back home, a couple of weeks after her funeral, Billy got a call from his dad.

"Billy," he said, "there's something I meant to tell you while you were here, but forgot in the confusion of everything that was happening."

"Yes, dad?"

"The day your mom died, I heard her fall. I found her lying on the floor of our bedroom. Her eyes were open and she was conscious. I picked her up and carried her to the bed. Son, the mind is such a strange thing. It was like she was having flashbacks. She was talking about you and your sister growing up, about your sister's dancing, and your playing ball. Isn't it odd how the mind works? In a little while she closed her eyes. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was gone. I'm sorry son, I meant to tell you while you were here."

"Thanks dad," Billy said. "I understand. I'm glad you called me."

That evening after dinner Billy went to his study. He took down a scrapbook his mom had given him just before his marriage. He turned to the pages with pictures from when he had played ball. For the first time he noticed that his mom was not in any of them. She had taken them, and then given them to him. They were snapshots of her memories. He thought about how he had never thanked her, never told her how much he enjoyed playing ball and having her come to his games. He knew she would not have expected him to, not think it necessary. Still, he wished he had done it.

He heard his wife enter the room.

"Don't forget," she said, "that we need to get up early tomorrow. Billie's got a ball game."

"Oh, I won't forget," he said. "I washed her uniform. It's hanging up downstairs. After the game, I thought we could go to the Root Beer place."

ONE MOMENT

Lori Gravley

for Ruby Weir Gravley

She pushes aside the pickle jars and grape jelly,
chaste bathing suits, brittle hatboxes.
She finds things she remembers
but has forgotten why she's sitting here
in the middle of the basement,
holding a collar box in her hands.

Her life is the same as it was when this was stored.
Recipes and gardening tips she'll never remember.
Diamond earrings hidden from thieves
who wander through her mind.

She doesn't know what's emptied these rooms
        in her head, scattered
hundreds of insignificant people and left the dead—
her son, her father, her first love. The rest are strangers.

She holds the rattling collar box. She can't find
the needs to fill each day, can't find her
        hairdresser's address
or the strings of her mother's apron, the horse's reins,
the yellow ribbons for her daughter's hair.

SAME OLD RECOMBINANT BLUES

JP Allen
after Amit Majmudar

I left my baby.
I was lightning in a bottle,
flipping home loans and easements—
in her mind, a devil.

Our home was full of lightning.
She never left rebuttals alone; I
was devil-may-care.
We were of two minds about babies.

Pleas, battles, a vaudeville
of baby-faced lawyers
with highlighters, blank spots
left and right in the empty house.

I leave a light on for my devils.
They're at home in my mind,
at ease, never lonely,
sucking baby-bottles.

My baby left me.
the devil moved into my home.
I take lightning in a bottle
to ease my lonely mind.

THE EMPTY FLOWERBOX

Shelby Sprigg

Jimmy did it just a couple months after Carol-Anne got herself a baby with the neighbor boy, and her belly was big as a melon. The rest of her got big too, but mostly just her belly. The way it sagged when we found her body, it reminded me of those geezers outside of town, with their too-much-beer, not-enough-soap smell and their rotted brown teeth.

That morning Jimmy did it, Papa left his rifle on the table and went to clean the mud off his boots before Mama could yell at him. Jimmy and me, we just sat on our stools, sweating through our Sunday clothes and looking at that gun. It reflected the lights from the burning Texas sun and spattered the wall all red and orange, like somebody had set it on fire.

"You think he gave up on shooting that coon yet?" I asked Jimmy without looking away from the gun. The lattice-back of the chair pushed hard into my spine, like it was trying to figure out how to throw me off.

Across the table my brother shrugged and reached into the tin for another of Mama's jelly cookies. "How I see it, it don't really matter neither way."

"Well, I think he aint never gonna get her. That coon's smarter then Papa," I said.

Jimmy's cookie crumbled all over the front of his cotton button-up shirt, and a big clump of strawberry jelly plopped down on the edge of the table. It just sat there next to the rifle, red and glossy as a puddle of blood. He choked and sputtered for a couple of minutes, then swallowed all at once.

"He got the last one. Killed it dead, right out by the pecan tree. I saw it," Jimmy said.

"You just don't understand these things, Jimmy. Papa only thought he shot that last coon. Really it just hid in the tree till he left, and then ran off. Just like Grams, when she got sick. She said that sometimes, people don't die after all, even when it looks like they're gonna. "

"Only Grams did die, Sophie," he said. "And she didn't run off with a raccoon neither. She just got sick, and sicker, and then she died."

"Well, what about Carol-Anne's baby, then?"

Jimmy's eyebrows pulled down real low over his eyes and the smudge of jam smeared on the side of his mouth slowly dried into a gummy paste. His face was like that when we found them too; Jimmy holding Carol-Anne's fat, saggy body, her all empty and speckled red and him with his too-much-thinking face on. She sprawled out with his arms around her, her head on his shoulder and her hair a waterfall spilling down over his chest.

"What happened, boy?" Papa asked that night, rushing over to them with his huge lumbering steps and his fingers so tight on that rifle, they looked like they'd turned all to bone. I hid behind him, shivering in the cold night air and my thin sweater already soaking wet. They were just sitting outside in the rain as though the water didn't mean nothing, leaning against the barn walls, and for a minute we didn't even notice the blood all over them. It just blended together with the paint until all I could see was red.

"She said she was tired, and she'd woke up and realized she wasn't a princess after all," Jimmy said without looking at us. Lightning flashed overhead and he just sat there, holding our big sister and not even crying.

"Maybe her baby got itself put into some other lady somewhere, and now it's getting ready to get born all over again," I said finally.

"Maybe it weren't never a baby to begin with," he said.

"Course it was a baby!" My hands clenched into fists on the table so I wouldn't slap him across the face by accident. "Carol-Anne wouldn't have said there was a baby if she didn't have one."

"Then where'd it go?" Jimmy asked again, really looking at me.

He halfway stood up from his chair and glared down his nose at me. "Cause when I found her, she said there weren't no reason to have the baby anymore. Grams always says everybody tells the truth when they're already dying, on account of how there aint really no point in lying."

After that Jimmy got quiet and we just watched that stupid gun like we were scared somebody would steal it before Papa got back. The rough wood floors creaked and our stiff, fancy clothes crinkled and itched every time we shifted in our seats. Outside the picture window the birds chirruped their little tunes from the empty flowerbox. The old wind chime tinkled its fairy bell song in the soft breeze and Jimmy's fingers tapped at the tabletop as if he was sitting at the little piano in the family room, doing the only thing he was ever any good at.

I can hear it, sometimes. I can hear him playing those complicated old classical pieces he liked, with his two hands doing totally different things and his brain split between them. Sometimes, when it gets real quiet, I can still hear him play that old, out-of-tune piano, even though he hasn't been sitting on that cracked wood bench since the night we found him holding Carol-Anne in the rain. He played his fingers bloody that night, and I just sat and watched and wished I knew how to play, too.

"Why don't you play for real no more, Jimmy?" I asked. His fingers stopped their tapping and he glared down at them, angry they'd been moving at all. A gnat buzzed in through the open window and hovered between us a moment before settling on the edge of the cookie tin.

"Aint nothing left to play for, I suppose."

"That's stupid." I reached for one of the buttery cookies and the fly darted away from my hand. The biscuit was crumbly and dry, sweetened by the sticky jelly pooled in the center. "Used to be you'd play for no reason but to annoy the rest of us when we was trying to work."

"Used to be more of you," he said, soft and quiet in his dead-inside voice. "Now that Carol-Anne got rid of her baby and did herself in, there aint no point in playing for you on account of how you wouldn't understand it anyways."

I stuck out my tongue at Jimmy, even though Mama always said nine was too old to be doing that anymore. He was the one who couldn't understand things. Even when we'd all gone to see those fireworks out in the city a couple years back for Juneteenth, he'd been too stupid to understand anything. We'd all of us been together that day in Dallas, Carol-Anne and Jimmy and me all lined up in a row like human stairs, sitting on top of Papa's old rusty truck.

"I'm gonna marry Davie someday," Carol-Anne said over at me, without looking away from those fireworks. Jimmy just laughed between us, snorting through his nose like some kind of fool, but I knew it weren't no joke. Anybody who'd seen them two, all sweet and in love since back when they were kids together, they'd have known Carol-Anne was serious.

"Did you tell Davie how you love him yet?" I asked back. The metal was still warm under my legs and I could feel it shudder with every hollow boom, every firework explosion.

"I will when the time's right. Someday I will. And we'll have the prettiest babies. Just you wait and see, Sophie." And we sat there, watching those fireworks together, me and Carol-Anne thinking about how much she loved Davie, and Jimmy just laughing to himself like it was all some kind of a game.

Jimmy stared out the window at the patch of dirt where Carol-Anne used to grow her bluebonnets. "See Sophie, I've got to thinking lately," he said. "I've got to thinking that maybe we're the ones that died, and Carol-Anne was the only alive one between the three of us. Maybe we've always been dead, and we just didn't know it. And now that we do know about it, we can't go back to being dead, because we're all changed inside."

"Maybe you shouldn't bother with thinking, Jimmy. You aint never been any good at it anyways." Now it was me looking at that dirt in the empty flowerbox and wishing I'd thought to ask how she made the flowers grow so big and bright every year.

Jimmy just smirked, like I'd given him some sort of compliment. "You're the one that thinks Grams ran off with a coon, not me. I know dead means dead."

"Why don't you get it, Jimmy? She aint dead. She just can't be." Only I wasn't talking about Grams no more, and Jimmy knew it.

"Sure she aint," he said, shaking his head all slow and sad, like he didn't really believe it. "Sure she aint."

*

The day Carol-Anne first told me about her baby, summer was just starting. The sun shone hot and dry down on us, and we were dancing in the speckled light under the old pecan tree. She was wearing this little white sundress that flared out around her when she spun, and for a minute I just stopped and watched her, laughing and dancing all by herself.

And then she slowed her spinning, and she looked down at me, her head tipped sideways and the sunlight bouncing off her pale skin. "I'm gonna have me a baby, Sophie," she said, matter-of-fact.

"Well sure," I told her, coming out to stand with her in the sunlight. "Someday."

"No, not someday. Me and Davie, we already made one. In a couple of months, I'm gonna have me a baby."

"But Mama says you can't have a baby until you get married, and Papa won't let you until you're sixteen, and that isn't for another year. So what are you gonna do with it?"

But Carol-Anne just smiled, and it was prettier than anything I'd ever seen before. She picked a little stem of bright blue flowers from the window box and stuck it in my hair. "Don't you see, Sophie? Now Davie just has to marry me, and Papa's got to let him. He aint got a choice no more." And she laughed and spun in another little circle. She really did look like a princess out there, with the birds singing in the tree, butterflies scattering and fluttering from one flower to the next all around us, and baby squirrels bouncing through the grass, collecting up their dinner.

"Someday I'm gonna have a baby too, and I'll be in love just like you and Davie," I said. Carol-Anne laughed again and grabbed my hands, and suddenly we were dancing in and out of the sunlight, and everything was just about as perfect as it could be.

"I'm a princess, Sophie. Davie told me so, when we made this baby. He said I was his princess, and now we get to be together forever, because he's gonna marry me."

Carol-Anne's pretty white dress swirled around us as we spun under the pecan tree, like she was an angel getting ready to fly away.

The gnat circled the kitchen table a few times before touching down on the rifle barrel.

"You think Carol-Anne's happy wherever she is now?" Jimmy asked me. I looked at him again and saw that little spark in his eyes, just like back when he'd play for the baby. Used to be he'd play that old piano all the time, claiming that he was gonna make Carol-Anne's baby smarter than any of us. Maybe it would have even worked.

"Don't see how we'll ever know that, Jimmy. But I'm sure she's doing all right for herself out there. Even if Jesus don't like suicides, I'm sure she's found herself a way to be happy. Carol-Anne is stubborn like that."

"Yeah, she was, wasn't she." He smiled down at his fingers and I took another cookie. Then he reached out and picked up Papa's old rifle, startling that damned fly back into the air. It darted back and forth between us like all the things I should have said.

*

It rained that night, one of the early fall storms that blew through and turned the whole world grey and impossible. Later they would give it one of those fancy names, like Katherine or Samantha or maybe Horatio, but just then it was only another thunderstorm.

"What's the matter, Carol-Anne," I asked her, sitting down across the table. In the bright flashes of lightning, I could see the little lines her tears had left behind when they rolled down her cheeks. They mirrored the trails the raindrops were leaving on the window.

"He's got another girl," she cried, and her head dropped down into her hands. "Davie's got himself some hussy from the city, and he says he don't need me no more."

"But what about your baby?" I asked her.

The spicy chili smell left over from dinner didn't quite cover up the scent of Papa's liquor on her breath.

"What about the damn baby? I don't need it no more either; he aint gonna love me even if we have a baby, so why should I care."

