

storySouth



The Best of the South 2005

storySouth: The Best of the South 2005

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publisher and fiction / creative nonfiction editor: Jason Sanford

poetry editor: Jake Adam York

associate poetry editor: Dan Albergotti

special feature editor: Ashley Johnson

storySouth is a quarterly online literary journal that has become well known for its unique look at southern writing. Stories, essays, and poetry published in *storySouth* have been honored by numerous places, including the Chronicle of Higher Education's Arts and Letters Daily, MobyLives, and *e2ink* (the first anthology of best web-published fiction). *storySouth* is also a Contributing Small Press for the Pushcart Prize. Finally, *storySouth*'s annual Million Writers Award has been named a Hot Site by *USA Today* and was the subject of a feature interview with *storySouth* editor Jason Sanford in the *2005 Novel and Short Stories Writers Market*.

storySouth: The Best of the South 2005 is the journal's annual print edition of the best short stories, poetry, and nonfiction published during the last year. An online version of this journal can be found at <http://www.storysouth.com>.

For writers guidelines and more information about *storySouth*, go to <http://www.storysouth.com>.

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Front cover: "Reading upside-down love stories (self portrait)," acrylic on canvas, 20 x 28, October 2002.

Inside back cover: "Sweets for a Sweetie" acrylic on canvas, 24 X 30, March 2004.

Terry Rentzepis's art work was featured in the fall 2004 issue of *storySouth*. More of his art can be seen at <http://www.alltenthumbs.com>.

Front and inside back cover art © 2004 by Terry Rentzepis.

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Publisher's Note

There's an online literary revolution afoot. While all types of print publications—from traditional literary journals to magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*—have seen their circulations dropping in recent years, online magazines and journals have been gaining in both readers and prestige.

If you need any proof of this, simply check out the *2005 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market* (N&SSW). Two of the book's feature interviews focus on the growing field of online fiction.

In the first interview, editor Jill Adams of the *Barcelona Review* talks about how online magazines and journals are now legitimate places to be published. In the second interview, I talk about *storySouth*'s annual Million Writers Award for best online fiction of the year.

When you add these interviews in with the 2005 N&SSW Market giving online markets their own section in the book, it is hard for any writer to argue that online magazines and journals have not come into their own.

And yes, there is a reason I'm talking about writers accepting online publications. In my experience, most readers come to a story, essay, or poem from one point of view: Is this piece of writing worth the part of my life I'm giving to reading it? If the story is well written, if the poem engages, if the essay delves into insight and understanding, then odds are the reader will not care if it was published in an online or print publication. (And before anyone asks, I know many readers still prefer to read longer works on paper. However, if these readers know that an online publication does quality work, then they are usually willing to print off what they want to read).

Writers, though, care about much more than just publishing their work. Not only do they want to know that people are reading their work, they want their peers—and families and friends—to respect this new notch on their publishing credentials. Prestige. Honor. These are the reasons that many writers were initially suspicious of online magazines and journals. As many writers were saying a few years ago, if you can't hold a magazine in your hand, then it's not a true publication.

This line of reasoning surfaced in the response to an essay of mine in the winter 2002 issue of *storySouth*. In the essay, I said that new writers benefited more by being published in online magazines and journals than in traditional print literary journals. My reasoning was simple: because online publications usually have more readers than the smaller print journals that accept writers at the start of their careers, new writers gain more exposure online than in print.

The response to that essay was fierce. A number of writers started heated discussions in online discussion groups and stated that online magazines and journals didn't matter and were little better than self publication. If anyone noticed the irony of these writers using the online medium to put down online publications, no one said so.

However, it's amazing what the passing of time can accomplish. Over the last few years, the best online magazines and journals have proven themselves to writers through strong editing and large numbers of readers. In fact, online literature has become so accepted that the *New York Times Book Review* recently ran an essay titled "Where to Find Digital Lit," which highlighted the growing online literary life.

It can only be a good thing when the literary establishment begins to accept online publishing as legitimate.

Now some online journals and magazines are going full circle. *Eclectica Magazine* (www.eclectica.org) has published a wonderful print anthology of their best fiction, while other online journals like *Small Spiral Notebook* (www.smallspiralnotebook.com) have begun publishing print editions.

The reason for doing this is simple: To reach more readers—especially those who still prefer to do their reading by holding paper and ink publications. It is for this reason that *storySouth* is now publishing this yearly print anthology of its best fiction, essays, and poetry.

storySouth: The Best of the South 2005 features an amazing line-up of writers. Of the authors in this issue, some are just writing their first poems and stories, while others have been writing for decades. These writers have been published in almost every literary journal in the country, from *The Southern Review* to *TriQuarterly*. Two have previously published stories in *New Stories from the South*, one has published work in *Best American Short Stories*. Several have their first books scheduled for publication in the coming year, while others have published numerous books. All of them are writers at the top of their game.

Yes, online publishing has come of age.

It has also come full circle.

I hope you enjoy the writings in this issue.

Jason Sanford
publisher and fiction/nonfiction editor
storySouth

A Sampling of the Best Online Literary Journals

Blithe House Quarterly: <http://www.blithe.com>

OUT Magazine calls *Blithe House Quarterly* “The central publishing arm of new queer fiction.”

Diagram: <http://www.thediagram.com>

Schematics, schemes, the structures of complex words. Poems, fictions. Anything with a line.

Eclectica: <http://www.eclectica.org>

Nine stories from *Eclectica* were selected as notable stories of the year (and two of those selected as the best of the year) in *storySouth*'s 2003 Million Writers Award.

Pindeldyboz: <http://www.pindeldyboz.com>

The winner of the *storySouth* 2003 Million Writers Award for best online publication.

Fiction Warehouse: <http://www.fictionwarehouse.com>

An exciting site dedicated to fiction writing, featuring some of the best short stories being published online.

Mississippi Review: <http://www.mississippireview.com>

Still one of the best online literary magazines.

Small Spiral Notebook: <http://www.smallspiralnotebook.com>

A venture into something literary. Contains a great mix of poetry, fiction, memoir and more.

thicket: <http://www.athicket.com>

A new journal focusing on Alabama literature.

Words on Walls: <http://www.wordsonwalls.net>

Literary fiction, poetry, broadsides, and more—all with a southern flair.

Word Riot: <http://www.wordriot.org>

Edgy and provocative fiction, poetry and reviews.

Butterfly McQueen's Oscar: A Lie

by Corey Mesler

“Although little of it remains physically, there is still much to talk about.”

—Richard Raichelson
from Beale Street Talks

* * *

A Necessary Part of the History

As far as I know, the story of Butterfly McQueen's Oscar has never before been told. Its veracity is dubious as hell, but it's half-baked quality—part raw hyperbole and part overdone mythmaking—make it a necessary part of history. I mean everyone's history, but most especially what we'll deal with here, the convoluted taletelling told of Resole McRey.

Now Resole was a fixture on the Street, as natural a phenomenon as the flood, as common an accessory as dusky bluesmen with too much past and no presence, half-heartedly strumming out of untuned guitars in Handy Park. He was ubiquitous, mercurial, out of step but plugged in, simultaneously an insider and the world's best outsider.

No one knows where he came from and, in the end, no one knows where he went. But that's the end. Let's go chronologically.

Resole was a storyteller. This is a fact. He may be the best damn storyteller these parts or anyone's parts had ever seen or heard. Resole's stories encompassed all stories, they went hither and yon, they yinned and yanged, they yoyoed out to the end of the line and snapped back like a ricocheted comet. They were the discontinuation and the inauguration, amen, and the circle in a circle was maybe born in them and reiterated endlessly since, but that is just the warp and woof and the substance is what I'm gonna tell you now.

The story was only one story.

The story Resole sold was the story of his life—his own precious life. It was the story of Beale Street. No one knows when he started telling it, along about his teen years near as anyone can figure but that is just mathematics and of no real interest. Resole told the story of his own life and he told it in such detail the telling took as long as the living and so you had to attend to the minutest things when you listened. But such is the life of every man. Such are we all.

Believe it or don't.

Resole told about the schooling, about the raising, about the first stirrings in his primordials. He told about eating and singing and whispering and sleeping (though he slept when telling of the sleeping as you can imagine) and the playing and the shitting and the laughing and the crying and the masturbating and the bathing and every sigh and hiccup and blink and every time he changed the part in his hair. He told the waking in the morning, breakfast,

newspaper, coffee, shave, perambulation, lunch, nap, telephoning, television, visits, dinner, the long liquid hours between repast and slumber, the silvery evenings, as slippery as memory, as powerful. He told the dreams and the disappointments and the hurt and the seven sins and the lies and the pride and he told the love. He told it with an honesty of Biblical proportions, a fury that holds men in its sway, a supranatural thing.

The telling took as long as the living. Resole told his story endlessly, rain or shine. One day he was there and the telling had begun and it was a force of nature—or it was the devil as some said—but it was as real as the rain and sun and as tireless as the stars.

By the time of this here story Resole had already passed the part of his life where the telling began and by now, as we know, he was telling about the telling and his audiences had dwindled and interest had waned but Resole McRey was still a phenomenon and the wonder of him was undiminished. Some people came back to hear tell about the parts where they first appeared to listen, lo these many years ago. The telling of the telling included all who listened, as must be.

The telling took as long as the living.

Some say Resole was the illegitimate offspring of a furtive coupling between a once respectable white doctor and a young tenebrous conjurewoman, years ago in the dim twilight of the world, in the days before the music died. It was hard to tell from Resole's hue just exactly what race he was—human for sure, yes—due to the weathering of his exterior. He may have indeed been mixed-raced. Who knows?

Besides, some say Butterfly McQueen didn't even win the Oscar, that she died prizeless, bereft. So there you go about what people know.