I looked at my big sister, and suddenly she seemed so small. It was like all of her had shrunk up into this little crying girl, and now there wasn't any room left for anything pretty or nice. Suddenly I was the only one who still had our dreams, only I didn't know what to do with them."But he's got to marry you, because you've got his baby in you. What'll Mama and Papa do if he doesn't marry you?"

"I don't care!" she sobbed. "I don't care no more, Sophie. Let them do whatever they want to me. Send me to one of those convents Mama keeps goin on about, or to live with Grams. I don't care no more." And she got up from that table and ran for the door like the devil himself was chasing her out. As I stood there watching her go, I thought about all the nice things I ought to have said to her, all the things I should have told her but didn't have the words for.

"But you were in love since forever," I whispered at her back as Carol-Anne ran out into the rainstorm. "He's gotta marry you. He promised."

*

Sometimes, I can still hear Jimmy play his stupid piano, and I wonder why I never asked him to teach me. Maybe he could have played again himself if I'd only 'a done it. But the flowerbox was empty, 'cause I didn't ask Carol-Anne how she got her bluebonnets to sprout, and maybe it wasn't sunlight reflecting off that gun. Maybe it was raining that day, and there wasn't a sun at all.

And all that rain, it pattered down the window like little tears, and I thought about how Carol-Anne cried just like that. It hit the glass with this little tapping sound, almost like fingers, and Jimmy was glaring at the fly that landed on his cookie, not at his hands. And I never asked him about the piano, on account of how he wasn't tapping to begin with.

Maybe it's all jumbled, and there was no rain on the night Carol-Anne died. Only a drunk, crying girl whose heart was too broken up inside for dreams, or babies, or bluebonnets.

Maybe, it wasn't months later at all, but only a few days after Carol-Anne killed herself. And we were wearing our Sunday clothes, but it wasn't Sunday, because we'd only just got back from

the cemetery. And, maybe, it was the neighbor boy that did it, and not Jimmy at all. Maybe they fought, on account of how Jimmy said it was all Davie's fault that Carol-Anne was dead, and it was Davie that picked up that gun.

Or it was just Jimmy, looking at that empty flowerbox and realizing that he couldn't play his old piano no more without the baby to play for.

"I gotta do this now, otherwise it'll just kill me," Jimmy said, like he was explaining himself to me. Like I should understand. Jimmy held the gun out at arm's length and turned it toward himself.

He looked a complete fool, standing there in his special Sunday suit with that long barrel pointed at his heart. His face had this pained, self-sacrificing look, like he was doing something he wished he didn't have to do but couldn't see a way out of. Maybe Jimmy fancied himself some sorta martyr, standing there in our little white kitchen, framed by the sunset coming through our little window. Only there was still that jelly smeared across his face to ruin the picture and make it still just Jimmy holding that gun, not some old soldier with flags waving in the background and trumpets singing and ladies lining up to get their babies kissed.

"Don't be dumb, Jimmy," I said to him, standing up real slow so I wouldn't startle him. "This aint funny no more."

"Well, I'm starting to think maybe it never was, Sophie. But don't you see? That's why I gotta do it." And with a sharp click and a big, hollow boom just like those old fireworks we'd watched together, the rifle went off.

MIGNONETTE

Catherine Moore

Half-shelled, swimming in peppery sauce, the oysters lie
like a vignette from the menu. Like its glossy photo over
the "You are Here" blue star on a hand-drawn map.
He has pointed to it five times since we hijacked the table. He says
it looks like pear-shaped flesh on bone, like my ass. His
lips shiver around the hot oyster flesh. Hmm, I reply. I am
humid with noise and grease out the diner vent. I recite my
grievances in silent alphabet, last halted at goad. I know I'll
begin with hell. He orders another Schaefer. Humans like
fives. May he hold his. Limits happen.

CONJURE LADY

Mary Leauna Christensen

She had soapsuds on her hands when her father's friend, a man with crow colored eyes set unevenly above a round brown nose, clambered up the front porch steps. He was going on about an old woman, a widow, who sat by herself in the back pew of the church and who sat by the creek, stones churning in her hands over and over until they were polished cat eye marbles. He said the night before his dogs, three coonhounds put to bed in a fenced off lot, wouldn't stop barking. Like anyone would, he went outside with a hand-me-down rifle.

He saw nothing at first, only heard wings beating the cool black air. The dogs went silent the moment an owl swooped near his head, its three toed feet picking up strands of hair. *It was a big white screechin' owl,* he said, *it flew at my face over n' over. I figured it was rabid, acting all queer-like. I shot its left wing and it flew haphazard back into the trees.*

But what had him shaking was the old woman walking down his dirt road, sunlight playing on white tufts of hair, her left arm in a homemade sling, a spot of red bleeding through. *Her hands just kept rolling those stones, conjuring sure 'nuff.*

My grandmother shook her head, rinsed the soap from her hands, thinking nothing of the story as she reached into her apron pocket. Her stones were still oblong, not quite round.

CHASERS

Charles Israel, Jr.

After the blackpeople started moving into our neighborhood of whitefolk, our parents started meeting. Sunday socials, they called them. In the backyards, our dads turned the hand-crank on the churn filled with sweet peach ice cream, and our moms served the iced tea in plastic glasses and the ice cream in Dixie Cups. Our parents always tried to con us into staying at the Sunday socials.

No fucking way, we thought.

No way me and the Chartwell Boys are spending some yawning Sunday afternoon with our moms and dads talking about how good a neighborhood Chartwell was (we'd never had neighborhood gatherings before); how solid it was (it was just one road looping back on itself for about a half-mile, with the houses flung out from it, like the shit slung out of a chitlin); how good of friends everybody was (our moms and dads who before the black people came might have said "hey" over the roofs of their cars after coming home from a hard day, but no more, before going inside); and how wonderful the ice cream was (over-sugared so bad, it made you thirsty). As the afternoon wore on, the talk got hazier, like the extra sugar suspended in the iced tea.

As the sun came down and spread its last rays, they came to the last thing to say, the thing that laid under everything, like capillaries under the skin, spreading all over: How they'd never sell their houses.

Well, they would say, never sell to any niggers.

It was not a word I'd heard much. My parents had made it clear that it was a clean-your-mouth-out-with-Lava-soap kind

word, and if I said it again, I'd be grounded for a month. But my parents had heard the word all summer at the Sunday socials. One night, after one of the first Sunday social, I asked them why the neighbors used the word so much. Well, some people use that word when they don't know what to say, they said. I asked if it bothered them. From the way they looked at each other across the table, I could tell they'd talked about it a lot. Finally, they said that in a new place, sometimes you must make adjustments. And then came the quiet, the only sounds being Mom letting the dishes slip softly into the dishwater, and Dad inhaling and exhaling his cigarette, the television news off. When your parents go quiet like this, the questions are done. That night I fell asleep to their low voices downstairs.

My family had just moved to Chartwell, a suburb of Columbia, South Carolina, earlier that summer, right after school let out. We'd come from the little college town of Annandale, in the northwest cranny of South Carolina, where that word was about as rare as it was common here. Not that the whitefolk and blackpeople were close in Annandale, but there had been black kids at my mostly white school and the pitcher on my Little League team was black, cheered on by white parents, too. Plus, the church my parents went to sometimes, the Unitarian one, had a few black families.

Then, there was Barbara, who I'd left behind in Annandale. Barbara Lawson, the only black girl—and the only girl—I'd ever kissed. Her school portrait, the only picture I had of her, was tucked behind everything else in my wallet: behind the photo of Leesa, the cheerleader who gave me her official cheerleader photo; my school ID from Annandale Jr. High, me with my long blond hair almost as long as Leesa's; and my public library card. You would find Barbara only if you were just tearing up the wallet for money; most people would stop at Leesa's picture.

I can't tell my parents or the Chartwell Boys about her.

Even in Annandale, a small town of hippies and college students, it was only when we could get alone that things felt right. But there were so few places like that: this one far-away table at the school library, the balcony at The Orpheum, and the earthen levee that held back Lake Annandale, like hate could hold back love.

We'd hang out at a library table that was walled off by three sets of stacks, working as co-editors on The Annandale Jr. High Hi-Life. That's how we met, on the school newspaper, and it was the first time that the school had had one black and one white co-editor. It took the whole library table to lay out the newspaper: we had the big layout sheets, printouts of the stories, and still-glossy photographs. Once we decided on the layout, we'd paste all the stories and art on the proofs with rubber cement. We had a pretty big argument about the first issue. I wanted to run a front-page expose on the in-school suspension program, a story so long that it jumped to the back page, and she wanted to make sure all the squibs of club news filled the back page instead. I remembered I couldn't believe how stubborn she was, and she later told me she felt the same way about me. But we compromised, shortening the expose so there was no jump and running all the club news.

I liked that she stood up to me, and I started just watching her. How she carefully applied the rubber cement, the way she cropped the pictures so that everyone, regardless of how they looked in real life, looked good in the photos, and how she smiled when we'd finished a page.

*

So, after giving our parents at the Sunday Social the story that we were going to Trenholm Park to play baseball, we hopped on our bicycles and cut out. Baseball, shit—we took off for Green Hole, an abandoned granite quarry, with clear spring water that only looked green because of all the trees around it. Our bikes, mostly one-speeds but a few with banana seats and sissy bars. David and Donald (the D and D boys, the biggest badasses we had in the Chartwell Boys) carried the heavy artillery. David had the eight-track ghetto blaster lashed between his apehanger handlebars, and Donald stacked the beer on his rear rack, in two big brown-paper grocery bags. Tucked into some of our blue-jean back pockets was some reefer. Besides this usual cargo, the D and D boys had packed a gross, almost 150 of the damn things, of those little rockets. They were called Whistling Chasers. And the best place to set them off was Green Hole.

Riding over to Green Hole, I took my place at the back of pack. Watching our bikes bunch up as we cruised down the road, it struck me how different it was from what me and Barbara had to do. When we wanted to meet at The Orpheum or the levee, we had to ride separately. First, we came from different neighborhoods, but even more important: even in Annandale, we weren't sure about riding in tandem.

Once me and the Chartwell Boys got Green Hole, we camped out on our favorite slab of granite, one big rock, right on the edge. Even before we started in on the reefer and beer, we lit a few Chasers. One of them zigged and zagged across the slab and dove into Green Hole, going underwater, and exploded with a muffle and a quick flash. Then, up came a big bubble: when it popped, a ring of smoke came out of it. Across the green water, in their red, white, and blue bikinis—for the Bicentennial, we guessed—were two girls from our school, Sharon Mielke and Joni Gantt. Even though they were sitting on their own rock with some older boys, some high school guys who had their own cars, we thought they might be impressed. They weren't.

With his church key, Mark opened the Ballantine beers. We smoked some reefer, and in the low-hanging sun, you could see the thick smoke hang its shadow on the big, blue-granite boulders. Out of the ghetto blaster's two big-as-pie-plate speakers, Richard Pryor, in his black preacher's voice, came blasting out: "In this year of Bicennteniality, we are celebrating two-hundred years of whitefolks kicking ass!"

Just like the audience on the eight-track, we cracked up and turned up the volume. Sharon Gantt and Joni Mielke were still across the water, lounging with their sunglasses on so you couldn't tell if they were checking us out, so we pretended they were. The older guys from high school, the ones with cars, who had been sitting around the girls, were gone. So, we stood up to go over there and offer them some beer and reefer, our best gifts.

*

Now, looking back on it, this one Sunday, it was all the yellow jackets' fault. They'd showed up at the Sunday Social for the peach ice cream and sweet tea. They would walk along the rims of the

Dixie Cups and the clear plastic glasses, as they felt Fall coming with their antennae. Fall meant school again, with blackpeople sitting down in class next to you. Even the parents had looked a bit scared. Yellow jackets weren't afraid to sting because, unlike honeybees, they don't die after stinging you.

Just when we started to go over to talk to Sharon and Joni, we heard the high-school guys close by, laughing in that kind of way that we knew it was about us. Coming from behind the underbrush, they planted themselves on our rock, with their backs to ledge and the green water a three-second fall below. They were daring us to push them off. They looked like the front line on the high school football team: bare-chested, with just their blue-jean shorts on.

"We can hear that damn ghetto blaster all the way across Green Hole."

"No way." Mark said.

"Hey, dumbass, sound gets louder as it goes over water."

"Oh."

"And the girls don't appreciate some niggery voice coming across the water and all you assholes laughing along with the niggers on the eight-track."

"Sure, man, we'll turn it down," Mark said.

"And we're going to be playing some Nugent, right, and we don't want y'all coming over to bitch about it."

When they left, what stayed was their smell, suntan oil that we'd watched Sharon and Joni carefully put on.

Once we were sure that the guys were out of hearing range, we all agreed that we would've fucked them up if we weren't so fucked up ourselves. It seemed like a really funny thing to say. When the boys got back with Joni and Sharon, though, we stopped laughing, remembering how the sound carried.

I thought about how I could have taken them. My great-Uncle Albert, who'd boxed for his aircraft carrier in World War II, showed me his combination for taking down the big boys, who never were as fast as they were strong: left jab, then fake another left jab. When they tried to block it, they'd open themselves up for a right hook. I didn't say anything to the Chartwell Boys about boxing though; it might seem like bullshit since I hadn't done anything.