And Resole stood the same damn spot on Beale Street every day of his life, as constant as the blues, as solid a spectacle as the statue of Mr. Handy itself. *Mirabile dictu*. It's said he was there in the beginning but we folks with more sober inclinations understand that Resole McRey came from somewhere and when he had gone he went back there, like the tides maybe, like Brigadoon. Resole was the world's foremost storyteller because Resole was the story himself.

Now rightly here is not the place to relate the story Resole told, the story of Resole. (Though the story necessarily encompassed many from here about.) His life is not yet transcribed and maybe never will be. I ain't the man to do it. And I've got other fish to fry.

This is the story of Butterfly McQueen's Oscar.

As I said.

* * *

Butterfly McQueen & the Angels of Beale Street

Now, Butterfly McQueen you all know from *Gone with the Wind* and she doesn't figure prominently or at all in the proceedings, except in the form of a piece of her property which she reported missing and which has been one of the foremost mysteries in the cockeyed annals of tinsel-town history—where that thing done gone. Anyway.

The Oscar itself, where did it go? Who spirited it away, and how, children, most pressing of all, did it end up in Mort Smalley's pawn shop on Beale Street in the year in which this story proceedeth? How indeed.

So, Ms. McQueen you know, and we mentioned Mort Smalley, but it was his daughters, his twin daughters, Valerie and Vivian, who we wish to know better, yes. The witchy pale white twins with the radiance of their blond manes the subject of many counties worth of adoration and admiration. The gorgeous twins who were never apart—Siamese at the souls, it's said—the opposite of Superman and Mr. Kent, one person in two bodies, people, those twins.

And it was the twins, the big-hearted twins, the ones who were always bringing in hurt bugs and stray dogs,

who befriended the ragman, Freeman Blemish. They found him one afternoon on the east end of the street, bent like a kindergartner over a square of sidewalk, drawing circles with a stub of chalk. They stood over him reverently watching his intensity with an intensity of their own, as he drew loop after loop, circles within circles, his chalk diminishing like ice cream, seemingly eternal until it seemed the shaggy ragman was drawing with only a memory of chalk, the circles pulled from the air.

Finally he looked up, squinting, at the magnificent twins with the bright summer sun behind them, their shapely shapes rising from the earth like plant life, their aforementioned aureoles of hair refracting light like cornsilk, and in short, Freeman Blemish thought he was experiencing a visitation. Yes, he thought, angels stood before him and he was sore afraid.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Valerie tinkled.

“Yes, sorry,” Vivian echoed.

“Your circles are quite extraordinary,” Valerie said.

“Would you like us to get you some more chalk?”

Freeman just squinted. The angels could speak.

“My name is Valerie and this is my sister Vivian.”

Freeman’s brain, missing links, connected that there were indeed two beings present, cut from the same supernal raiment. The angels stooped and their faces, though he was resistant to looking directly into them, came perilously close to his. They spoke again, or one of them did.

“Would you like some lunch?”

“Urg,” Freeman managed. He was, as always, starved.

“Um, can we buy you a sandwich? Or would you like to come to our house for some of our father’s Dogpatch Stew?”

And so the sisters led the befuddled ragman to their humble abode and began a friendship which took the three of them right into the middle of this story.

* * *

The Storyteller’s Fans

Meanwhile the storyteller’s story went on and on. A small lunchtime crowd normally attended, sandwiches in hand. A polite burble of commentary and applause awarded every pause, though most pauses were not breaks in the narrative flow but silences for emphasis, silences where there were silences in the history which was being unfolded. Wind in the interstices.

Of course, the big-hearted twins loved Resole McRey. Often it was they who furnished him with meals and a warm place to lay his head (their nearby domicile, the aptly named Betelgeuse). They were his most faithful, his beloved devotees. Sometimes—and this is to go no further for there are minds out there still in their reptilian selfishness, small and unloving—sometimes the girls took care of Resole’s other needs. It was the least they could do, they figured, small recompense for the lifetimes of pleasure the indefatigable griot provided. So sometimes at night, in the stillness of Beale Street shadows, the lovely freemartins took Resole’s manhood out of his attrited trousers and let it feel the fresh evening air and the nunlike ministrations of their silken palms. And, the beauty of it is, they never interrupted the story. With profound respect, they waited for a period of untelling. Some say there is a small spot in the murky shadowed soil on Beale Street where Resole’s seed has been gathering these many years and it will be there that something miraculous is predestined to occur. This is magical speculation, sure, and we file it away as such.

* * *

A Pornographic Outing

Ok, the statuette. It sat at the back of a back shelf at Smalley's Pawn Shop, burnished with age and outside of memory. No one knows how it got there—gypsies some conjecture—sold so long ago not even timeless Mort Smalley remembers from whence it came. Just one more knickknack in an emporium of knicked knickknacks, items which move as if with the winds, coming from there to here, from far away to near at hand, and soon gone again, the transport of the traffic of trade or the trade winds.

And then one day it had to come out. Old Mr. Smalley happened upon it searching for a beatup triton he knew was there somewhere, just what the peculiar, bearded gentleman was asking for. He pulled out the statuette with a short snort, set it aside and produced from the shadows a rusty trowel, turning sheepishly with it in his outstretched hand.

"Thank you, no," the elegant dandy pronounced, spinning on his heels and exiting.

But now Mort Smalley had had his attention drawn away and he hefted the Oscar in his gnarly old hand and brought it back to the counter with him. He was polishing it when his daughters popped in from the luminous perdition of the outdoor world.

"What's that, Pop?" Valerie reported, pulling a yellow Tootsie roll sucker from her perfect mouth.

Vivian just smiled brightly, her tongue rolling around its own orange pop.

"Dunno, girls, found it on a back shelf. Methinks it's some kind of Greek thing. You know, classy. I'm thinking I can shine her up and ask a pretty penny, sell it to one of those tasteful East Memphis dopes," their industrious father answered.

"Sounds good, Father Mine," Valerie said.

Vivian bit down on her sweet mouthful with an abrupt crack.

"What are you two minks up to on this hellishly hot day?" their father asked them as the small statuette began to glow under his manipulation.

"We just took Resole his lunch and now we're thinking about going to the movies," one of the twins said.

"Unless you need us to help you," the other added hastily.

"Nah, nah. You two take the day off. Go see the Pola Negri thing, God I love that Pola Negri."

"Right, Pops," Valerie said, kissing her busy father quickly on his stubbly cheek.

And they blew out the door.

They weren't going to see Pola Negri—hell, they didn't even know who Pola Negri was. No, they were going to the Adult House that just opened a few blocks over. They had been planning it for weeks, ever since they heard about its opening. Curiosity ran in them like bug juice. One of the musicians told them they showed people in full glorious nakedness, doing gloriously naked things. They couldn't even imagine it.

* * *

Love: A Crime

So, we know where the Academy Awards statuette resides at this point. And the twins, the comely twins, are warm and snug in the unrenovated, threadbare theatre seats at Al's Adult Cinema on the corner of Third and Madison, watching a large-boned Swedish actress go down on the love muscle of a flat-bellied hustler and drug addict on the fireplace-sized off-white screen. They are happy. And Resole is tale-spinning, what else.

Freeman Blemish, enters, stage right. He is loopy and weatherworn; he smells of canned fish. He squints at the heartless Southern sun. He is waving one loose-jointed arm wildly at the sky and he has one crooked appendage dug down deep in his bemired clothing fiddling with his own controls. Freeman is lost, Freeman is alien. Freeman is in love.

He makes his way across Beale and locates the door to the old man's pawn shop, knowing the way, memorizing the way. Freeman is looking for the angels, the seraphic Siamese. He wants to drown in their cupboard love.

Above his head a small tintinnabulation announces his arrival, the sound of Terpsichore tuning up. The old man at the counter has his back to the door and he turns slowly like in a dream—it is a dream, a dream Freeman has had somewhere in his forgotten past.

“Hello, Ragman,” the wizened gnome pronounces.

Freeman stands in the doorway with the sun streaming around him, confounded, composed of glim and dust mote. He is protean. He speaks.

“Love,” he says.

“What is it, Freeman? What brings you here?”

The ragman looks wildly around the shop. They are here. He must get past the gatekeeper first. Task number one.

Freeman stalks forward, carried on air. He is in one place and then he is in another. He reaches a hand out (the one from inside his garments) and it hangs in the heightened atmosphere like a sword. It is waiting for the completion of a transmission.

It hangs like a scimitar, like justice.

The hand moves falteringly, sluggishly. It starts for the half-glasses suspended on the face before it, turns slightly, adjusts. It touches, lightly at first, the gleaming tip of a small, golden human-being. It runs along the crown of its small head.

He likes the gentle curve of its pate. It talks to him; it belongs to him.

And then, swift as justice, the hand closes around that head, lifts and strikes. The old man falls. Freeman looks closely at the figure in his grasp, now touched at the tip with a magical drop of blood, which slides down the statue's face, a face reflecting Freeman's own, as if in a circus mirror, so that the blood drop, on its enchanted voyage, appears to be on Freeman's distorted visage. Freeman is hurt. He turns and runs, the twins forgotten now—what had he come for? His heart hurts, he is going to be sick—grasping the trophy like a talisman, out into the sun, straight into the sun.

* * *

Some Harsh Realities

Who knew there would be blood spilt in the story? There is always blood spilt.

Who knew there would be sex, there would be the agitated congress of lubricated humans? There is always lubricated congress of agitated humans.

Who knew the story had no destination? There is never a destination.

Who knew no one knew?

No one, children, ever knows.

* * *

Ghosts and History Songs

Did the shopkeeper die? Are our beautiful twins orphaned, cast on parentless shores?

Sorry to say, yes.