Hopping on our bikes, we pedaled home harder, because we hadn't forgotten about backing down. When we got back to Chartwell, we still had some the Whistling Chasers left, and having beer and reefer weren't options. To me, they didn't whistle, they screamed. Whistling Chasers—that's what we'd called the little rockets in Annandale—since the name was written on them, right above the words, "Zig—Zag—Boom." I said something about setting off some more of them. The Chartwell Boys said "Whistling Chasers" was a pussy name," and that in Chartwell, they called them, "Nigger Chasers." So called, they said, because the Chasers just kind of hugged the ground, but you needed some kind of a chute so they wouldn't zig and zag all over, before they went boom. You were supposed to lay them in the gutter to guide them. And since the maids, all blackpeople, would be standing in the little gutters, waiting for the bus or for their ride home, they would the targets of the Chasers. But in Chartwell, well, nobody was rich enough to afford a maid.

But the problem wasn't that there were no maids, it was that the boys didn't say Whistling. I could hear it, the other word, either tearing along the gutter or diving off a boulder into Green Hole, screaming to the end. When the other word came screaming through my brain, I wanted to say Stop, I wanted just to open my lips and fire it out. Then I clamped my lips together, pushing it back down to my belly. The bile broke down Stop into bits you wouldn't recognize as a word: just the stems of the letters and their little feet. Maybe that was when I first started closing down that part of me.

Because, just like the Chasers and the other word, Chartwell was always full of screaming. Parents screamed at their kids, and we screamed at each other. It was so unlike me and Barbara. Back at The Orpheum in Annandale, a lot of people screamed at the scary parts, or even the funny parts, of the movies. We'd be up in the balcony, back-row, and we'd just stay still and quiet.

Not many people went up to the balcony, because it was hotter and farther away from the lobby snack bar. But there was another reason few people went up there. Up until right before Barbara and I were born, it was the only place in town where black people

could watch a movie. The balcony even had a separate entrance back then, on the side of the building. You could get to it only by first going down an alley to the balcony door that was now locked and the staircase up to the balcony walled off. We guessed both black and white people thought it was a bad reminder, or somehow cursed.

When we were up there, almost alone, it felt okay to whisper. Mostly, it would be me asking about a part of the movie I didn't understand. While we may have kissed a few times, we always held hands. From riding our bikes in, our palms were a bit moist, mine more than hers. But it felt right. And the balcony felt like our own little neighborhood, with us two the only ones living there, and it felt like we could stay forever, getting our food at the snack bar, having the bathroom there, just watching movies. I would put my arm around her, and she'd lean her head on my shoulder. I'd look over, into her eyes. And her eyes had that look, like she was kind of watching the movie but mostly looking at me, just like I was looking at her.

*

But looking back, on this one yellow-jacket Sunday, the next thing that happened was the most clear. A bunch of blackpeople, kids about our age, were coming down Chartwell Road. We recognized a few of their faces, because all that long summer, they had moved into Chartwell. As they drove in, they had stared at us, and we had stared back. Most of them had moved from the poor neighborhood called Black Bottom, right next to the Congaree River. They had moved from mostly wood houses on cinderblock pilings. With their orange clay and yellow sand, their yards looked like a copperhead lying next to the river.

I'd already placed a Chaser against the side of the gutter. But it immediately zig-zagged, flipping itself around, and headed for the black guys. To their credit, they didn't try to dodge it, the way we did when we had bottle-rocket fights at night. The smoke spit out of the ass-end of the Chaser, and we heard it scream as it shot toward the biggest guy, the one whose T-shirt said "They Call Me the Big Pill" from that summer's P-Funk Earth Tour (feat. Dr. Funkenstein). Right in "The Big Pill," the Chaser went boom, and

left a little scorch mark. He looked at the spent Chaser lying on the ground and then up at me. Me, the asshole that'd lit it. Me, the one who'd never been in a fight; me, a tall, skinny, scared whiteboy. And while I had a big right forearm from playing j.v. tennis—the D and D boys said it was from jerking off—there was just 120 pounds hanging on my frame.

Because if there was going to be a fight, trying to make it a boxing match was my only chance. Anything else, and his weight and strength would kill me. He looked like he could hold down the starting linebacker spot for the j.v. team. I had to pop him fast and hard, before he could gather himself, using great-Uncle Albert's combination. The rest of the Chartwell Boys moved back, and his group did the same.

"Fight, fight, a black and a white!" chanted both sides.

The Chartwell Boys expected me to fight for them, for the neighborhood—well, the whitefolk part of it—and somehow, for the entire race of whitefolks. Oh, no. Then, I thought I saw Barbara, standing next to Chartwell Road, away from both groups of boys.

She was wearing the same dress she was wearing on the Lake Annandale levee, the last time I saw her. At the near end of the levee, we'd met and leaned our bikes against the bumpy trunk of a pink dogwood. When a spring breeze came across the water, it left a few riffles. A few pink bracts fell on our bikes. In my backpack, I had a little blanket, my transistor radio, and some Cokes, so we started out for the far end, which was much more likely to be free of people. In the lake, you could see the blue sky, unlike Green Hole, where you only saw the green reflection of the tall loblolly pines ringing it.

As we walked across the grassy top of the levee, I reached out for her hand, and we laced our fingers. We could've talked about how we'd write letters and make phone calls when we'd saved up enough allowance, and how tight we were, even if other people couldn't see it. But talking about it would've made it seem real, so we just stayed quiet. I wished the grassy top of the levee went on forever, or at least until it reached Chartwell, 250 miles away.

When we got to the far end, I unwrapped the still-cold Cokes

and spread out the blanket. We were close enough to the waterside slope that we could hear just the little lapping of the waves against the granite boulders. We listened to WIS, the only station that played music we both liked. We heard some Hall & Oates songs, which always seemed to be about love going away. Their two voices were so high that they seemed to rise off the blue skin of the lake, in two huge, bright bubbles. You would watch them float off as far as you could, until the sun got too much for your eyes. But you felt they could make it all the way to the sun.

But lying down on the blanket and watching them, I guess we both knew. Since our parents weren't much for traveling, it'd be hard for us to ever see each other again. But just because you know something doesn't mean you have to say it, does it? And maybe, if we just didn't talk about breaking up, maybe it wouldn't have to happen.

*

But what if Barbara was here now on Chartwell Road? Would she tell me not to fight? Or would she just look at me and I look back at her, like we did at The Orpheum? But then, everybody could have seen it. And that was too much, because Barbara had to be a secret, tucked away in my wallet. So, from deep behind my eyes, I pushed her away. She vanished like the smoke trail left by a Chaser.

There were no cars on the single-slug chitlin road. Neither me or the other guy said anything while the chant bounced off the blacktop and into our faces. He wanted to box, too, so I was lucky. We circled each other, our Chucks sliding on the blacktop, feeling each other out. He made a few jabs, but with his right, like he didn't really know how to box. I kept flicking my head to avoid them. The jabs made him drop his left guard. He was open for the great-Uncle Albert combination. My first left jab glanced off his sweating chin, and I pulled my left back like a recoiling snake, like I was coming with a second jab. When he put up his right arm to block it, he left himself wide open. I drove my right hook for his head. Like on a big tennis forehand, I left my feet.

I connected square on his nose and probably broke it—it doesn't take much force to break nose cartilage. He staggered back. Two of his guys caught him before he hit the blacktop. My hand hurt

like hell. He wasn't knocked out, but he bent over, holding his nose with both hands. The blood came between his fingers, and the first few spots of it hit the blacktop. I swore I could hear them. Then he got up, and I thought he'd be coming after me again, and I'd be fucked. No—he was staggering, still bleeding, and crying.

I went over and said they should put him on his back, over on the Mitchell's lawn—a whiteperson's lawn—to stop the bleeding. I took off my black Led Zep '75 American Tour T-shirt, a shirt soaked with sweat and fear and said they could use it like a compress. They didn't say anything, but one of them gently laid my T-shirt on the guy's nose and told him to hold it on until he could feel the bleeding stop.

Donald said, "Come around again, and y'all will get more of the same shit. We don't need you niggering up our neighborhood."

"Shut the fuck up, Donald," I said, cocking my arm for another right. He looked as scared as he had when the high-school boys showed up on our rock. He shut up.

Walking home by myself, I wanted to cry, but I was past crying. Then I went to heave, but I just swallowed the vomit. The taste it left made my mouth feel like it had forgotten about kissing Barbara, and wasn't good enough to kiss her.

We all got back to our houses, these little spurs on the one circle of road that was our neighborhood.

The black kids didn't come around again. That Fall, when school started up, we'd all stand at the one bus stop in Chartwell, in clumps of blackpeople and whitefolk.

We weren't ever friends.

HUNGARIAN BLUES

Kerrin Smith

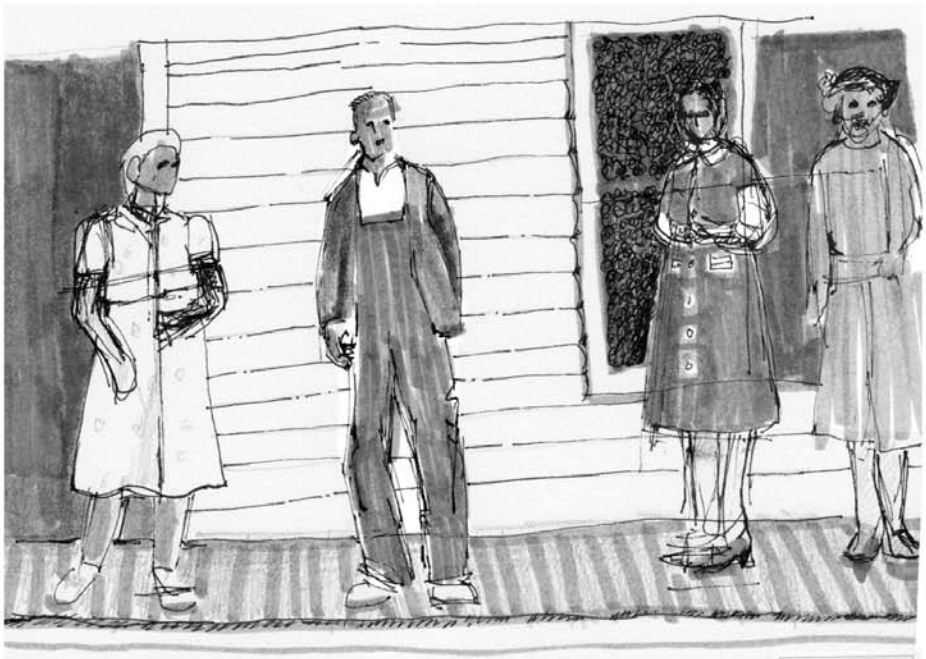
Bela Lugosi arrives in New Orleans
by boat. Not in a coffin full of dirt
from which he emerged
to pick off the rats
and then the sailors—
above deck.

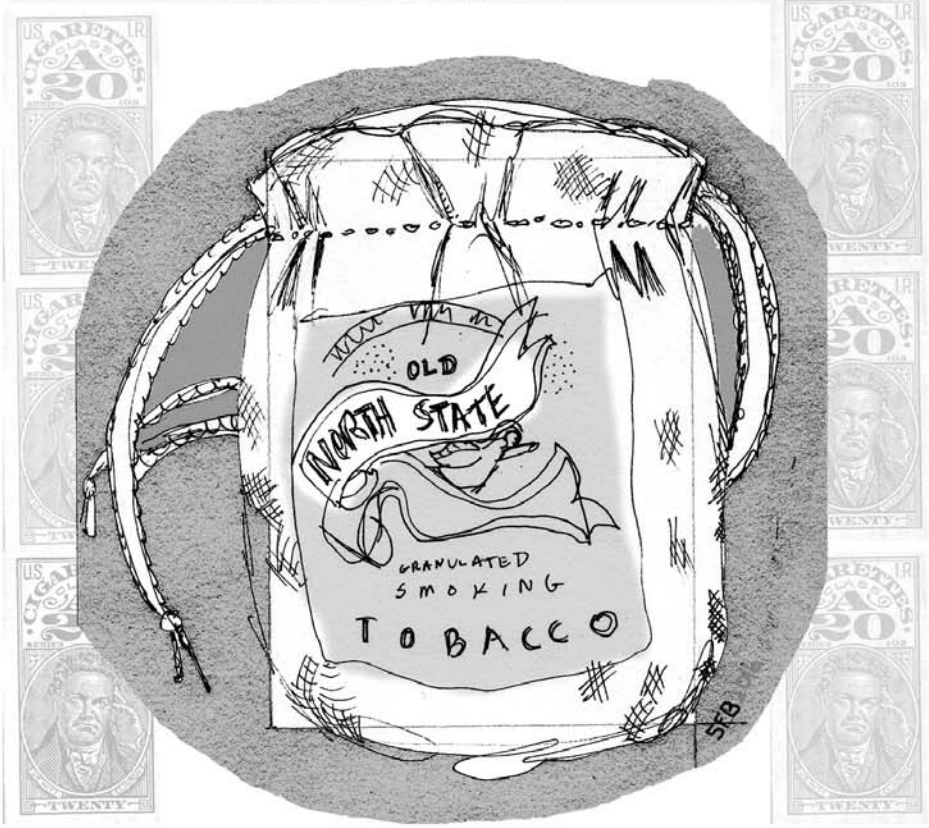
He has never chewed English.
He'll mimic the whole road to Broadway,
intone the foreign lines before
knowing their meaning, try
to animate the words with what
is almost life but the bite marks
will never knead out of the language.
Each night he'll dutifully rise,
the professional Transylvanian.