Mortimer Smalley was buried in Elmwood Cemetery, far from the Confederacy but near some heroes of Yellow Fever, on a cool, sunny day, with many in attendance. The twins read a section from Resole's tale (since, we understand, Resole could not be present) which was a particular favorite of their father's, a section about the flood on Beale and the Jewish writer who walked the newborn shores and remembered it all to recreate it later in Biblical prose, for all time, for all time.

Many of the aged dancers and entertainers from the defunct clubs came to pay respects. An old man sang a number about Mississippi and one of the dancers swayed slightly, her arthritic hips deep in recollection.

It was a wake after, the procession leading down Old Beale, past the scene of the murder, closed to business now forever, ghosts skittering into the gutters as the music went by, singing echoing from the heavens, songs about the history. History songs. Mort Smalley laid to rest.

* * *

Someone Was Hurt

And the murderer, skulking in doorways, living in shadows, barely aware of his own guilt, but knowing he had done something, some harm, somewhere. Someone was hurt, hurt bad. That was what the singing meant. He huddled under old papers, yellowed with forgotten news. Freeman Blemish was trying to make himself smaller, trying to shrink like a werewolf, trying to disappear. The sunset found him cold and scrawny, a part of the street's debris, waiting for the final horn, waiting for the story to come back around.

* * *

Leonard Gunshy

Leonard Gunshy (pronounced gun' shee) had worked the Beale beat for most of his adult life. He was a tired cop and, for the most part, could care less. He could care less about prostitution, illegal gambling, illegal booze, knife fights, murder. Let them kill each other, he could care less. He'd seen it all, he'd lost two wives to divorce and half of his scrotum to a gunshot wound. He was drifting toward retirement like a rudderless craft.

He could care less, even about his own retirement.

But, damnit, Mort Smalley had been a friend, a lifelong friend. He decided after that moving procession down Beale that he cared enough to try and find the scoundrel who had beaten his friend to death with a blunt object. And to find the blunt object. Leonard Gunshy decided he was on the case.

And he was in love with the twins.

* * *

Love Again

The twins survived the loss of their second and last parent with the kind of resilience they have been noted for—part independent fire and part joie de vivre, a joie de vivre as intense as a delta rainstorm. They were voracious about life, even in the face of death and, it wasn't long after the untimely demise of their poor old progenitor, they were fixtures on the street once again, here feeding the shifting faces of homeless vagabonds,

there administering definitive blowjobs to the storied Resole McRey. Resole for his part, deeply chagrined at the loss of Mort Smalley, was deepening the texture, the weave, the subtext of his telling, casting it in a melancholy framework, keening it into the sunny heavens and into the dusky twilight, in honor of a fine man, whose daughters, well, were his sole delight.

And the bedraggled inspector spent many an afternoon and evening on the corners of Beale Street, watching the beautiful twins go about their business, making notes about them, studying their every movement with a dedication previously uncelebrated in the twisted annals of human heart strings, all under the guise of digging into the case. He was having a hard time getting back on track after years of ennui. He was seriously sidetracked. He could care less.

* * *

The Problem of Freeman

Meanwhile, though perhaps not at the same time as any of the action related above, Freeman Blemish had taken up semi-permanent residence in a culvert North of downtown, huddled under a mixture of cardboard and styrofoam packing material, cuddling to his chest his only connection to reality, his lifeline. He held the bloodied Oscar like a baby holds its blanket, like Thor held his hammer. It meant something to him, something profound, maybe even tragic, but he could not remember what. Long afternoons he stared at it, trying to plumb its depths, to unlock the mystery of the statuette. He crooned to it, questioned its sphinxic silence, rubbed it with the alacrity of Aladdin. It answered not.

Freeman emerged from his culvert only to scrounge food from dumpsters. He hurried on these gustatory missions as if he had important business to attend to, or as if he were expecting an important call back at the culvert. To be away from home was anathema to him. What if he missed—what? He couldn't say. But there was something imminent awaiting him and it involved that mysterious statue.

* * *

Back to Betelgeuse

“Hello, Inspector,” Valerie tinkled, but it could just as well have been Vivian.

“Ladies,” Leonard Gunshy said, tipping an imaginary hat, awkwardly. He had abandoned his furtive skulking on corners for the forthright approach of talking directly to the young women. But it was like looking into the sun for him and he squinted and shifted under his coat and looked altogether crazed.

“What news brings you, Our wise Inspector?” V or V tittered.

“Please call me Leonard,” the Inspector said. No one had ever called him Leonard, not, that is, since seventh grade, when Mrs. Parrish called him that right before she seduced him.

“Leonard,” the twins said, in indignant unison.

“I have no news, Ladies. I am doing a pitiful job. I admit, I am as lost as Atlantis. I have no leads.”

“What have you done so far?”

“Whom have you questioned?”

Leonard Gunshy looked at his beatup, unfashionable shoes. He shuffled. He took a deep breath.

He looked from beatific face to beatific face.

“So far,” he said, clearing his catarrh. “I have only followed the two of you.”

The twins smiled.

Leonard Gunshy continued.

“I am sorry. I have become tangled in my own web. I have been following your every move for weeks.”

“And what have you discovered, Leonard?” one of the twins said while the other stood with her cheek fat with her own plump tongue.

“I have seen many things,” he said. “I have discovered two saints in our midst, two angels from heaven. Ladies, I have fallen in love.”

Here Leonard Gunshy burst into embarrassing tears. They flowed down his cheap raincoat, over his cardboard belt, across his partly jammed fly, over his service revolver. They popped on the dusty leather of his shoes, making a sound like music from a Disney film. He wept for his own uncaring soul, for the loss of his friend Mort Smalley, for his dishonor in front of the two finest women he had ever known.

Of course, the twins took the cheerless policeman to bed in Betelgeuse, their home, and undressed him and bathed him and anointed him with their own sweet musks, cleaning him like a cat her kittens, and in the end, Leonard Gunshy emerged a new man, one committed to action, younger than yesterday, a rededicated constable.

The twins went about their business.

* * *

An Unholy Rain

One day it rained an unholy rain on Beale Street, a soaking as sour as death, as deadly as a dogdeep depression. It fell like a final curtain, and the street was dark at noon. It swept through the alleyways with demonic winds, howling up from perdition, a dybbuk rain, a succuba. And the outside world was barren of life, as if indeed the final day had arrived and all were chosen, a cleansing rain then, the waters of abstinence.

It was gray, lowering, Stygian.

The world was empty.

Empty except for one lone soul, one left to witness. The storyteller.

The storyteller, soaked to the bone, to the marrow, to his soul, never missed a lick. The water greased his tale-telling machinery; the story took on a watery shine, a slicker, heavier value, a retted legend, wind-whipped and liquid-laden. And in the dim distance, shadowed with the screen of falling rain, outlined like a drawing of death, drawing nearer, came another lone figure, moving inexorably toward Resole as if rolling on rusty wheels. There in the middle of Beale the confrontation grew more imminent second by second, and if there had been anyone to notarize they would have sworn that Resole moved also. But, no. He was as stationery as Old Man Schwab's and all the movement was towards him, as if he were the pole.

It is open to speculation as to whether Resole McRey paused in his telling, or even if he was aware of the stranger coming toward him in the rain. The story went on. As steady as the rain.

But in the closing seconds of the newcomer's arrival, recognition spread in Resole like a virus. He knew the face which now materialized out of the dim. It was the face of the ragman, the face of Freeman Blemish, who stopped just a doorgap from the storyteller's personal space and spoke.

“I killed him,” Freeman Blemish said, his words overlapping an account of a gray, nondescript day from the seventies, a day when two foreigners went to the movies in downtown Memphis and saw a movie they didn't understand, and left holding hands. An uneventful day woven deep into the fabric of the narrative, told with relish and elevation.

Was there a pause in the story? Some say so, most say no. It is unknown whether Resole absorbed the confession, understood it for what it was. But he thought of the twins. He wished the twins were here with him.

“I killed him with this,” Freeman said, brandishing a small gold human figure.

“I am vengeance, lost vengeance,” he further articulated and his sense began to run out as if there were a hole in the bucket of his head. “I am Torn Asunder, the wicked one. I am Golf and Dinner. I am Whiskerweed. Love me for who I am. I am Wisdom. I have been to the foul places and drunk there, Lord, Lord. I am the sleep at the end of the dream; I am the edge of your emptiness. I am Infernal Beeswax. I am Need. Look upon me and be glad. I am Love, I am Love, I am. I am. I, I, I.”

And he paused. The rain continued, clattering.

“I am the Storyteller,” Resole said.

Freeman threw his arms around Resole and Resole took him in his own arms and the rain and the story went on all around them and the street was deserted except for them and the world and it went this way for a while until Freeman broke off and, without looking back, faltered away into the indistinct day.

* * *

A Message Arrives

Leonard Gunshy awoke from a dream about the twins and the sun was coming in like a secondstory man and he shook his stubbly face to try and clear his head. Had he heard a dull noise, a muffled knock, or was that his dream, a heartbeat in his dream? He shuffled to his front door and, squinting like a mole-man, opened the door to the world.

He was blind for a long time and when he could finally see he wished he had remained blind. On his stoop was a small dead bird which had apparently flown into his door. A kamikaze bird.

And stuck in the rubberband of his newspaper was a note, a soiled corner of paper, folded once. A kamikaze, messenger bird? But Leonard doubted the bird had taken the time to place the note underneath the rubberband. His reason was intact.

He picked up the news and unfolded the piece of paper, which felt like a much-circulated dollar bill, soft with handling. There was a blue scrawl, cramped and shaky. And it said: Look for the small gold man.