He sniffs the air and finds paprika
as he marches inland, the whole time
swatting at mosquitoes.

TOBACCO BAG STRINGERS

Sylvia Fishbach-Braden





BULLETS DON'T CARE

James Glisson

Granddaddy told me at the age of seven when he gave me a Benjamin pellet gun. "Give it a name, a woman's name," he said. I rubbed down Erin each night after target practice.

I saw on TV that a bunch of folks got shot in Orlando. Some politicians say the guns do the wrong. I don't know all the books in the Bible, but I do know neither Cain nor Able had a rifle. Back in Jesus' time they used sticks, rocks, fire, and all sorts of things to kill each other. Bare hands will do just fine.

Granddaddy was a lawman. He cleaned out the bikers along I-20 from Meridian to Vicksburg. He saw three black boys danglin' from a rail bridge and a queer who had his thumbs cut off for hitchhikin' down by Mobile. I guess knives don't care either, or a hangman's rope.

After the war, Uncle Ross said, "Vietnamese bled the same as us." The worst day he ever had was the day he lost four men. Nine more died trying to get the dead boys out. Congealed blood spread across the floor of the choppers like dollops of strawberry jam on toast. We buried Uncle Ross up in Tupelo with thirty-two pieces of metal in him from Laos, a bronze star he never wore, and tumors that rotted him from the inside out. Cancer don't care neither.

On the way to the candlelight vigil I tell my son
to keep ahold of my left hand and stay close.
Granddaddy said, "Americans stand up for
others." I'm not sayin' I agree with what all
them folks in Orlando were doin', but they're
American same as me.

As we walk up to the center of the rainbow memorial, I
scan the crowd. My son carries a bouquet of roses from
my granny's farm. Her great granny planted that bush
the same month Lee surrendered. As I bend over to
help him place the flowers my snub .38, Roxanne,
peeks out from under my jacket. My bullets don't give a damn,
and whoever wants to barge in and break up this vigil is
guaranteed to meet Roxanne.

Erin is waiting for my son to be seven. He can rename her if he
wants. I'll tell him what granddaddy said about the bullets.

MINNIE LEE'S FUNERAL

Anne Whitehouse

Red mud glistened on the sides of the road. We were on our way to Minnie Lee's funeral that February morning in the cold and rain that means winter in the South. She had died two days before of a cerebral hemorrhage. Everyone was shocked at how swiftly death came, without signs or reason. On the way there I kept seeing Minnie Lee's face in my mind, remembering last Thursday when she'd come to work, the same as she'd been doing for six years. She hadn't looked sick to me then and I never remembered her complaining about her health, only that her back sometimes ached. "Those crickets in my bones," she used to say. It wasn't that I didn't believe in death, just not in Minnie Lee's death.

My father had asked directions to Minnie Lee's Baptist Church from her brother, but it still took us awhile to find it; it was an old wooden house that had been fixed up with a steeple, and it was off the main road. We almost got stuck twice, driving up to it.

The church was already full by the time we got inside. It was too hot in the dry winter way of overheated rooms that makes your head pull together and feel faint. There was a bronze crucifix over the entrance like in hospitals, only bigger, and one stained glass window on the right near the front showing Jesus as a shepherd with a flock of three little lambs. The wood was light unfinished pine, some of the knots oozing sap in the heat. A strip of red carpet led straight down the center aisle past rows of black faces up the pulpit. Underneath the murmur of voices I could hear a radiator keeping time in irregular beats.

"Mama," I whispered loudly over the noise, "those other people Minnie Lee worked for didn't even show up. And she worked for them much longer than for us."

"Some people have no respect." The radiator stopped its knocking halfway through my mother's sentence, made the last words come out loud, too loud.

"Let's sit in the back," my father said. I felt grateful because I could feel the rows of eyes on us, people nodding and whispering. We were the only white people in the whole church. My father guided us to a back pew but a man came up and started talking to him.

"They want us to sit up front."

"Do we have to, Daddy?" my sister said. I could see the tears start in her eyes.

"They reserved a whole row for us. That man said we're guests of honor."

"But..." My father cut me off. "Don't make a fuss. There're things in life you just have to do. There's no getting around it."

"But everyone will be staring at us," I finished but there was no one to listen. They were already half-way up the center aisle and I had to run to catch up with them.

Just before the pulpit on a little stand was the open casket. In front of the casket, four short rows were fixed perpendicular to the other long rows in the church. The man pointed to the front row and motioned to us.

"Sit down, girls," my mother said.

I slid in first, then my mother, my father, and my sister. Right to my left was the open coffin. Minnie Lee slept in her final rest, her face with its closed eyes next to mine. I had never seen a dead person before and as I looked at Minnie Lee, the room took on another tone, dimmer and muted, like a sound when a glass jar slips over it, altering its whole feeling, and you realize you must have heard it wrong before and you don't know how to hear it right. Minnie Lee was wearing a long robe with the rough, closed texture of linen or silk. Her face which had been a lustrous black where the expressions changed faster than glitter on diamonds had now turned a sallow grey. Before I had never noticed the grizzle

in her hair, creases in the skin from nostril to mouth. She looked so much smaller lying there in that coffin than she had in real life that I wondered if dead people shrank when their souls left their bodies.

My mother nudged my arm. Someone was passing out programs. I had never heard of programs at funerals before, but I got handed a white sheet printed and folded over. On the cover was a photograph of Minnie Lee, but I never would've recognized her from it. She must have been nineteen when it was taken. She was fifty-four when she died.

"They could've at least chosen a recent picture," my mother said.

Under the picture was printed her name, "Minnie Lee Weston," and the dates, and below that, a list of all the organizations she had belonged to. There must have been at least ten. "I'm a joining person," she'd always say. There was her church choir, a Ladies Aid Society, a Sunday School group, but what caught my eyes was The Daughters of the Eastern Star. While my sister and I ate the potato chips or fried pork rinds she'd bring us, we'd listen to her tantalizingly drop hints about the Eastern Star, the intrigues between the members. "You gotta humor 'em and know 'em," she'd said.

"Tell us more," we'd beg. "What do you do at the meetings?"

"I can't. I've sworn never to reveal a word," she would say in low thrilling tones. As much as we'd nag her, she'd never give anything away.

Now all the secrets had died with her. I knew enough to know there was a lot I didn't know. I had always thought I would be afraid at the sight of a dead person but sitting right next to Minnie Lee's body, I was calm and solemn. I could tell by the way my mother held her gloves in one hand and smoothed them over and over with the other four fingers held straight and flat as a board that she was frightened by the closeness of that dead body to her, and I wanted to reassure her but didn't know how. While the congregation assembled in their seats, she nudged me in the side with her elbow. "Just don't look. Look straight ahead. They're

all watching but it'll be over soon." Her tone seemed to assume I shared her fear and I couldn't help the resentment that rose in me.

If I clench my fists enough, I won't mind, I told myself. I felt points of pain start and the anger falling back and my head clearing in the too-hot dry air. Nothing mattered. I was myself alone. I looked at the marks my nails made in my palms like it was someone else's hands, watched them turn from white to red, then fade. Upon the pulpit above the casket, the choir was rising, their robes red blue red blue. They sang:

The river Jordan is muddy and cold
It chills the body but not the so-oul
All my trials, Lord, soon be over.

The minister was bigger than a fullback, not to be dwarfed by God or man. In a voice like a bassoon he preached: "We are gathered together today in mourning for our beloved Sister in Christ Minnie Lee Weston who departed from this life February the tenth. Rest in peace. The Lord takes back His own." There were no prayerbooks, no hymnals. His voice a cadence falling, rising in the box of a church. After awhile I forgot to listen, to catch the words floating by. My head heavy in the heat. I looked at Minnie Lee lying there in the coffin. I had heard that sometimes people died smiling as signs they were pleased with what they met in the Beyond, but I could not divine an expression in Minnie Lee's face. Her lips folded against each other, smooth and flat.

If living was a thing that money could buy
The rich would live and the poor would di-ie
All my trials, Lord, soon be over.

"Today our sermon concerns the story of Naomi and Ruth in the Bible which I'm sure you all here know but to refresh your memory, Naomi growed up in the Holy Land, a good religious girl always tending to God's word. But she was dissatisfied, Lord, yes, dissatisfied. Not content with the lot she was born to. She wanted to see the bright lights of the city shinin dayn night in her face.

The world never stoppin but goin on, and so she got married to a man from the land of Moab and moved there where the lights never dimmed atall and abided there in the city, never pausin to think that Moab was a godless country. Yessuh, a godless country where they didn't worship the Lord Jesus or have no Sunday Schools. But she lived there and had two sons and they married in Moab and lived there."

The minister used his hands and his body as punctuation for the sermon. He was confident, finding a central pulse in the rhythms of his words and expanding it. His voice was a rocking boat carrying its listeners along. He knew just when to pause and when to take up the thread of his story.

"But by'n by Naomi's husband died and her sons died. Naomi was an ole woman and she saw the emptiness of those bright lights and recklected the Holy Land and she said I'm goin home. Lord yes I'm goin HOME. And she took her two daughters-in-law and tole them, Children I'm an ole woman and I'm goin back to my homeland. And Orpah she kissed Naomi goodbye but Ruth said I'm goin wit' you and you can't stop me. She said and I read to you today, thy people shall be my people and thy God my God. You see, my fellow worshippers in Christ, it is not too late to turn back to the Lord. It is never too late. Think to yourselves, are you leadin Christian lives? Performin the will of Jesus? I seen the light and I seen the darkness and I tell you now that Freedom, FREEDOM, is the way of the Lord."

I got a little book was given to me
And every page spells Liberty-y
All my trials, Lord, soon be over.

There grows a tree in Paradise
The pilgrims call it the Tree of Li-ife
All my trials, Lord, soon be over."

Part of the time I was hearing the minister and part of the time I wasn't. It seemed to me his words were like thunder and music and it didn't matter what they said or if they said anything.

People were stirring around me, swaying a little from side to side, humming under their breath. Only my family and I sat motionless; we were separate, remote from the drama that swirled around us. I looked up but couldn't see a thing out of those small high-up windows. The radiator had quit knocking and was purring and shushing like water falling. Or was it the rain outside? I looked at Minnie Lee lying there and I could feel the cold core of silence settled around her coffin.

"Now if any members of the congregation would like to speak on the subject of our bereavement," the minister was saying, "would they please make theirselves heard at this time." I heard something rustling and recognized Minnie Lee's sister, Alma, standing up. Even from where I was sitting I could see the sweat beading on her forehead. "I lost the best sister in the world always ready with her hands open and her mouth shut asking no questions but helping all," she said in one breath. She stumbled a little and for a moment I was afraid she was going to fall, but her brother caught her shoulder, relaxed her to her seat. "A-men," the congregation sang, a wave of sound rolling through the room.

Minnie Lee's brother stood up. "We would like, if you please, a word from our guests." The whole congregation looked straight at us. My sister, my mother, and I looked at my father who stared down at his hands.

"We would indeed be honored," the minister gestured to us.

My father got up, coughed a few times, cleared his throat. I was too scared to look, but I could feel eyes and eyes on us. The back of my neck itched but I couldn't lift my hand to scratch it. I wanted to hide under the coffin stand and never come out.

"It's true, like Alma here says," my father began, "that Minnie Lee was always helping people in distress. I know this for a fact because of the people she sent to me who had legal troubles. And I understand she was very active here in the church, ready and active in all her organizations." I heard a murmuring through the church and I darted my eyes up and saw that people were nodding to one another and there was a rustle of "yeses." I was so surprised I didn't hear the rest. I had never known before that my father could make speeches.

After my father sat down, other people came up to speak. I listened as their voices got thinner and wispier until I lost track of them. I was tired and drowsy and heavy in that hot room. I felt if my head could stop going round with dizziness, I'd find I could put my arm straight through those rows of swaying people as if they were no more than curtains going back and forth in an empty room. It seemed to me that if I could get beyond those curtains, I would see the real Minnie Lee, not in the closed grey face but somewhere else maybe perched up on the church's bare pine rafters looking down below at the grieving congregation. Slowly she would take a long drag off her cigarette and throw her head back, blow out smoke rings so thick and blue you could put your whole wrist through one.

After awhile I noticed there was no more talking, but people rising and lining up towards the front, like they were heading for the side door behind the casket and the rows next to it where we were sitting.

"What're they gonna do now?" I heard my sister whisper.

"Paying their last respects," my father whispered back.

Someone handed my mother a flower, a white gladiolus I remember because my mother says to this day they remind her of funerals. She looked around, a little crazily, like she didn't know what to do next, then rose and stood over the casket, kissed the gladiolus, and laid it on Minnie Lee's breast. "What a shame to remember her like this," she murmured to me as she sat down again. I held her hand tight.

So many people were crowding to the front of the overheated room that I lost sight of the bare wall across from me. They blocked out the pulpit and the minister. People swollen by their heavy winter coasts pushed against us where we sat in the front row beside the casket. I couldn't tell where the line ended. Maybe ten people had filed past the casket and out the side door. There was an undercurrent of wailing in the room that had a rhythm to it, like the swaying had.

Alma was approaching the coffin. She was so close to us that I could see how the hem of her black dress fell unevenly around her calves. For a moment there was silence. Then she rushed

toward the open coffin. Thrusting her cheek against Minnie Lee's motionless breast, she cried, "Minnie Lee, why did you leave me? Take me with you, with you!" Her words, through sobs, were a high peal of sound; her face hidden, hat pinned over stiff crimped hair. The congregation suspended around her, waiting, scarcely breathing. I saw her hands shake, the coffin stand wobble under her weight, steadying again. She raised herself up, gasped, and as effortlessly as a leaf falling in summer wind, she fainted, right on top of me.

Later my mother would say the fainting was a show put on for "us white folks"; or, if not that, a competition to see who could prove their grief the greatest; for, after Alma fainted, other mourners even way back in the line toppled over, prostrated in the aisle. I'm not so sure. I watched Alma falling as if from a distance, and I knew how her weight would knock the breath out of my lungs, saw the inevitability of it in slow motion the way you do in accidents or disasters when you know you can't stop them and you wait, helpless. For an instant, I saw her eyes dilated to black before the scratchy fabric of her dress forced mine to close. I don't know how much later it was when I felt, separately, her shoulder pressed to my face, her knees digging into my shins. When they pulled her off me, I was working for breath and my eyes were tearing where the dress had caught them.

My father managed to push us all through the crowd and out of the church by nodding towards everyone and heading straight for that side door. I craned my neck for a last glimpse and saw the scene repeating itself, the minister waving his arms at the people rushing toward the coffin and noticed, in the emptiness at the back of the church, the bronze crucifix punctured by shadows. The last sound I heard was the radiator knocking.

The wall of cold wet air outside hit me and I stumbled. I was breathing again; I could see my breath condense, misty and white, then dissipate before me. As my eyes adjusted to the grey light of that winter afternoon, the colors of things penetrated me, the way they do when the light is opaque and flat and reflects nothing and casts no shadows. Colors became, not a quality light brings to objects, fluid and shifting from minute to minute, but denser,

something that weaves together from inside, tighter and tighter so that it's the fabric itself, the whole substance wrapping itself around you, a sadness you can't pinpoint but more real than anything else you know. It seemed to me I'd never noticed that particular red of the mud the way it was now and it hurt me so my throat tightened and I wanted to break down right there outside the church, though that same red mud had been with me all my life; I knew it inside me without seeing it. The whole time my father was opening the door for me and I was getting into the car I could feel that slick cold bank of red mud without touching it.

My father turned on the ignition, pressed his foot on the gas slowly so the wheels wouldn't spin. I heard the motor climb louder and deeper, the car edge out carefully over the mud to the shiny black curl of paved road and through the rear window I watched that box of a church shrink smaller and smaller. Then we passed over a hill and it disappeared from my view.

A PEACHY METAPHOR

Mercedes Webb-Pullman

You learn how the untrimmed trees
are hard to work around, and might
mean much more work. It helps to see

each apron-load before you start. Reach
to the top, don't look down. Blind,
you learn how. The untrimmed trees

scratch at you deliberately
as if these guarded peaches, ripe,
mean much. More work, it helps to see,

will earn you money, make you free
and independent, buy your life.
You learn how. The untrimmed trees

can trap your ladder suddenly
and peaches falling from a height
mean much more work. It helps to see

shapely acres of pruned peach trees,
such pleasures to pick they make you smile.
You learn how the untrimmed trees
mean much more work. It helps to see.

A SOUTHERN HAIKU

Mercedes Webb-Pullman

hauling empty net
silhouetted fisherman -
Mississippi blues

BLOODLINES (A REGIONAL DRAMA IN SEVEN PARTS)

Dewey Fox

I.

Gather us, someone, whomever I'm petitioning. Take our wrists and
Pull our hands along the line so we might discern its coordinates, so

We might come to feel the dark sheet stretched along the division.

II.

At sixteen, running through the endless backyard of a Rising Sun
Girl whose parents' property stretched north nearly to the border,

Drunk on secreted bourbon and Cokes, I aimed the last two charges
In a Roman candle at a square white stone pushing up out of the

Grass just before the tree line. Both shots sailed off into the woods.
Later I asked the hostess why the white stone was there: Daddy

Said that's a Mason-Dixon marker. I skinned my toe on that thing
About down to the bone one time running around playing tag.

A voice, a boy's, out in the dark of the yard but close, called back:
Bullshit. It's a gravestone. Some farmer buried his kid there.

I never sorted out who was telling the truth. Perhaps they both were.

III.

A mile west of the white stone stands a bar, the basement of which,
It's said, hosted meetings for Maryland's last active Klan chapter. I've

Heard this affirmed, refuted. I hope it's a myth, but don't think it is.

IV.

My great-great-uncle Hezekiah, an upstate potato farmer with little
Stake in it or anything outside the family's dirt plot, marched south with

The 141st New York and made it to Towson, where he took a Confederate
Minié ball to the thigh and bled away before a surgeon could see him.

Another blood relation, John, a Harford County boy born and bred ten
Miles south of the line, an actor and a famous one, strode one night

Into a theater booth and aimed his only shot at the President's head.

V.

At ten, on a tour of Fort Delaware, where the Union shipped captured
Johnnys to starve or rot, a reenactor tried to recruit me for the Army of

The North but stopped the induction short after he asked my birthplace:
Hellfire son, I can't take you, even with all your teeth and knowing how

To read. You're from Maryland. That's by-God Southern. Can't have it.

VI.

At a traffic light on Pulaski Highway, a mile from where I was born,
The driver of the pickup behind me lays on his horn when I don't go

Immediately on green. The Georgian in the passenger seat flicks her
Cigarette out into the grass divider, exhales, says: You Yankee trash.

Always in a goddamned hurry to get nowhere. I don't get you people.

VII.

There on the dark sheet, faint as a watermark, is the Southern Crux.

HANK'S HAT

Mike Murphy

It was late. I woke up in the passenger seat when Kruk pulled off the highway into the gravel lot of an all-night diner and shut off the engine of the pickup truck.

"Where are we?"

"Mingo County. Last stop before Kentucky and Tennessee."

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and followed him into the diner. He walked with a slight limp which he liked to tell strangers came from being stomped by an ornery bronco he was trying to bust in Laredo but I knew it was really the result of an old high school football injury, back when the local papers had called him the "Greenbrier Cannonball."

The place smelled of sweet molasses and burned hash browns. Kruk took his white cowboy hat off his head, walked to the farthest red vinyl-covered booth, and sat down facing the door.

"The Doc Holiday spot…always keep your back to the wall and your eyes on the door, son."

I slid into the booth across from him.

Kruk had taken to calling me "son" in a deep Southern drawl because he thought it made him sound more Texan or something. Kruk—whose birth name was Clarence—liked to pretend he was a real cowboy but nobody wore cowboy hats in West Virginia except the country bands that played the Hilltop Lounge every Saturday night. He was my mother's cousin, fifteen years older than me. More like an uncle really.

Our family, the Hammons, had always been loggers until all the big trees had been cut down. Then we were coal miners until

the government men said it was too dirty to burn anymore. Now we took work wherever we could find it or picked ginseng and bloodroot out in the woods to make ends meet. In a few decades our family had become a band of travelling gypsies.

I'd never known Kruk well growing up because he'd gotten out of the mountains early, moving first to Baltimore to work in the Sparrows Point steel mill and then up to Detroit to work on an assembly line banging out Chevy Impalas. He'd never married despite all his big talk about girlfriends that included, at one time or another, dancers, bounty hunters, rich widows, and one who ran a snake farm in Florida somewhere. I'd see him every few years at the family reunions we'd have at Tygart Lake State Park, but that was it. He'd worn the hat as long as I could remember.

I'd just spent the summer after graduation working with him on the line. It was good money while it lasted and I got my union card. But once the economy tanked and the easy credit dried up, no one was buying new cars and the counting men moved in. GM shut the plant down and shipped the equipment to Juarez. Now, based on a tip from one of Kruk's buddies, we were headed to Texas to look for work in the refineries. We'd been driving since morning and were just passing through, not even stopping to see family.

"I never feel like I'm truly back home until I cross the Lost River and the bridge over Big Lick Creek and the mountains start to crowd themselves in." He wiped his forehead off with a red bandana he'd taken to keeping in his back pocket. It was another of his cowboy affectations, just like the beat-up roper boots he'd found in some thrift store.

I'd begun to notice that Kruk always set the white hat down real close beside him so it was touching his body or at least within easy reach. He never hung it on a hook or tossed it casually onto the table like most men would do.

The hat had a thin pinkish-tan ribbon wrapped around the base, a stiff horseshoe crease in the middle, and a short-angled brim more resembling a fedora. A field hand would say it was too "dressy," not a real working-cowboy's hat, but it wasn't overly fancy either.

A sturdy-legged waitress who looked like she'd rather be anywhere else came over and we both ordered black coffee and eggs, sunny side up. The rubber soles on her shoes squeaked as she walked across the freshly mopped floor which still looked dirty, stained from years of ablutions of spilled gravy, pancake syrup, and rhubarb pie.

"Can I ask you something I been wondering about Kruk?"

"Shoot, son."

"What's with the hat? You sure seem mighty attached to it."

He didn't say anything for a minute, just twirled the toothpick he always held between his teeth and stared at me.

"Well, there's a story to this here hat," he finally said, picking it up from the booth and turning it, waving it in the air like he was trying to catch an invisible butterfly. "I don't much like talking about it."

"No?"

I knew if Kruk said he didn't like talking about something it probably meant he wanted to talk about it, or at least he wasn't opposed to it. Kruk was contrary like that.

"That's right, son. See, I've had this hat for near on twenty years now. Man that sold it to me said it was cursed. But nothing bad ever happened to me 'cause of it. In fact, just the opposite. I ain't had a bad day since. So I call it my lucky hat." He grinned and put it back down on the booth next to his leg.

"How in the hell can a hat be cursed?"

I couldn't help but snicker and chuckle a bit when I said it. He looked straight at me, his grin now gone. His blue eyes were the color of the sky just before it snows and deadly serious, seeming to say that speaking of curses and such was no laughing matter, a thing not to be mocked.

He didn't say anything more and let the conversation drop but I could tell he was thinking about it, trying to come up with the right words. Then he rubbed his face with both meaty hands, a weary man about to undertake a long journey he didn't want to start on, and spoke as if he was lecturing a wayward child.

"Son, I reckon a hat can be cursed just as easy as any other damn thing, just like a person or animal can be cursed. Hell, there's been

curses rendered since ancient times. Ain't you ever read the Bible?"

I looked around the dingy diner. The windows were dark voids filled only with the black night outside. There were a few truck drivers sitting on stools at the far end of the counter eating in silence. The white-aproned cook's head bounced in and out of the open kitchen window and a bored-looking Mexican busboy folded napkins next to the cash register. Other than them and us and the squeaky-shoed waitress, the place was empty.

"Well, what did the man who sold it to you say about the curse?" I purposely ignored his Bible crack because the last thing I wanted to do at three a.m. was to get Kruk started on scripture verse.

He paused again still staring right through me, trying to decide how much he wanted to share. The waitress brought our coffee and eggs and put them down on the Formica table like she was doing us a favor. He waited until she squeak-squeaked back to the kitchen before continuing, leaning in across the table, as if he didn't want anyone else in the place to hear the tale he was about to tell, and whispered,

"This hat belonged to Hank Williams himself. He was wearing it when he died. I bought it for one-hundred dollars from a fella named Woody Beauregard at a flea market in Oak Hill, up in Fayette County, years ago."

I almost spit out my coffee. "And you believed that?" I stammered.

"Got no reason not to, son. You see, Woody—the man I bought it from—lived just up the road from Oak Hill. Oak Hill's one of those places in America where nothing ever happened. But then something did."

He poured hot sauce on his eggs and looked at me as if that explained everything.

"So what does that prove?"

"It don't prove a damn thing, son, but it makes it highly likely that this here hat is the legendary cursed hat of Hank Williams."

He saw the bewildered look on my face, not comprehending. He went on.