There is much speculation as to who left the sign. Evidence points to Resole McRey, but this would be an unprecedented form of communication from the man. Leonard Gunshy didn't join in the speculation. He took the note very seriously indeed and he could care less from whence it came. He was sure it was the break he had been waiting for.

After he had showered and dressed he put the message into his jacket pocket and went out with a purpose. He began asking around about the “small gold man.” He checked with all his usual sources and they all thought he was mad, moonstricken.

A small gold man, Leonard pondered over his deli sandwich lunch. And after considerable pondering the ideation formed in his pondering that he maybe was searching for a piece of art, a sculpture, a statuette. He renewed his questioning, formulating his inquiry around the search for a small gold statue. Still he came up empty.

It was at the end of the third day Leonard ended up at Betelgeuse, where he found the twins watching Jeopardy. He sat in an understuffed armchair and put his hand into the popcorn bowl.

“What is Valhalla?” the twins said.

“What is Valhalla?” the TV intoned.

“Who is Kaspar Hauser?” the twins said.

“Who is Kaspar Hauser?” the TV snapped back.

“What is ‘Mississippi Lowdown Blues’?” the twins said with particular zest.

And again the echo came.

Leonard Gunshy wanted to contribute but the twins tied his tongue. And they were faster.

“What is Uruguay?” the anxious detective jumped in, startling the women, who grimaced sympathetically.

“What is Paraguay?” the TV admonished.

The twins reached over and patted Leonard on the knee. He sunk into humiliated suppression.

At the next commercial break Leonard emerged from his self-imposed exile and sighed as preface to speaking.

“I have a lead, ladies,” he said.

“Ahh,” they entwined.

“It is a curious lead, a puzzle in itself,” and he gave a deprecating snort. “I believe, though, that if I can solve this riddle I can solve the larger one.”

“We are intrigued,” one of the women said.

“What is this enigmatic clue, Leo,” the other said.

Leonard unfolded the wrinkled note and laid it out on the coffee table next to the popcorn bowl.

The twins leaned over and read the scribbled message.

They bobbed back up, concurrently.

“The Oscar,” they said.

* * *

Some Things Become Clearer

Leonard Gunshy listened carefully as the twins explained how they had seen the statuette on the dusty, mangle-mangled shelves of their late father’s pawn shop. With their usual prescience they glommed onto what it was but thought no further about it. After all, Smalley’s Pawn Shop was the final resting place of all manner of remarkable gewgaws and kickshaws. They had bowling pins, snorkels, a parachute, a pitchpipe, scrimshaw, a printer’s brayer, a tatting shuttle. They had trusses, dentures, church keys, a pacemaker, a policeman’s baton, an S-band steerable antenna from the lunar landing module. They had fanbelts, fan magazines and fans. Also, an oar, a bolo tie, a lorgnette, a pipe tool, a candle snuffer, an icing syringe, a branding iron, an allen wrench and the Pope’s own toothbrush. They had a piece of the prototype cross. What was one Oscar more or less, they reasoned, amid all that accumulated abundance. There must be thousands of them, what with costume designers, cinematographers, sound effects nerds, and the special assistant grip’s nephew eligible for one. So an academy award ended up in their pop’s pawn shop. No big deal.

They could not have known that it once belonged to the exanimate star of *Gone With the Wind*, though they were of the few who believed she had received one—history being malleable—along with her more famous cohort, Mammy. They could not have known that its value increased because there were questions about its very existence. With every day it stayed missing another dollar was tacked onto its imagined assessment.

Leonard Gunshy accepted the explanation. He was giddy with gratitude and kissed both girls, impulsively, on their respective cheeks. He leapt into action and out the door.

It did not take him long to locate a bum who knew another bum who had seen another bum with an Oscar under his arm. The skinny was that he lived in a culvert on the Northern side of town. They pinpointed the current address of our befuddled antihero, Freeman Blemish.

Leonard closed in.

* * *

The Return of Freeman

The return of Freeman Blemish, coming as it does penultimately, will be seen here and elsewhere as some sort of crux. But stories rise and fall, rise and fall, a sign curve, signifying not much, going on their way lonely as a cloud. We try to put order to them, whip them with the lash of our sense and try to pen them, herd them, tame them. They will comply, nodding along, for a while. For a while.

But they can turn on their masters.

So the storyteller's story rambles and rumbles and moves like a river at floodstage, wandering like a plaintive shadow. His story, this one.

It is told: The return of Freeman Blemish came about this way:

The culvert was empty, deserted.

There was evidence of previous inhabitation, candy wrappers, Sprite cans, unmentionables. Leonard Gunshy was like a happy hound, an old dog out on the hunt again.

He learned that Blemish was haunting the Beale Street area again. He had several sightings of him, he had a description.

It was dusk and the tired but energized detective was sitting in Handy Park, humming blues tunes and letting his mind unwind. Some hundred yards or so away the storyteller droned.

As darkness crept slowly over the street the twins appeared with dinner for Resole. Leonard imagined they would lead the griot into the shadows again and perform their ablutions and he was happy about this as if he were witness to the rightness of things, to the natural patterns of a weary world. A third figure appeared from the East, forming an uneven quadrilateral with Resole, the Twins and Leonard Gunshy himself the reference points. This figure moved like a scarecrow come to life, as if he only lacked a brain. It careened, but slowly, crepitatingly.

It was Freeman Blemish, of course. But hold the suspense a moment longer—our heroes know this not.

Vivian and Valerie were unwrapping a meatball sandwich, unscrewing the top of a thermos (with a semi-nostalgic momentary passing thought as to the fate of thermos corks) full of Mountain Dew, and half-listening to the story of a cacodemon and his mate who used to work out of the backroom of Sweeney's a few years back selling homemade hootch. The storyteller, they stopped to muse, was in rare form.

The seemingly drunken tatterdemalion emerged from shadow to light. It was a cartoon of an arrival, the murderer out of Looney Tunes, East of Eden.

Leonard Gunshy got shakily to his feet.

Freeman Blemish stopped in the middle of the street and his head bobbed on the stem of his neck like a car ornament. He brought his slowly focusing eyes to rest on the slowly moving form of Leonard Gunshy. He thought he was the most beautiful man he had ever seen; he fell in love with Leonard Gunshy as quickly as a scalded cat goes through a back window. And, as quickly as he fell in love with him, he knew this: he had to destroy him.

Leonard Gunshy stood frozen in Handy Park, his hands raised in front of him, as if they were playing freeze tag. He stood in the shadow of W.C. Handy's statue and unconsciously mirrored him. The moment was fraught with world-turning drama. The smell of red sauce filled the air.

Vivian and Valerie squinted toward the end of the street, half-smiles stuck awkwardly on their divine faces. They were confused. They were in a story.

Freeman Blemish had both of his hoary hands deep in the pockets of his weather-worn overcoat. In one hand he clutched a grimy pistol he had recovered from a dumpster. In the other the Oscar. His misfiring gray-matter worked on the problem of which to pull out. "A man destroys the thing he loves," he heard his inner voice

mutter as if it were drunk and only half-interested. Again: “A thing of beauty is a joy forever.”

He hesitated. His shoulders made preliminary movements which signaled the appearance of one of his hands. Quickly, like a gunslinger, he pulled his left hand from his coat pocket.

Leonard Gunshy reacted with a lifetime’s training. His service revolver whisked into the cool evening air swift as a thought. It barked once.

Vivian and Valerie both screamed. “No,” they bansheed simultaneously, splitting the air, dislodging rooks and night owls and bats. Resole McRey stopped talking.

Resole McRey stopped talking.

Freeman Blemish hit the ground hard. He fell like a pile of cans. Out of his filthy grasp the Oscar flew, skittering along the pavement like a puck.

Leonard Gunshy dropped to his knees and burst into tears. The flying animals circled once, twice and re-lighted.

* * *

The End of Story, Story Continues

Time passed and people came back to Beale Street. People came back to hear Resole McRey. Word got out again. Word persevered.

The crowds grew, sluggishly at first, like the bleeding of one season into another. Resole became popular again, inexplicably perhaps. Why now, why ever? Time passed and the story changed and the people in the crowd recognized the names in the story and once again they became part of it and Resole’s fame spread like a whore’s legs, pardon me.

“It isn’t all skittles and beer,” as Leonard Gunshy used to say.

Resole told the legend of Butterfly McQueen’s Oscar.

Eventually Resole McRey moved on—like legend, children—gone but to our recollection. But it was not the death of Freeman Blemish which occasioned the change, know that.

Because first the people came back to Beale.

People came back to Beale to hear about the past, about the shop owner felled by a dead Negro actress’s disinherited and once-denied Academy Award, to hear about the twins who visited briefly from Zion, about the bravery of a grizzled police veteran, about the swiftness of justice, and the unreliability of renown.

The Oscar went back to the pawn shop’s shelves. The pawn shop became a small museum. Valerie and Vivian moved up North—you’ve heard of them. Leonard Gunshy retired, remarried, died unhappy. Freeman Blemish was buried in Elmwood Cemetery—the twins saw to that—near Mort Smalley. Some forgiveness conquered death.

Resole McRey told on and on, his name written down nowhere, the story unfolding around him like heavenly robes, uncoiling like revelation.

* * *

Corey Mesler is the owner of Burke’s Book Store, in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the country’s oldest (1875) and best independent bookstores. He has published poetry and fiction in numerous journals including *Yellow Silk*, *Pindelyboz*, *Green Egg*, *Black Dirt*, *Thema*, *Mars Hill Review*, *Poet Lore* and others. He has worked in the book business all his adult life, if he has had an adult life. A short story of his has been chosen for the 2002 edition of *New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best*.