"You see Oak Hill is the little speck of a town where Hank died in the back of his baby-blue Cadillac on New Year's Day morning,

Nineteen-hundred and fifty-three. Hank had a neighbor kid drive him up from Alabama to play a couple of shows in Charleston but the weather was bad, real bad—cold freezing rain and fog. They was runnin' late and the promoter was givin' 'em Cain so they decided to drive on through the night, New Year's Eve. Shoot, you know how it is to drive these southern West Virginia roads at night in the rain and fog, curvy as hell like they was laid out by some drunken Indian…"

I shook my head in the affirmative but he'd already moved on.

"…damn near a death wish if you ain't from these parts…so… where was I?….oh yes, it was around six-thirty in the morning New Year's Day when the sky finally started to lighten. The kid pulled into the Skyline Drive-in which wasn't nothing more than a cinderblock greasy-spoon joint on the highway outside of town—kinda' like this place here." He waved his arms vaguely at the empty booths.

"Hank was asleep in the backseat with his hat…this here hat… covering his face and eyes." He picked the hat up again in case I had somehow forgotten what we were discussing and covered his own face with it to demonstrate.

"So the kid goes in, takes a piss, and when he comes back out he notices that Hank's jacket and blanket have fallen off him. The kid goes to cover him back up and feels Hank's hand. It was cold and stiff as two-dollar steak. The kid knows something's wrong so he jumps into the car and speeds into town hoping to find a hospital. He pulls into the Pure Oil filling station which was owned by a fella name of Pete Burdette and asks Pete to call for help. Pretty soon the sheriff shows up and they take the body over to the hospital and the Doc certifies that ol' Hank's dead as a doornail. The official cause of death was listed as heart failure compounded by acute alcoholism. Hank did like his whiskey you know. The man from Tyree Funeral Home came over and picked up Hank's body. And that was that. They used to call Hank the 'Hillbilly Shakespeare' so I guess dying in a pissant town like Oak Hill was as good a place as any."

He tore off a piece of rye toast and used it to sop up his runny eggs.

"So what about the curse?" I asked again. "You didn't explain the curse."

He took a swig of coffee and swished it around in his mouth before continuing.

"Im'a gettin'there, son. Hold your horses. It took a day or so for Hank's kin to drive up to claim his body. In the meantime, the sheriff had stored Hank's Cadillac in one of the bays of Pete Burdette's filling station. When Hank's mother Lillian arrived – she was the first one—she went to the funeral home and picked out a silver Batesville casket with white satin insides and one of Hank's white cowboy suits that was in the trunk of the car to bury him in. Hank's pretty young wife, Billie Jean, showed up a few hours after his mother did. Billie Jean had an hourglass figure and flame-red hair but not much else going for her. Lillian had brought paperwork with her that proved Billie Jean was still married to another man when she married Hank so Lillian got to make all the funeral decisions as she was considered next-of-kin to the satisfaction of the Sheriff. He described her as: 'stately and composed…she held her grief.' Now ain't that a helluva phrase for a mother who's just lost her son…'she held her grief'?"

I nodded my head but he was already gone on again.

"Well, after all the arrangements had been made Hank's mother and the kid drove back to Alabama in the baby-blue Cadillac and old man Tyree—the funeral home Director—drove Hank's body back in the hearse. Not sure how Billie Jean got home but she would soon marry Johnny Horton who was one of Hank's musician friends. Johnny went on to record the hit song "Battle of New Orleans" and was a fine singer in his own right…but he weren't no Hank Williams. God only made one of him. Anyway, I'm gettin' off-track again. Where was I?...oh yeah, so Tyree, he drove that hearse fifteen hours straight through to Montgomery and kept hearing all of Hank's songs being played on the local radio stations…"Your Cheatin' Heart," "Hey Good Lookin'," "Lovesick Blues,"… every damn one of them, all with Hank himself lying dead in the back. Imagine that! Tyree said every time he'd stop for gas at a filling station the attendants would see the West Virginia license plates and ask if he was carrying Hank

back home. When he'd say, "yes," they'd wipe the windshield clean and polish up the fenders a bit and, more often than not, let him have the gas for free."

Kruk took the last piece of rye and wiped his plate clean with it, going around in circular motions.

"The curse! What about the damn curse?"

"Well, hold on. I'm gettin' to it. A man shouldn't be in a hurry when a good story's being told. So…where was I? Ah, yes….so after things had settled down in Oak Hill, people soon started seeing Pete Burdette walking around town wearing this nice white cowboy hat. Pete didn't make no secret about it. He said it was Hank's hat and that Lillian—Hank's mother—had told him he could have it in gratitude for storing Hank's car in his garage. Most folks, knowing Pete the way they did, didn't believe him and just figured he'd stolen it in all the excitement. Rumors even went around that someone had Hank's Martin guitar and someone else had his Dixon boots that Ernest Tubb had bought for him, but those things were never reported missing. Now Hank's pearl-handled .45 pistol did go missing and was never found. Least not yet. Some folks believed Pete stole that too. But back to the hat… Pete wore it everywhere for a few months. He even started bragging that Billie Jean had given him a kiss before she left town. He would strut around like a Rhode Island Red he was so proud of that hat…until his hair started to fall out. First a little bit here and there that he would notice in the shower. And then it started falling out in clumps. Well, within six months of putting on Hank's hat, Pete Burdette was as bald as a cue ball. When folks started asking him what happened to his hair he blamed it on the hat. Said it was cursed. Said he thought it might've been because he kissed Hank's pretty young wife. Whatever the reason, he never wore it again. He eventually sold it to the man I bought it from, Woody Beauregard, for five dollars just to get it out of his house. Pete took to drinkin' heavy and a couple years later ended up shooting himself in his bald head out behind his Pure Oil garage, right next to the bay where he'd stored Hank's Cadillac. Least that's the way the story was told to me by Woody. So… you can see why folks thought the hat was cursed."

Kruk signaled the waitress for more coffee and asked for the check.

"Well how do you know that's the same hat?" I asked him. "Couldn't that guy have been feeding you a line? A hundred bucks is a lot of money for a hat."

He looked at me like who was I to doubt his story or doubt the power of a cursing. He reached down and picked up the hat for a third time and slowly turned it over to where I could see its insides.

"Look at the headband," he whispered, "just next to the maker's tag—everyone assumes Hank wore a Stetson but it's actually a Resistol Rancher… and tell me what you see."

He shoved the hat closer across the table. In the bright fluorescent light of the diner I could just make out what looked to be faint initials written in faded blue ballpoint pen. They were so light they were almost invisible but there was no mistaking the crisply printed block letters: HW.

Kruk pulled the hat back and looked at me with one of those now-do-you-believe-me-shit-eating grins and arched his bushy eyebrows. I didn't tell him that anyone could have written those initials on there and made them look old. He must have seen the doubt that remained on my face. His grin widened into a broad smile as if something beautiful had just occurred to him.

"Here, son. If you don't believe me, if you don't believe in the curse, go ahead and put it on your head. Try it on. I dare you."

He extended the hat to me across the table with two hands, palms up as if he was making a holy offering.

I didn't take it. I suddenly felt chilled.

"No thanks. I believe you."

I didn't really believe him but enough doubt had crept into my head and my gut was churning which could have just been the greasy eggs. What if Kruk was telling the truth? Maybe it really was Hank's hat. Maybe it really was cursed. I wasn't in a position to take chances.

Kruk pulled the hat back from me and put it on his head, tugging the brim down snuggly over his black hair that he wore slicked back with a shiny Vitalis sheen. He leaned back and laughed. It was a guttural laugh that sounded like it rumbled up

from some deep, dark place, like it could have come up from one of the flooded-out mines that dotted the mountains outside of Oak Hill and Mingo County, holes that still held the bones of dead men in their cold hollows.

"So tell me then," I said. "If that's all true, then how come you still got hair Kruk? How come you ain't been cursed like Burdette was?"

He laid a twenty-dollar bill on the table, stood, and hitched his pants up by his big belt buckle. He stuck a fresh toothpick between his teeth. Then he looked at me like I must be the most naïve idiot who'd ever been born.

"Well holy hell son, I ain't never kissed a dead man's wife or stole a dead man's gun and a curse is only as bad as the one it gets conjured upon."

"Come on. Let's go. It's a long-ass drive to Amarillo," he huffed as he limped off towards the door, the white hat perched atop his head pointing like a beacon to the waiting truck and the dark parking lot, pointing somewhere to the south, somewhere to the west.

I rose and followed him out. Merle Haggard was singing Kern River from one of the tableside jukeboxes and I thought it was just about the saddest song I had ever heard, sadder maybe even than any of Hank's.

As the waitress slipped the money into her apron and the busboy looked up from his folding, I wondered if curses might just be the myths we tell ourselves about ourselves, created by lonely men and hurt women and angry rivers, to explain the things in this world that can break a good man's heart.

ADVICE

Wendy Taylor Carlisle

By a lake shaped like a cartoon parrot
We practiced the simple art.
You were 17 and I was 19, two years
between us and then I was twenty.
This is the simple math.
It was Florida in the Sixties and
your aunt said, don't grin honey,
you don't want to work your skin
like that. She told me, one day
you'll be dead, but until then put on
some lipstick, wear a cute skirt.

SAY YES

Wendy Taylor Carlisle

I don't remember much about our house—
the Sears plaid sofa, the shotgun kitchen that exploded
into a breakfast room, the small bedroom
he and I called 'ours.' I wrote in the nook
which should have been the closet but was instead
a set-in desk with a glass-covered top fastened to the wall,
a dime-store filing cabinet pushed underneath.
I couldn't look out the window there was no window.
On the other side of the wall was the Sears sofa
and the GE Hi-Fi, radio, record player with its
stack of 45's and 33's. In that kitchen
I learned to take a hit. With that GE I drowned out
the curses. On that sofa I learned to smoke pot.
In that bedroom I learned to say yes as if I meant it.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

J. Patrick Henry

After Mervin Smith passed away his body lay in state at Black's Funeral Home in Creekbed, West Virginia for weeks. Not that he was actually on view all that time (he was in cold storage); "lay in state" was simply a phrase that Maude, his wife used to make the situation sound a bit better. Fact was, she had no money to pay for the burial. Thus Mervin's corpse fell victim to what people in town took to calling (with apologies to the Irish) "The Troubles".

The Troubles began long before they acquired that name, and for a reason that most people had difficulty remembering. Some pointed to an earlier funeral as the cause, which makes you wonder how is it the dead can complicate the lives of the living long after they're gone. Often it's due to poor estate planning, which is exactly what happened in this case.

The problem started after Willard, Mervin's older brother, died as the result of an industrial accident the year prior. He left behind an antique business, a pile of cash, a nearly new pick-up truck, but, unfortunately, no will. His lawyer said he'd made numerous appointments to start on it, but never followed through. Willard wasn't the first Smith to die intestate (a term that, when Mervin heard it, made him think that Willard's privates had been harmed in the accident that killed him), but he was the first to leave behind enough assets worth arguing over.

Now you might think, given what went on when Mervin died, that Willard was stored next to his brother in Black's back room, but he was smart enough to prepay his for arrangements, and so his funeral went off with but one not so minor glitch. Seems

Willard misunderstood what it meant to pre-pay burial expenses. Oh, he gave Mr. Black the agreed upon amount to set up the trust account, but each year when a statement arrived showing how much interest had accrued on the account, Willard would walk down to the bank and withdraw exactly that amount. He didn't understand that the interest belonged to the funeral home and no one realized what he'd been doing until it was too late. The family was surprised to receive a bill for an additional $1500 for his funeral and it was that bill, never paid, that caused Mr. Black to refuse to bury Mervin without receiving the cash up front.

The absence of a will became a thorny problem given that Willard was a lifelong bachelor and died without any direct heirs. Of *secondary* heirs, however, there was quite a passel.

Mervin and Maude had three kids, Merle, Martin and Maisie (their names a nod to M&M's, Maude's favorite candy) and Enos, the youngest Smith brother, and his wife, Eleanor, had three as well—Jared, Megan and Amanda.

Even before The Troubles there were fault lines opening up in the family, often involving the wives. Eleanor, for example, was thought to put on airs; she acted as if her and Enos' branch of the Smith family was more modern than the others. In addition to the children's trendy names, there was a satellite dish in the back yard, a built-in gas grill and magazines delivered right to the door by the mailman. Granted, it was only *TV Guide*, but to Eleanor, the fact that their coffee table had something on it besides an ashtray and the remote control spoke of a certain level of sophistication she said was lacking among the rest of the Smith clan.

The thing that sparked The Troubles occurred when, a month after Willard's funeral, Maude learned that Jared, Enos' and Eleanor's oldest, was driving around in Willard's truck. It was actually Mavis, her daughter, who first noticed it. She was jealous and argued that, being older than Jared, she had just as much right to that truck as he did. Maude confronted her husband about it.

"Aw hell, Maude," Mervin said, "Jared always had a key to that truck. He helped Willard deliver his antiques on weekends and Willard'd let him use it anytime he liked. I can't see why Jared

shouldn't keep driving it until the estate is settled. That can't be much longer, can it?"