Cassie Sparkman

WATCHING BUZZARDS

All morning you wait for rain and watch buzzards swoop on warm air, tracing oblong patterns against the green hills. No one comes to visit, although yesterday your sister left flowers on the porch when you would not answer the door. She called your name, circled the house and peered in windows, cupping her pale face against them. You hid in the deep bathtub, all your bones aching. Last night, you dreamed yourself a suicide bomber in training. The dynamite around your belly bulged, cartoonish, draped impossibly with wires and a clock. *The border guards will know you* thought. Waiting for a man to map out your target terrified you more than what it would feel like, the sundering. You woke with sweat pooling between your breasts and your husband asleep, clutching your hand. Today your teeth jangle in your jaw, will not settle mercifully back against their roots. You watch the buzzards and think of plucking your molars out one by one, then working forward to incisors, finally the flat blades in front. Surrounded by teeth and dripping roots, perhaps at last someone would take you behind the barn and shoot you like an old horse no one trusts around the children. You wait for the rain patiently because it is coming, because you need a bath, because you can no longer sit in the bathtub without thinking: refuge. You think of climbing into the hills to find what the buzzards circle. You want to lay with a dying animal, roll in rotting leaves with it, hope that when the birds drop to feed, they do not distinguish between the animal and you. What has brought this on, you wonder, this sickness? You would sit and stare at the hills until your eyes bled with looking –

Cassie Sparkman is a native of Kentucky and a current resident of southeastern Ohio. She is a graduate of the University of Washington, and her poems have appeared in *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Seattle Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

Matt Henriksen

ADAGIO

Your dress still hanging in the sycamore
When I woke, and painted invisibly, the air
At my eyes full of forget with what
You must have said, and what the birds say,
Or don't, or you did not, or I don't hear
What other times the tree's arms' movements bear,
What else is left to paw after, at,
With lonely fingers, the keys of morning's play.
The birds aren't singing loud enough, whiskey-
Clarified branches glint in morbid dew
Where dead birds live, to bravado a climb
Up that tree, take down your dress, redo the done,
Rethroat your songs, and cause again the cry
You put us in, going quickly slowly on.

Matt Henriksen co-edits *Typo* (<http://www.typomag.com>). His work has appeared in *Can We Have Our Ball Back?* and *Octopus*.

Radio Wave Ethics and Back-Woods Beatings

by Jason Sanford

You just have to know the music is there. Walking beside you on those dim gravel roads. Bouncing radio electrons through the passing pine trees and weeds. Beating past your skin, skull, intestines, and bones.

The music's always there—even when you don't want to hear it.

A friend tells me this story while we sit at his lake house near Wetumpka, Alabama. For the past hour we've been watching the passing headlights of the Labor Day crowds—people driving home so they won't oversleep and be late for work in the morning—and as they pass we drink beers and listen to a country music station over my portable radio. My friend works as the program director for this station and he comments on every song that is played. ("You can't have a Labor Day without a little 'Take This Job and Shove It'" he says when that 1970s work anthem blares out.)

At some point we drift into a rambling discussion of philosophy (or as deep of one as two almost-drunk people can achieve). After talking at length about how ethics apply to everyday situations—such as if it's okay to call in sick at work when you're really fishing with your buddies—my friend says he has a story to tell. "A great story," he states. "You can even write about it if you want." However, he adds, I must promise to never use his name with any of this.

"Statute of limitations," he explains awkwardly.

When I ask how long it'll take before he can't be arrested for whatever he's done, my friend admits that he isn't so much afraid of prison as he is of what people will think about him. "I have kids now," he says. "And a great job."

I almost ask if having kids, or a job, means one can never admit to having done wrong? Still, I promise I won't use his name if I write about what he's about to tell me.

So call my friend "Bob."

Forget Bob's real name.

This is the story he tells.

* * *

It is midnight in Alabama. The car is parked on the edge of a cotton field on a large hill overlooking Wetumpka. Through the trees the distant street lights and car headlights wink and wave before turning into sparkles, while around the edges of the field the fence-line oaks flicker to moon shadows as the night clouds drift on high-altitude winds. Cicadas and crickets buzz for all they can in the heat and humidity.

Bob has driven a friend's Honda and parked it in this field. He is fiddling with the radio's tuning dial when Scott walks up to the car window.

"What time is it?" Scott asks. His face is smeared with black and brown camouflage grease. There is a dab of forest green on his nose.

"12:10," Bob says. He's still tuning the radio—the volume low, the tuner briefly picking up the signal of faint gospel music before lapsing to static.

“He’ll hear that radio,” Scott says.

“He ain’t here. How’s he gonna hear it?”

Scott nods, and leans his baseball bat against the car door. Across the little cotton field, sitting just in the tree line, is Flame. Bob can’t see Flame, but he knows which dark shape of a tree he’s under because every few minutes there’s a flick of blue light there—electricity jumping from metal contact to metal contact—as Flame makes sure his stun gun still works.

“Let’s call Cindy on her cell phone,” Scott says nervously.

“No,” Bob says, and Scott nods. He leans across Bob’s face to see the time on the radio. His camouflage drips and runs sweaty in the humidity. Several grease drops land on Bob’s hands and pants.

Normally Scott’s the nicest guy anyone could know. He even looks like a nice guy—with a too-skinny body, ribs and bones poking everywhere, and long hair going down to the middle of his back. He reminds Bob of a smiley-faced hippie doll left over from a Woodstock souvenir stand.

One year ago, Scott got beat up at a pool hall in Wetumpka. Flame and Bob had been shooting pool with him for most of the night but, as more and more drunk rednecks came into the place, they decided to leave.

“Let’s go back to my house,” Flame said, “and work on my tattoo.” Back in high school, Flame had been known as Jack. But after graduating he shucked that name, tattooed his arm with fire surrounding the word Flame, and took that as his nickname. The tattoo was homemade—prick after a hundred pricks with a surgical needle dipped in ink. Every few months Flame added another detail to his tattoo by getting Bob or Scott to stab his arm with the needle and ink for a few hours.

“Man, I’m sick of that bloody shit,” Scott said to Flame, and added that he’d rather stay. His new girlfriend, Cindy, was going to stop by the pool hall after she got off work.

So Flame and Bob left. On the way to Flame’s trailer, they grabbed some pot and got stoned. Flame then showed Bob what to draw on his arm—a grinning skull, dancing under the flames already tattooed in.

Bob was halfway into stabbing an eye socket onto Flame’s arm when Scott’s girlfriend called. She said Scott had been beaten up outside the pool hall and was in the hospital. While Flame tried to wipe the blood from his tattoo, Cindy screamed over and over into the phone that this was their fault. “How could you leave Scott alone with all those damn rednecks?” she said, crying.

* * *

As Bob tells his story, he mentions that he really doesn’t remember what he said to Scott when they went to the hospital that night, or whether Scott’s left or right arm was the one in a cast, or if his nose was already bandaged or not. Bob remembers the general stuff—how Cindy was furious at him and Flame, how the emergency room was crowded, and how Scott was so doped up he kept babbling nonsense about being on the beach in Panama City.

One detail Bob does remember, though, is how on the way to the hospital he tuned the radio to one of Dolly Parton’s early hits—“Jolene”—and actually cried at the beauty of everything she was singing about. “None of her songs ever hit me until that moment,” he says. “After that I began listening to country music again and found I still loved it. I probably wouldn’t be working in radio if Scott hadn’t gotten beaten up.”

When I ask why he can remember this detail but not the others, Bob says that most of his memories tie in with music. If he thinks back on all of the church services he went to as a kid, what he remembers are the hymns. His clearest memories of Christmas days past are wrapped around “Silent Night” and “Jingle Bells.”

“Smells bring back memories for some people,” he says, “music does it for me.”

This isn't a surprise. As long as I've known Bob, he's been obsessed on music. When we drive together, Bob continually fiddles with the radio. He can ramble on for hours over some station at the lower end of the dial playing obscure songs from the 1950s or '60s. "Obviously not a corporate-owned station," he'll say, "or they wouldn't play something that hasn't been surveyed to death."

Bob says he's always wondered about the power of radio. "I mean, you listen to a CD, you know what music's coming up. Pop in some damn Britney Spears on a drive to the grocery store and Britney's gonna be bopping along until you tell her to stop. But radio—you never know what might come up there. Who hasn't had the experience of being at a stoplight, flipping to a radio station, and suddenly the exact perfect song you needed for that exact perfect moment comes on? Some song you just couldn't have picked for yourself even if you'd known what you wanted."

"What exactly is radio?" I ask. I figure Mr. Radio Man should know these things. "Radio is sine waves," he says. "Endlessly curving electromagnetic waves going up and down, jumping through all of us. In one spot you hear them. In another you don't."

Thinking back to our earlier conversation, I ask him if radio waves are also like ethics.

He smirks, but doesn't answer.

* * *

Flame and Bob found out later that when Scott walked out of the pool hall to see if Cindy had arrived, someone hit him from behind with a baseball bat. The police found bloodsmears and dragmarks for twenty feet across the asphalt and cement parking dividers. The police figured Scott got beat up because he looked like a hippie.

The next day the police arrested three rednecks who called themselves the Bama Boys. "Well no shit, they're Bama Boys," Flame said, cursing the gang for their stupid ass name. Bob figured they were just some random rednecks, getting drunk and starting a fight. But when he went to the arraignment a few weeks later, he found out that the leader of the group was a guy he knew named Lester Allen.

Lester Allen had passed through high school with Flame and Bob until he got kicked out and sent to vocational school. Lester was older than Bob—he'd been held back a year or two—and, in Bob's words, "He was way big and tough." Flame never had much trouble with Lester in high school because Flame played football and was a starting tackle. Flame was short and squat with massive arms and Lester kept away from him. For Bob, though, the more he exercised the more the skinny stuck to his bones. He and Lester fought all through high school.

The last time they fought was in tenth grade. Somehow Lester found the combination to Bob's school locker. Bob would come out of class to find his books and stuff scattered up and down the hallway.

The last time it happened, Bob was picking up his victimized books when Lester marched down the hall. They were both late for class and alone in the hall, so Lester walked right up to Bob and planted one foot on top of Bob's books like Napoleon surveying a damn glorious victory.

Bob jumped and punched. Before he knew how it happened, Lester pinned his neck and smeared his nose across the dirty tile floor. "Don't ever fight me, you fuck," Lester said.

By eleventh grade Lester was gone. The next time Bob saw him was at his trial for assaulting Scott. Lester was now 22 and still big—six foot four and all muscle. Coming into the court one day, Lester passed Bob in the hall and mouthed a silent "Fuck you."

"You know that guy?" Scott asked Bob and Flame. Scott had only moved to Montgomery a few years ago and didn't have Bob and Flame's history with half the town.

In the end, Lester's lawyer worked a plea deal—a month in jail and two years probation. The judge

agreed because Lester had been drunk. “Just boys getting out of hand,” the judge said. Scott protested to the prosecutor—said that it had taken two months before his bruises healed, longer for the cast on his right arm to come off, and that his nose now seemed to move at right angles to the horizon—but the prosecutor simply said the plea bargain was the best they were could get.

Scott nodded, and muttered to Flame and Bob that he’d get payback.

At first Flame and Bob ignored him. But as the months went by and Scott kept talking about getting even, they realized he was serious. When Bob said there was no way Scott could take on all three of the Bama Boys, Scott agreed and said he’d settle for Lester. When Flame said Lester weighed three times as much as Scott, Scott said that was okay because Bob and Flame were going to help him. And since Bob was the only one who’d ever fought Lester—Scott refused to call getting hit from behind a fight—Scott continually asked him about Lester’s fighting style.

“That was back in high school,” Bob would say. “He didn’t have a style. He was bigger than me and just kicked the shit out of me.”

In the end, Flame and Bob gave up trying to stop Scott and said they’d help him. Bob still isn’t sure if they agreed to help out of guilt over leaving Scott alone at that pool hall—or simply to get Scott to stop bugging them about Lester.

* * *

According to Bob, when you promise to help a guy beat someone up, you can’t just hang out together anymore. Every other conversation is, “Can we really do it?” or “How are you gonna feel after you bust his face?” It gets old—or so Bob says.

Even after agreeing to help, Flame still figured Scott was bullshitting and that they’d never do anything. As time went by Bob guessed he was right. Still, Bob couldn’t figure out how he felt on all this. He still hated Lester and sometimes caught himself in flashbacks to high school hell as Lester kicked his ass time and again. Bob understood why Scott wanted to kill Lester. But he also didn’t understand it. Part of him just wanted to move on.

But one night when Bob and Flame were slightly drunk, Scott drove up in his car with Cindy and said they were going after Lester.

“We ain’t going after no Lester with her here,” Flame said. But Cindy said she was staying and Flame and Bob were too tired to argue. Everyone piled into Flame’s Honda and they drove to Lester’s house. They parked across the street and waited for more than two hours, hunched down in their seats so passing drivers couldn’t see them.

“What are we gonna do?” Bob asked. “Jump Lester when he comes home?”

“Yeah,” Scott said.

As Flame and Bob sobered up, they begin to see how stupid this was. Even if Lester showed up, he had twenty neighbors to see everything that happened. Plus Lester was big and all they had was Scott’s baseball bat.

“This is shit,” Flame said, starting the Honda and driving away. “You want us to help, we gotta do this smart.”

So they made a plan. It turns out that every Friday night, Lester went to a bar called Deacon Blues. Cindy agreed to hit Lester up there and convince him to go out with her.

“Think you can get him to drive to that overlook just outside the city?” Flame asked.

“Yeah,” Cindy said. “I’ll make him think there’s a chance of sex or something if we go up there.”

Scott was nervous about Cindy being near Lester, but she said she’d take her cell phone and call 911 if Lester tried anything before they got to the overlook. Once there, Flame would run up to the car, hit Lester with a stun

gun and drag him from the car. Scott would then work Lester over with the baseball bat.

“What about Bob?” Cindy asked.

“We’ll let Bob give a real scare to Lester,” Flame said. He walked back into his bedroom and came back with a large double-barreled shotgun. Bob didn’t like the idea of a gun, but Flame said he had to have one.

“A gun’s the only way a skinny shit like you can ever look scary.”

* * *

So now they wait for Lester.

Bob is still flipping radio stations when Flame flashes his penlight at him from across the cotton field. Moments later Lester drives his pickup truck into the field and parks next to the dropoff, killing his headlights while smooth music comes out truck’s open windows. That’s good, Bob thinks. Flame had been worried they’d have to bust out the window with a bat to get at Lester.

Bob gets out of the car, hating and loving what’s going to happen. The ethics of hurting another person. The ethics of supporting a friend.

Flame runs out first. Bob can’t see him too well in the dark but he follows with the shotgun and reaches the pickup truck just as Flame shocks Lester with the stun gun. Cindy bolts out the other side of the truck as Lester grabs the steering wheel and screams. Bob waits while Scott and Flame tug Lester like a mother trying to pull her kid away from a favorite toy.

Flame has to stun Lester twice more before he lets go of the steering wheel. Lester then falls into a fetal position on the ground as Flame kicks and zaps him again and again. Scott wails on him with the bat. The whole time Lester screams “Don’t hurt me, don’t . . .” The same words, over and over.

“That’s fucking enough,” Bob suddenly yells. Scott hits Lester one more time with the bat, then he and Flame step away. Lester lays there on the ground, crying and shaking and bleeding as Bob walks up to him and brings the shotgun to Lester’s eyes. Bob doesn’t want to do this, but he knows that Scott and Flame are expecting him to do his part. Lester mutters “fuck” and tries to raise a broken arm to the gun barrel.

Bob pulls the trigger on the empty chamber. Click. The other barrel. Click.

Lester keeps crying and saying, “Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me,” as if he’s unaware at almost being killed just now.

They get in Flame’s car and drive away, leaving Lester crying on the ground.

* * *

Bob repeats to me how radio waves travel through everything. He says they exist between you and me, within you and me, and all around you and me.

However, he adds, if you don’t have a receiver, you’ll never know they are there.

The radio waves, he means. Not ethics.

* * *

While driving back to Montgomery, Bob turns on the radio. He can’t remember what station they listen to, or even what music plays.

Before the beating he’d been most scared of getting caught, of being arrested for doing something just because he’d told himself that the ethical thing was to stand by his friend.

But now, driving that back road home, he feels disgusted at the thought of Lester laying there on the ground and begging them not to hurt him. Flame and Cindy are also quiet, while Scott keeps describing parts of the

beating in an excited voice—“Did you see him cry? Did you see him grab that steering wheel?”—until Flame tells him to shut the fuck up.

On their way home they pass an abandoned gas station. The only thing still working in the place is a payphone by a light pole.

“We need to call 911,” Scott suddenly says. “Get someone to go up there and make sure Lester’s okay.”

Flame can’t believe that Scott just said that, and asks Scott what the hell is with him anyway. However, Scott insists they call 911. “It’s the right thing to do,” he says. Cindy volunteers the use of her cellphone, but Flame says the police might be able to track it, so Bob turns around and drives back to the payphone they just passed.

Cindy calls. She makes her voice sound deep and masculine and says there was someone beat up and hurt at the overlook over Wetumpka.

Then they are driving again.

The radio keeps playing music that Bob says he no longer remembers.

* * *

That’s Bob’s story as he tells it, these ten years after the beating. Even though we’re still drinking our beers, I don’t feel myself getting anywhere near to drunk.

“Well, it’s over and done with,” I say. “Not much you can do about it now.”

“Of course,” he says, adding that he doesn’t regret anything he did. Or that regretting what’s done is a silly practice.

I ask him why he doesn’t remember what music was playing while they were driving away from the beating. “Didn’t you just tell me you remember stuff by what music you’re hearing?” I ask.

Bob is silent. The Labor Day crowds are almost gone and with them the passing headlights that illuminate us as we sit by the lake. The radio is still tuned to the station Bob works for, and suddenly a new song comes on, a song I’ve never heard before.

“Hell, yes,” Bob says, turning up the volume. “I just chose this song for the playlist. It’s a hell of a song to hear—really going to go somewhere, it is.”

* * *

Jason Sanford is the fiction editor of *storySouth*. His fiction has been published in the *Mississippi Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, and many other places, and he has been awarded a fellowship from the Minnesota State Arts Board.

Janet McAdams

INTERVIEW WITH THE READER

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. She gave you a list. What were the first three items? | 1. Woods to go to, the fish-shaped leaves of lilies, well water with its arc of rust. |
| 2. What windows did you cover? What doors were boarded up against the bitter winter? | 2. There were no windows. Every door hung open. |
| 3. Did a phoebe call out fee-bee? Did the mockingbird say your name? | 3. I heard a name but it was not my name.
I heard a name but it was only an echo. |
| 4. Was it only a flesh wound? Did anyone suffer? | 4. Are there other kinds of wounds?
I am not tired of happiness. |
| 5. What was the song that the heart learned to whistle? Did the bell have a tongue? What did you know about silence, before you fell through the clear sky air? | 5. Only the lub-dub of the body's river, pushing and pulling, the daily wave of flotsam and jetsam. I knew a different kind of quiet. |
| 6. And what was left in the knapsack, in the abandoned basket at the lakeshore, after Summer burned like a yellow thread into Autumn? | 6. The ribs of an umbrella that no longer opens.
A gold ring from a woman's ear.
This book, which I'll close, when your voice grows faint and my ear turns toward another story. |

Janet McAdams' collection of poetry, *The Island of Lost Luggage*, won an American Book Award in 2001. Her poems have appeared in *Salt*, *TriQuarterly*, *the Kenyon Review*, and other journals. She grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and is a member of the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers

Adam Clay

BAD LUCK CRADLESONG

Do what you will with the dirty pictures of your first lover:
The wind can still bang a screen door off its hinges
And simple myths, like mirrors, will continue to bootlick
In the back of your mind. It seems natural to fall in love
At a funeral, the way a body shivers under weight,
The way those drinks stain the collars of your shirts.
You can look all you want, you can piss into the face of oblivion,
You can turn it on, turn it off again. Staring at the sun
May take your vision, but the light will be infinite
And repeating. When it seems to go, stare hard at nothing,
Think of the dirt in your body, and it will be light again.