That's where he was wrong, because when a person dies intestate the law gets involved, and when the law gets involved, lawyers get involved, and when lawyers get involved, billable hours start to add up and, as we all know, billable hours, like jack rabbits in Australia, have no significant predator. Unless someone steps in to stop it they keep right on multiplying.

The Troubles clicked up a notch a few weeks later when Maude was in the bank and happened to see Enos at the counter filling out a withdrawal slip. She watched as he crossed something out and took a fresh slip, throwing the other in the trash basket at his feet. She turned so that Enos couldn't see her and, as she finished her business and headed out the door, she dropped her purse on the floor. While gathering up her things she slipped a hand into the wastebasket, pulling out the paper Enos had discarded. She got in her car and drove away, waiting until she got home to examine it.

When she sat down and looked at it she gave out with a shriek, "Mervin! I *knew* something was fishy. Look at this withdrawal slip. This is Enos' handwriting and he's taking money out of Willard's account and half of that belongs to us. Your brother is stealing your inheritance!"

"Now Maude," said Mervin, "I'm sure there's an explanation for this. Enos and Willard did business together sometimes and this money could just as easily belong to Enos as it does…er did to Willard."

Maude was not satisfied. "If you won't do anything about it then I'm calling the lawyer. I refuse to let your brothers connive to cheat us out of what's rightfully ours, even if one of em is dead and gone."

"Maude," cautioned Mervin, "the only thing you'll accomplish by calling that lawyer is to put more of our bread into his mouth."

As it turned out, Mervin was correct, because the account in question was a joint one used for business, and the lawyer explained that everything in it legally belonged to Enos as much as to Willard, and so technically wasn't part of Willard's estate.

As time went on and the estate remained unsettled, relations between the two families continued to worsen. Petty things at first. Things that could be written off as oversights. For example, Maude began having headaches any time one of Enos' and Eleanor's children had a birthday. Then, at church, Maude insisted on sitting in the back so as to not have to share the traditional handshake with her in-laws at the end of the service.

Things took a serious turn at the church potluck supper when Eleanor and Maude showed up carrying the same dish. *This* couldn't be written off as a mistake because it was Eleanor's signature recipe, the one she jokingly called "Road Kill Casserole". It wasn't anything elaborate—just your basic tuna noodle recipe with venison in place of the tuna—but when Maude walked in with the same recipe in an even larger dish, the significance wasn't lost on anyone. It was as if Maude had shown up at the Grange dance wearing the same dress as Eleanor, but with more cleavage showing.

The final straw, the thing that led to Mervin's untimely demise, occurred at the local McDonald's at lunchtime on a Thursday afternoon. It was Eleanor's habit to bring along a sack of burgers when she took her daughter to her weekly play date and, coincidentally (or not), Maude was in the Drive Thru lane at the same time as Eleanor, and just ahead of her. Maude watched Eleanor in her rear view mirror as the line moved slowly ahead. Maude seethed as she watched Eleanor fix her lipstick in her mirror. "*My god*," Maude thought, "*The rich bitch has to gussy herself up for the pimply faced boys at the drive thru? She's crazier than I thought!*" Then, comparing her ten-year-old rustbucket to the new Ford Eleanor was driving she became even angrier. "Probably bought with Willard's money!" she said. "Well, I'll show her!"

With that, she put her car in Park, took the key out of the ignition and slipped it into her handbag. When the line ahead of her moved Maude's car didn't. Eleanor noticed the growing gap and tapped lightly on her horn.

Maude, without turning around, waved her hands in the air as if to say, "Sorry, I don't know what's wrong with my car."

After another minute passed car horns began to blare.

"Hey, let's go!" Eleanor shouted as she leaned out her window.

The McDonald's manager came out to see what was holding up his Drive-Thru line at the peak of the lunch rush. Approaching Maude's car he said, "Hey lady, let's move it. You're holding everybody up."

"I'm so very sorry," Maude said, "my key dropped out of the ignition and now I can't find it."

Eleanor, blocked in with nowhere to escape, was now livid. The stress of running late, the heat of the day, and her low blood sugar coalesced into the perfect emotional storm. She released her foot from the brake, letting her car creep forward. When her front bumper tapped the back of Maude's car both she and the manager turned to look back. That's when Eleanor realized who was causing the commotion, and she snapped. She backed up to gain some momentum and hit the accelerator, banging into Maude's car again, hard enough to make Maude's head snap backwards and the manager to jump back and land on his behind in the grass.

From a seated position he yelled, "Hey lady, calm down! I've got this under control."

"Like hell you do." Eleanor shot back, "I'm starving and you don't realize who you're dealing with. Trust me, that woman is bonkers. If you don't get her moving I'll ram her again!"

With that she climbed out of her car and approached them. Looking her sister-in-law straight in the eye she said, "Maude Smith, if you don't move that car I'm going to move it myself!"

"Oh. You're hungry are you, Eleanor? Well then have some of these!" And with that Maude reached into her purse, pulled out a large bag of M&M Peanuts and threw it in Eleanor's face, breaking her glasses and raising a welt around one eye. Then she pulled the key from her purse, started her car and peeled out of the parking lot.

Just as Maude arrived home and began to tell Mervin what she'd done and why, the phone rang. It was Enos, calling to complain on Eleanor's behalf. Poor Mervin. He had Maude yelling in one ear and Enos in the other when he noticed a growing tightness in

his chest. By the time the ambulance arrived he was down for the count. They continued their efforts to revive him all the way to the hospital, but he was declared DOA before his gurney could even be unloaded.

Mervin's passing was a shock, and to Maude most of all. He'd left her barely enough to keep the family fed and housed. Paying cash for a funeral was out of the question. She didn't know where to turn. Enos was willing to help, but Eleanor, still feeling the effects of the McDonald's confrontation, would not agree. "*If only Willard's estate could be settled*," Maude thought, "*that would solve so many problems*."

So it was that Mervin's body remained in storage as the months dragged on and relations between the two families grew ever colder. Then, oddly enough, it was that truck of Willard's, the same one that triggered The Troubles back when Jared was seen driving it, that broke the legal logjam.

It happened that Jared lost his truck key and went looking in Willard's workshop for a spare. He found it on a large ring with other keys and he took to carrying the whole set. Seeing this ring of keys on the kitchen counter one evening, Enos picked it up thinking it was his. When he realized his mistake he took a closer look and noticed one odd shaped key that had a code stamped on it. He recognized it as belonging to a safe deposit box. It took the lawyer awhile to track down the bank that used this type of key but once he did he got Surrogates court's permission to open the box. Inside he found a letter from Willard that read:

Dear Mervin & Enos,

If you're reading this letter it means that something happened to me. I intend to start working on my will with the lawyer next week. I know that you two will be surprised by what it says, so I am writing this letter to explain my thinking.

As a rule a man leaves his worldly possessions to his children, but unlike you two, I never had any (or any that I know of….ha ha). In that event you would expect me to leave things to you two. However, after seeing how your two families—especially

your wives—seem to disagree over every little thing, I realized that I couldn't name either one of you as executor without creating more hard feelings. For that reason, I will have my lawyer act as executor and instruct him to do the following:

First, money will be set aside for burial expenses for the two of you and your wives. As you know, I'm a great believer in pre-planning for this eventuality, and I know that neither of you were smart enough to have made any arrangements. You'll be happy to know, however, that there's a nice little bonus when you collect the interest on your burial account each year!

Second, Jared is to get my truck and the right to continue doing business under my name if he so wishes. He was always a good helper to me and I trust he'll take good care of things.

Finally, the rest of my estate will be going to your children. I think that skipping a generation and leaving everything in trust for my loving nieces and nephews will not only assure them a future education, but also keep peace in the family, something I have long wished to see.

Your loving brother,
Willard Smith

It took some time for the signature on the letter to be confirmed, but once that was done the court gave permission for the lawyer to carve up the estate just as it had instructed. This meant that Mervin's funeral could finally proceed, and that the dispute between the remaining two branches of the Smith family could find resolution.

And, finally, although the two women would never truly become friends, Eleanor did attend the long delayed funeral, providing an opportunity for her and Maude to bury not only Mervin, but the hatchet as well.

DANIELS

Fitz Fitzgerald

fishing awaits the epiphany
beneath the ruins of a church
struck by lightning in the hills
rainbow trout on a heron highway
rush the rapids into waterfall
silver-backed until teeth chatter
then bask on a sun-baked rock
loquacious boys wade the Patapsco
the apartment in Brooklyn lost
to an extended camping trip
fishing seeks such epiphany
the wait for a sudden moment
at times it's fawn light
a place to be from

ROLLING ROAD

Fitz Fitzgerald

cut by the enslaved for king tobacco
hogsheads tumbled from plantations
rolled from field to port
we roll like Quakers from the north
nested near Ben Banneker's farm
astounded by his astronomy
convert planters to wheat now taken
via oxen and cart to the deepest harbor
dredged in the largest bay on the coast
onward to Samuel Hartley's hill
where Olive sings a cat bird language
blonde jukebox waxes pregnant
a smart kid sells sincere ferns

SOUTHERN LYRIC

Samuel J. Fox

There are, most days, the smell of black powder on the wind near grandmother's property. The hunters this season are setting their stands, a secret in the throat of the whispering sycamores, ready to wait, a patient, burning twitch in their fingers. A gun report in the distance; I stand looking out over an expanse of yard. I know that a body is laying in Carolina clay or maize now, an antlered crown to be exonerated as trophy display.

In the South, guns become a way to live. Whether in rural piedmont of North Carolina, to the sweaty, humid city of Atlanta, guns equate to good living. Those who own them feel secure in having a pistol in a lockbox, a shotgun under the bed, or a pair of hunting rifles locked in the back of a pickup truck. Yet, whenever I smell black powder, hold the heavy casings of bullets, spent and discarded in forest behind my home, or hear the retort of rifle, I imagine the kick of the stock into a man's shoulder. I can only guess that life and breath in the American South is one marred by, loaded, with violence.

*

Finding myself many evenings in the city of Raleigh, hunkered down at a grated, rusting table outside a palsied coffee shop, the smell that is most prevalent is the smell of burning tobacco leaves and rolling papers. Cigarettes, whether it be a pack of Pall Malls, Marlboros, or American Spirits, have always been present in my life. Wrists dangle in the humidity, like wilting day lilies, smoke issuing from the glowing tip pin-holing the dark.

Big Tobacco makes it cheap here, where fields are plentiful. As is cancer. As is a chain-smoker at a pool hall washing down the acrid taste with an Indian Pale Ale. I've watched men on the street bum cigarettes instead of asking for money. I sit at the coffee shop, sipping and inhaling. Exhaling. In and out. Fire and water. This land is your land, should you come and visit. This land is still repairing itself from Civil War fires, the type that you can still fit in-between your fingertips, level to your lips, taste the close past.

*

Outside the city limits, where the land smells of methane, cooling clay, and slowly dissipating sunlight, you can watch the stars come out. You can spot Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, Orion the Hunter, Draco, Scorpio, and, if lucky, catch a shooting star pulverizing itself: a quick suicide across the night sky. The city is a dim halo on the horizon, and, with the right patch of clover, a flashlight, and a mason jar full of your favorite alcohol, you might find rest.

There is much to be said about a dark sky. The stars cremate their past into our present: they are the only near immortals. Several hundred miles south of the Mason Dixon, you can hear a train go by. It sounds like a dying art, that kind of travel. An echo or a bray of some mechanical beast not wanting to perish, while the red flicker of airplane wings shoot across the sky, blinking as they disappear behind tree tops. In this state, planes had their birth, on the coastline near Kitty Hawk, when two city slickers, smart as razors, flew their glider. You wonder if they knew the type of tragedy they'd initiate: wars easily fought, men gone missing, the atomic bomb dropped as people looked up in something like awe, like despair.

*

It's pronounced Ap-pah-latch-a. Not, Ap-a-lay-shia. There is no hush in its name. It's a sharp click of rocks trickling down a cliff side. The oldest mountains in the world are held like a dulled knife in the pocket of an angry god. They rise at the Western most edge of the Carolinas. I've called them home despite the amount of swindlers, back-woods cutthroats, Southern Baptist hellfire spitters, and moonshine-still maintenance workers.

No matter who cons, no matter who claims a man, no matter who is able to kill with bare hands, a land where the heart goes untamed is a home to me. Come, climb with me. Let's go to the top of Black Mountain. Watch the sun go down. The world is not as large as we'd like to think. Everywhere, guns. Everywhere someone can tar their lungs. Every sky is occupied with aerial travelers. Every mountain is shrinking. The American South is no different. We may speak funny, draw out our diphthongs and slur into an accent. We may drink tea sweetened thick as molasses. Home is not so much a locale as it is the people who fill it. We like our blood thick.

*

When the sky rolls and tumbles upon itself, the slow drain of its color from swatches of picket fence into that of gunmetal, I emerge from the cool clarity of my apartment out into the humid, shattered light. I will practically swim through the air to stand in the parking lot, barefoot, white t-shirt already stuck to chest, and wait. The rain slowly encroaches the dry earth; I spread my arms out and let it soak me down to bone.