Adam Clay lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas and co-edits *Typo Magazine*. He has work forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review* and poems in *Octopus*, *Milk*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back?*, *Three Candles*, and *Tarpaulin Sky*.

The Philosophical History of Corpus Christi, Mississippi

by Josh Shepherd

1:1

This is how the world begins

World begins, world begins

This is how the world begins

At 2 a.m. in the morning

2 Mississippi, 1884.

3 The Colonel lay in his bed alone and quaked with the fever. Thin trails of steam rose from his pale, boiling face. He was forgotten. His young wife—still a virgin—died at his feet. The temperature in his brain cooked his vision and he saw fantastic things, frightening things. He mumbled to himself, his eyes wild and wide, his sight behind them now, detached from his sense.

4 He reached for her, as if he might brush against her here, in the darkness, as if he would know it was her, should he find her here, in the darkness. This small two story house—small for a man like the Colonel—was a strange place to remember.

5 The last words she said—to him, always to him—were words he couldn't hear, because the fever had already taken hold. "Remember," she said, "we're all going to die."

6 And if he'd heard it, he'd have laughed. Unbelievable. Death forgets its way this far south. The walls of security, of pride and tradition, are too high. We all run the race and we're just so fast. Better things to think of than death.

7 The last words he heard were words of idle conversation—"It's so quiet up here," she said. Thus his last thought—before the fever mastered him—was of the silence. The town outside groaned in silence, the stunning silence of grief.

8 When there should have been the wail of lovers separated, of mothers without children, the low strong masculine wail of fathers fighting the always lost battle against time and frailty—there was nothing.

9 The town was not real.

10 Just days before the town had been real, vibrant with life, secure. Now it crumbled, humbled by the fever, everyone called to account to death. In this wake all the survivors could offer was the silence. This was the affirmation of all they knew. This was the affirmation of what they had been taught. This was the lesson that cost everything and gave nothing but silence. It seemed to him, in his last hour, a fitting defeat. He cursed them, masters of denial, and swore in his pride that he would not bathe reality in the sweet deception of silence.

11 Three weeks previous he had returned like a conquering Caesar to his town. He had stepped off his horse into

the arms of his plump nymphonic bride.

12 “You seem faint,” she said.

13 “Merely the heat,” said he, but he did feel queasy.

14 “Your face is flush.”

15 He looked down at her with compassion and all the words he had planned to say to her—words of beauty and elegance and mystery and lust—passed and he fainted, collapsing into her on the lawn.

16 The doctor confirmed the fears of the town. The Colonel had brought the fever back with him from Yazoo. He would have to be isolated, bled regularly, prayed over by the town minister.

17 But all the prayers and blood in the town would not, could not have stopped it. (History is a tale of swamped and static fate).

18 The fever had taken hold. The dense Mississippi air transmitted it effortlessly, joyously, from house to house. Every day people died and every night the houses danced and swayed in the light of fire. The fire grew, the burning sheets, the burning clothes. The crackle of burning was the only noise the Colonel heard, save the whining of mosquitoes, who had organized and agreed on exterminating the whole human race, if only they could evolve bigger wings.

19 In the last few days his bride was valiant. She would not leave him, though she knew she was weak with the fever, hurling towards death herself. Soon she was not waiting on him, but laying next to him, listening to the burning crackle.

20 The community was quarantined, left alone, and the doctor left town quietly. There was no one left living, only those still not dead.

21 Hey, they joked.

22 Hey.

23 You look alright.

24 I feel a little pale.

25 Mm. Me too.

26 I always wanted a white girl.

27 They joked.

28 Silently, they had thoughts of consummation, of intimacy.

29 They lay and watched each other die, without the strength to consummate, unable to achieve unity, the oneness promised them by divine ordinance. She remained alert but he, lit up with dreams of the future, slept and shivered. She lived for the moment each day when he would wake and come to his senses—this man she didn’t know—and when he would he put his hand through her hair.

30 She died content as he lay, his eyes wide open, his mind somewhere else. In a fit he knocked her to the floor and that is where she stayed (who can bury the dead).

31 All are dead. Who has the arrogance to mourn. The town decayed, and each one worried about himself.

32 When death overruns a society the pretenses must go.

33 The Colonel shook his bed with violent sobbing, the dark hatred of his visions. In his visions he was transported to the future, transported to death. Even after he died he shook and moaned, next to his decaying wife, dreaming dreams of truth.

34 His new sight was better, brighter than ever, the waking realization that this life, this whole life, was a sleepwalk, the final reality coming in the crackling quiet of burning, his final thought how quiet it truly is and then the fever mastered him.

2:1

The Colonel woke to the blazing heat. Hell, where am I. Hell, it's hot. Hell.

2 Strange that his senses should be so alive, that his separation from the body would prove still so physical. He was still in his upper room, his bridal home in the center of Corpus Christi, the town of his youth. It must have been 1887, and he felt just fine. Like he'd been asleep for a very long time.

3 This is how it goes for the ghosts of Corpus Christi. They are free to run, in and out of time, to the future, to the past.

4 The Colonel found his way around. He met other ghosts. He discovered that he had more power now than he ever had in life. He soon discovered the stickiness of the past, and more and more often frequented the future.

5 The other ghosts comforted him. They told him it wasn't that bad, being dead. But the Colonel was a bitter individual. He knew he was dead. He watched the decimated town repopulate, saw the immense forgetfulness of its people played out over and over and over.

6 He missed his bride, couldn't figure out where she was, why his love was relegated to life alone, and not to all times. He watched the town and he hated it, this town he had decimated with death.

7 The towns of the south, and especially Corpus Christi, were towns soaked in forgetfulness.

8 Thus, the Colonel learned that in a town with such bad memory, the dead speak truer than the living. The dead hold sway in this kind of place, using it as they wish.

9 Most ghosts left the town and never came back, preferring the bright lights of New Orleans or Memphis. Several went to Vicksburg and remained there, weeping with one another. But the Colonel stayed in town. He had influence there over the forgetful people, and it was his comfort. He used it out of hate, because he hated the town. He hated it because it was the place his wife died, the only love he could have, as dead people cannot love, his living love fully unknown, unrealized, from where he stood, unreal. He hated himself and he hated his name, the name his wife never got to call him in mornings when the coffee would have been black and the bacon fresh and the Azalias in bloom and they would have walked in the shade down the empty streets, arm in arm—before it got humid, the sun burning off the dew.

3:1

He built up the town after the dictates of his will.

2 He built it up to foster this forgetfulness, and you will see traces of him all over town, traces of death and fragmentation.

3 History is a fluid thing, he told himself. Create create create. His lies growing from his fear of the past which he never visited.

4 He worried only about the future.

4:1

The Colonel sat, as was his great joy and leisure during afternoons, with the ghost of William Faulkner.

2 He worshipped Faulkner.

3 They sat and sipped whisky and talked of things far and wide, and they wondered, as dead people do, about the nature of words.

4 It is the unique insight of the dead that their words are different than the living, that there is a mysterious connection between a living person and living words, and so they talked (dead as they were) in muted tones, their words sticking in the air like rotting flesh.

5 William Faulkner talked in immensely long and confusing sentences.

6 The Colonel hardly understood him, but he hated drinking alone, and he worshipped Faulkner, and he tried to keep up.

7 Language is a curious thing, Faulkner said. The way it comes and goes, the presence and absence of it all.

8 Sure, said the Colonel. I remember my wife, the way we used to talk, laying there in bed. Words seemed so sweet then, such a gift.

9 Faulkner said, Far as I can tell, an author doesn't last very long. The way signs relate to things, you see, it all gets blurry.

10 Faulkner took a sip of whisky.

11 Faulkner said, The correspondence is what I'm worried about. Here now, in Corpus Christi, you've got a situation to confront. All these historians, all these people sunk in daily life, thinking about everything else but what's there, in their face.

12 The Colonel said, She used to get in my face, talk to me. She thought I couldn't hear her, but I did. I was dreaming, sure, I was high on the fever. But I heard her. I knew she was talking, because she would come to me, in my dreams, talking in a fuzzy voice.

13 Faulkner said, You look at all the books I wrote. The spark of my soul. You look at how they're used now. The author of those books is dead.

14 Faulkner laughed to himself.

15 Faulkner apologized, said, Sorry about that, it was a bad pun, must be the whisky.

16 It's just that language seems to be so important. Look at that fool at your University English department, talk talk talk, everything about language, and he can't figure out a word of it.

17 Go far enough back, when Plato thought words related to ideas. That's an important thing. No one reads Plato anymore. Words related to ideas, and there was a possibility of truth.

18 Come up, then, to Descartes. Am I losing you?

19 The Colonel said, I lost her, Bill. She's gone.

20 Faulkner said, Descartes thought the relation of thought to language, self to the world, was a simple thing.

21 Descartes was a fool of a smart man.

22 I am the generator of meaning. It's a tempting doctrine, when you're alive. Get past words, straight to thought, you'll be getting somewhere. You may avoid error, get to truth.