Come, says the thunder, and I will teach you percussion. I will teach you to split the world with light and sow it back into something whole. I shuffle in the downpour. The timpani crash from the sky's voice is only as powerful as the rests that separate each beat. Blessed are those living in a region where nature considers no man in the celebration of itself. Each anorexic fork of light, the width of a sapling's branch, connects, for a fraction of a moment, the heavens with earth. I count this among the South's many blessings: that a man, if he stops looking, sees the atmosphere around him as its own ocean of miracles. As soon as it arrives, the storm's voice fades and departs, I lucky to have enjoyed what offering of power and grace the land tithes.

*

The South is not perfect. We fly a flag that should have been surrendered along with a faulted pride. Confederacy still haunts troubled hearts that try to tourniquet off a bleeding that doesn't exist; patch up gunshot wound that has long since already healed in the ideas around them. I confront prejudice whenever I see it.

There is no other race of people but humanity. Whether on the left side or the right side of the fence, the fact remains there is still a barrier to be dismantled.

If one wants to learn how to tear down that separation, take a trip to the Outer Banks. It is there one can stand on the shore to see the gap where there is no fence. Just the tide ebbing in taking offerings of shell, tooth, of mica and sand, the sea accepting only to offer it back. The ocean does not discriminate: it swallows a man or can wash him back in. I have heard if you look over the ocean at sunrise while listening to the echo of a conch shell's rejoicing while the swell of the sea kisses your feet, you will finally know what it means to be at peace. No other place will you encounter gravity's lush existence then at twilight, high tide, the Moon slowly accepting the light given from its sun. No other locale will you be so alone yet know a simple communion so strong it forgoes the love of self, of individuality. It is a love story older than the ground upon which you stand.

*

If you were to look me straight in the eye, you'd find my favorite hiding spot hidden next to my iris. My heterochromia placed a yellow speck next to my pupil, like the island off of a small archipelago in Lake Norman I discovered. It was there I felt like Tom Sawyer after he faked his death. I swim out there to watch the boats. I swim out there to lay on the red clay that swims in my blood. I lay there; wonder what God is.

In the Bible Belt, home is a congregation most Sundays. I don't believe in a God who necessarily cares if you dress up, face the pulpit, pray, heed to altar calls, or drink grape juice to remember his son's death. I believe in a God with a sense of humor. I think he'd sit in the back pew chuckling at how screwy we are. How desperate we look. I swim out to the island. Read scriptures in a dead turtle's bones. Find fossils under brooks that flow like resurrection. I take God with me. He's in the pages of my notebook, scribbles of poems. He's in the blue jay calling as I climb the tree to look out over the water. He's in the stone I chuck across the lake. I listen to Him laugh as it skips. God sings once the stars appear. If you listen, He might just whisper your name

in the breeze. He might have an accent, the kind that punctuates like chatter of elm trees, like mating chirps at three a.m., like the bellow of a boat steering home.

EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT CHICKENS

CL Bledsoe

I.
A girl I used to love who didn't love me had
a childhood friend whose father worked
at a chicken plant. All the spotted chicks
would be drowned, so she begged until her father
brought several home. In their new pen,
the chicks began to peck each other's spots,
their blood splattering, which gave them more spots
to peck, until all died but one. That one, she raised.

II.
My dad and uncles used to dredge out the old silage
at the bottom of the pit, which had lain, fermenting,
for months, shoveled it into a bucket, and let the chickens
have at it until they stumbled and lurched
around the Fish Shack, mimicking their owners.

III.
Erma Bombeck once claimed, as a child, she taught
her pet chicken to walk backwards. Others have claimed
to teach theirs math.

IV.
There are more varieties of chickens than people I've ever met.

V.
At my grandmother's house, they would spend

all day hopping and gliding from a stump
to the swing set to a small tree, but they rarely
got as high as the roof. They ranged free, the road
still gravel, mostly unused, though the odd car
did catch the more adventurous ones.

VI.
Even a pig sty smells less offensive than a chicken coop.
Chickens will de-infest a garden better than any herbicide,
and their feces will fertilize the garden.

VII.
The FDA designations of "cage free" and "free range"
do not, in fact, denote freedom or a lack of cages.

VIII.
On our third and final date, that wasn't really a date, we met
at a friend's farm. There was a pen with pullets of all
varieties. She sat in the grass, to let them come to her.
My daughter overcame her protectiveness and snuggled
beside her while I stood—separate—and watched them smile.

HOW TO COOK A SQUIRREL

CL Bledsoe

The best cut is the legs, a tough dark
meat, like chicken nuggets from a cheap
pizza place but without all the preservatives.

After Mom went into the nursing home,
Dad liked to have me deep fry them whole
and wide-eyed so he could suck

out their eyeballs, a delicacy I never tried.
Squirrel and dumplings is best. One shot
to the head or heart. The fur comes off loose.

Three or four plump ones are enough to fill
a pot with tasty broth I haven't had since
I left for college. My ex-father-in-law

puts out corn and peanuts so half-a-dozen
fat ones live around his house, but my ex- wife
won't let me bring a rifle when I visit.

GRANDMA OKRA

CL Bledsoe

It doesn't grow wild; who knows where
it came from, green and furry, full of seeds

like a primitive pomegranate. Some complain
about the slime but will suffer it in gumbo

if you don't point it out; egg-battered, dipped
in flour, and fried is better. A smattering

of onion, pepper, salt: it doesn't need much; the sharp

green peeks through if you don't over-season. Serve it
with a pork chop smothered in gravy, a side of white

beans with ham hock to taste, cornbread to sop it up
or maybe a ripe garden tomato sliced thick.

THE AUTHORS

Chance Lee is writing a collection of personal essays exploring nostalgia, mental illness, and video games. His essays have appeared in The Rumpus and Tincture Journal. His short fiction has appeared in Best Gay Erotica 2014 (as Lee Hitt) and on the website Every Day Fiction. He currently lives in New Hampshire.

Grace Ebner studies literature, creative writing, and women's studies at the University of Akron. She is currently at work on a collection of poems about women and the body. When not writing, Grace can be found walking her dog, watching *Gilmore Girls*, or getting lost on the internet.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book forthcoming from Circling Rivers called Loplop in a Red City. His work has appeared in: Mudfish, Nimrod, Colorado Review, The Fiddlehead, The Queer South anthology (Sibling Rivalry Press) and elsewhere.

Lynne Price is a dancer, educator, improviser living in Baltimore with their partner, Andrew Klein, and two black cats. Lynne holds an MFA in Dance from University of Maryland.

Mike Lee is a writer, editor, labor journalist and photographer based in New York City. Fiction publications include The Ampersand Review, Paraphilia, Sensitive Skin, Reservoir, Dime Show Review, The Solidago Journal and The Corvus Review. www.mleephotoart.com.

Jacob Budenz is a queer writer, multi-disciplinary performer, and witch bitch currently working on an MFA at The University of New Orleans. You can find some of his work in Polychrome, Assaracus, Hinchas de Poesia, or Glitterwolf, or by whispering to the moon on a partially cloudy night.

Bryonna Jay is a senior at the University of Baltimore. She has a crush on language.

Gershon Ben-Avraham grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, and currently lives in Be'er Sheva, Israel. His story, "Grandma's Postcard," was published in the Winter/Spring 2016 edition of Steel Toe Review. His story, "The Janitor," was published in Issue 18 of Jewish Fiction .net, in September, 2016.

Lori Gravley writes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. She earned her MFA from the University of Texas at El Paso. She has most recently been published in I-70 Review, Burningword, and Crack the Spine. She travels the world fas a USAID consultant, but lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Hear her read her own work and others' on Conrad's Corner and listen to her interviews with poets at WYSO Public Radio (www.wyso.org).

JP Allen is an MFA candidate in poetry at Johns Hopkins, where he also works as an assistant editor for The Hopkins Review. His work has appeared in Cactus Heart, After the Pause, and at the 8th International Congress on Micro-Fiction. He co-hosts Hey You Come Back, a monthly reading series in Baltimore, and teaches with Writers in Baltimore Schools.

Shelby Sprigg is a native Californian and a sophomore at Johns Hopkinds University, where she is double-majoring in Writing Seminars and Neuroscience.

Catherine Moore is the author of three chapbooks including the recent Wetlands (Dancing Girl Press). Her poetry appears in Cider Press Review, Southampton Review, Blue Fifth Review, Caesura, and various anthologies. She won the Southeast Review's 2014 Poetry Prize and was awarded a Nashville MetroArts grant. She's Tweetable @CatPoetic.

Mary Leauna Christensen has lived in Southwest deserts, in kudzu-infested Appalachia, and currently lives in the forever-wet Pacific Northwest with an overly dramatic cat. She is an MFA candidate at Eastern Washington University and a poetry editor at The Swamp. Her work has appeared in Cactus Heart, Permafrost, and in Driftwood Press.

Charles teaches creative writing at Queens University of Charlotte. Besides his poetry chapbook, Stacking Weather, he's had poems and stories in The Cortland Review, Field, Crazyhorse, Eleven Eleven, Nimrod International Journal, Zone 3, and North Carolina Literary Review. He is working on some longer fiction now.

Kerrin Smith's friends know her as "Boner Popper," "B-Pop," and "Kern." Her poems have appeared in Welter, Skelter, and Seltzer Zine, and her plays have been performed at the John Hewitt International Summer School.

Sylvia Fischbach Braden is an artist and writer who has lived in a Hampden rowhouse for more than thirty years. She earned a BFA in Painting from MICA in 1981, and in May 2016 completed her MFA in Creative Writing and Publishing Arts at the University of Baltimore. Sylvia is the author of *Karl Marx Imperial Dispensary and Himalayan Tea Garden*, a collection of poems. Her artwork and writing have been published in The Light Ekphrastic and elsewhere.

By day James [Glisson] battles pestilence and disease but by night he prods the embers of self-reflection with a notebook. He reads equal measures of Larry Brown and Sophocles. He was born in Mississippi and will die in Mississippi.

Anne Whitehouse is the author of six poetry collections. Meteor Shower (2016) is her second collection from Dos Madres Press, following The Refrain in 2012. She is the author of a novel, Fall Love, as well as short stories, essays, features, and reviews.
Mercedes Webb-Pullman: IIML Victoria University Wellington MA in Creative Writing 2011. Poems have recently appeared in Turbine, 4th Floor, Swamp, Scum, Reconfigurations, The Electronic Bridge, Otoliths, Connotations, The Red Room, Typewriter, Main Street Rag, and Pure Slush and in her books. She lives on the Kapiti Coast, New Zealand.

Dewey N. Fox is a poet who lives and works in Baltimore. He was born where the Susquehanna River empties into the Chesapeake Bay. He wants the Orioles to win the World Series.

Mike Murphy lives and writes poetry and fiction in Baltimore. He is a graduate of West Virginia University and does own an actual pair of cowboy boots (but no hat.) His work has been published in numerous journals. He was awarded top prize in the 2016 Maryland Writers' Association's writing contest for short-fiction.

Wendy Taylor Carlisle lives in the Ozarks. She is the author of two books, Reading Berryman to the Dog and Discount Fireworks and four chapbooks, the most recent is forthcoming from Platypus Press, UK. For more information, check her website: www.wendytaylorcarlisle.com.

J. Patrick Henry, a retired public servant, moved on from writing legal mumbo jumbo to more personal prose, both fiction and non-fiction. His work has appeared in Perspective Literary

Quarterly, Scrutiny, Across The Margin, Compass, The Sun, The Remembered Arts Journal, Literally Stories, Write Out and The Buffalo News.

Fitz Fitzgerald believes in 11:11 and number 13. He is a poet who lives in Baltimore. His work recently appeared in Rowhome Lit. His chapbook 17 Reasons is now out, published by AngelHouse Press, Ottawa, Canada, a lovely place.

Samuel J Fox is a queer graduate dropout, essayist, and poet living in North Carolina. He has recently been published in Luna Luna Magazine, A Quiet Courage, and The Miscreant for poetry; he has essays forthcoming in Muse/A Journal and Glassworks Magazine. You can find him at www.samueljfox.com.

CL Bledsoe is the assistant editor for The Dead Mule and author of fourteen books, most recently the poetry collection Trashcans in Love and the flash fiction collection Ray's Sea World. Originally from eastern Arkansas, he currently lives in northern Virginia with his daughter.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Mary Adelle is a poet/woman/friend/lover/animal living in Baltimore. She is the author of *GIRL FLAME*, a collection of feminist poetry.

Adina Ferguson is a writer from Washington, DC. She is the author of the essay collection, *I Don't Want to be Your Bridesmaid*. Check her out at www.adinathewriter.com.

Chris Kosmides is a teacher and writer based in Baltimore, MD. He is the author of the novel, *The Middlemen*.

Sarah Smith is a Baltimore librarian and poet. Her work has appeared in The Light Ekphrastic. She loves hair metal and skateboarding.

Alexander Stathes lives in Baltimore with his wife and son, where he teaches high school English. He writes fiction and creative non-fiction, and is pleased to be part of the team for the third installment of The Avenue.

Michael B. Tager is a writer and editor.