23 Their problem was the same as most people's, though, that I create meaning, that I'm the autonomous author.

24 The Colonel said, Ain't that a crock of [rubbish]

25 You're a good man, Colonel. It certainly is. Their problem, you see, was that they had no theory of meaning. Meaning was assumed. Your people, they can't do that anymore. Language isn't clean. It's a community's indoctrination. The south should understand that.

26 If language is just about thought, and thought is innate ideas, the way we structure the world, then what is the world? Not our mind. It's something else, something we can't know apart from our mind. Hence, all is just ideas.

27 The Colonel said, I had some crazy ideas, when I was sick. You should have seen the stuff I saw. Crazy.

28 Faulkner said, But what if our language tells us about innate ideas? That's something different. Then language might tell us about meaning.

29 But I'll go ahead and tell you, Colonel, language doesn't tell us about meaning.

30 The only way signs can relate to things is if there are things. We have no way of knowing that. We're slaves to language. These random binary oppositions we make, me the subject my speech the object—seems arbitrary, especially now.

32 You're dead and drunk, the Colonel said.

33 Maybe so, Faulkner said.

34 But if meaning must come from my consciousness, then my consciousness must come from something, or we're in the same trap, as in, the death of the author and the death of the book have to relate to something, namely, the death of God.

5:1

Faulkner rose to go.

2 Colonel always good to speak with you, he said.

3 So soon, the Colonel said.

4 Faulkner said, Things to do, in death as in life.

5 About that, said the Colonel. Do you think you could start calling me the Colonel of death? For the Colonel was always wanting to be known as the Colonel of death, wanting responsibility and lasting fame somehow for bringing the fever back to Corpus Christi. This was especially humorous to the writers from the Delta, who knew all about death.

6 Faulkner smiled at the Colonel with pity.

7 Naming something doesn't make it so, Colonel, he said.

8 The deep need of man is to find permanence, as I told you. To posit something stable, such as his own ideas, or the meaning in words, or language itself. It's the same [rubbish] always already.

9 The Colonel took an especially large sip of whisky and winced. Bill, I don't know if I follow you. And he almost fell out of his chair.

10 Faulkner began to walk away, and he thought to himself, what an ignorant town.

11 All of them deluded and always deluding themselves, blurring reality with these dreams of stability and self-righteousness.

12 The Colonel called out to Faulkner. Where are you Bill? His sight worsened by the year and now that Faulkner was out of sight, he wondered if he was coming back. He worshipped Faulkner, and didn't want him to leave. And Faulkner, developing a mean streak after his death, loved playing small pranks on the Colonel, especially playing on his diminishing sight.

13 Help, Bill, I can't see you. Bill, I can't see at all.

* * *

Josh Shepherd lives in Jackson, MS, with his wife. He is pursuing a Masters of Divinity and working part time at a small baptist church.

Marcus Slease

FACE TO FACE

God is a creased forehead,
a laminated eye.

Only heroes draw his innards.

The horror of escaped air confounds.

Hours burn into swollen pillows.

The lame whistle far and wee.

The paneled walls
will crumble.

There is no face to face,
only sandpaper on naked skin.

Two-second splashes, then
concentric circles.

A view from the window will not stop
the ship from sinking.
God's creased forehead
folds back into brain matter.

A pre-chewed gumball lodged in the skull.

We keep eating
whole continents of regret.

Fat sighs pinning us in place.

A merry-go-round absolves
my continuous stare.

It's the interior chain that keeps giving.

So, the traffic shifts suddenly.
 So, the night mounts a war I will never win.
 So, stupid moon, deaf birds in empty hallways.
 Wax from toy soldiers bleeding on light bulbs.
 Meatloaf of troubled heart, soggy and pink.

Desire is a blind man rapping his cane against my shins.
 The church closes its metal tongue on my outstretched hand.
 Thirst of the vacuum never fills.

The alpha wagers words; the omega erects a wall of syllables.

Every flash is magnetic for the bodiless God.
 Framed by cracks in the horizon.
 Succubus of language.
 Is it a cloak or rug, I cannot tell.

Heaven is a silent solipsism.

Transitory tranquility
 a double-edged word.
 Sleepwalker
 among broken eggshells.

My house: walled-up in a dream.
 My love: a cancelled check to an unknown God.

Marcus Slease was born and raised in Portadown, N. Ireland. Currently, he teaches Existentialism to freshmen at UNC Greensboro. Recent poetry has appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Conduit*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Diagram*, *Gut Cult*, *Typo*, *Milk*, *Shampoo*, *Spork*, and *Octopus*.

Green

by Sefi Atta

This is going to be really boring. I forgot my book in the car. We are in the immigration office in New Orleans. The television is on CNN not Disney. A news woman is talking about the elections again. I don't vote. I'm only nine.

We sit in plastic purple chairs joined together, Mom and me. Dad stands in line for one of the booths. The booth curtains are purple too. They are open like a puppet show is about to begin, but real people sit behind the glass windows, stamping and checking. I hope my parents get their green cards. I really hope we can drive back to Mississippi in time for my soccer game.

Booth A is for information and questions. Booth B is for applications. Booth C is for replacement cards. D is for forms and E is for adjudications. I know these words because I read, especially when I'm bored. What I don't understand is why must they explain the rules in different languages here?

No Smoking is No Fumar

No Drinking is Khong Duoc Uong

No Eating is No Comer and Khong Duoc An

I ask Mom, "What language is that?"

"Spanish," she says. She is not wearing her glasses so she can't see far. She is holding the yellow envelop for their passports.

I should have guessed Spanish. I take lessons in our after school program. Mr. Gonzalez won't let us leave until we get our words right. He is always telling us to shut our mouths or else. Then you should see him at mass on Thursdays, eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ.

There are people here who look like Mr. Gonzalez. Indian looking people too, like my friend Areeba who left our school because Catholic religion was confusing her. There are people who look Chinese to me, but whenever I say this, Mom says, They're not all Chinese! Sometimes she gets on my last nerve. I'm just a kid. There is one family who looks African like us, but Mom says they must be Haitian because a man next to them keeps speaking French to their son.

A pretty woman comes out of a wooden door. "Mr. Murphy?" she says. "Enrique Morales?" The third name she says sounds like Hung Who Win?

Mr. Murphy is the French speaking man. "A *bientot*," he says, when he gets up. No one in the Haitian family answers him. Maybe they are too tired to be polite.

I tell Mom, "Bet that's where the green cards are hidden. Behind that wooden door."

"Like lost treasure," she says.

"Why green?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"Maybe because green is for go?"

"Maybe."

“Remember when you ran a red light, Mom?”

“When did I ever run a red light?”

She did. She ran one and said it was too late to stop. I was small and I yelled, “Oo, that’s begainst the law.”

“Can I please go and get my book from the car?” I ask. “Please?”

“No,” she says. “Absolutely not. What if they go and call us?”

Green is for vegetables. I will never eat mine. Green is for Northeast soccer field, especially when it rains. Green is for envy. My best friend Celeste is trying to make a move on my man, just because their names both start with C. His name is Chance. I told Mom my true feelings when she forced me to share. She said if two women are fighting over a man they’ve already lost. “What if your best friend makes a move on your man?” I asked. “Kai,” she said and bit her finger. “I blame that Britney Spears.”

Dad hands over their passports to an old woman with orangey lipstick in the booth. When he comes back, he sits next to me.

“How long will it take?” I ask.

“You never know,” he says.

“What if it takes all day?”

“We’ll wait.”

“Aw, man.”

“Aw man, what?”

“Nothing.”

Last year, when Grandpa died, Dad couldn’t go for the funeral in Africa. Mom said this was because they were out of status waiting for their green cards. If Dad went to Africa, he wouldn’t be able to come back to America. Dad cried. Mom said people didn’t know the sacrifices we had to make. Then on the day of Grandpa’s funeral, a white pigeon landed on our roof. She said that it was Grandpa coming to tell Dad his spirit was at peace, which made me scared, so I sneaked into their bed again, in the middle of the night, even though I really didn’t believe that pigeon on the roof was my Grandpa.

“How I wish we can get back to Mississippi before six,” I say.

“What’s on at six?” Dad asks. “Some Disney rubbish?”

“Never mind,” I say.

If I tell him, he’ll think I’m selfish. I want to get back to Mississippi in time for soccer. Already he is watching the elections on CNN.

Green is for my parent’s passports. Green white green is the color of the flag of their country in Africa, Nigeria.

* * *

The pretty woman comes out of the door again. What she says sounds like Oloboga? Ologoboga?

“That’s you,” I say, pulling Dad’s jacket. “Come on. Come on.”

“Ah-ah, what’s wrong with you?” he asks.

“Calm down,” Mom says.

Sometimes my parents act like I’m bothering them all the time. I walk behind them. I don’t even want to be in the same footsteps with them. The pretty woman says, “Hey Sweetie.”

“Stop sulking,” Mom says.

“Are we getting your thumb print today, Sweetie?” the pretty woman asks me.

“No, she’s the American in the family,” Mom says and smiles.

On the other side of the door, I don’t see any green cards, only a room with a table and a copier. The pretty woman does Dad’s thumb print, then Mom’s, and then she writes our address in Mississippi to send their green cards. Mom won’t stop thanking her.

“You have no idea. We waited so long. When will they come?”

The woman leads us to the door saying, “By regular post. Yes, you can travel as you like. Yes, yes, you’re officially permanent residents.” I don’t think she cares.

“Can we go now?” I ask, after she shuts the door.

The Haitian family is still sitting out there. The lines for the booths are longer. An Indian boy spreads his arms like plane wings and makes engine sounds with his lips. Brr! Brr!

We walk to the elevators.

“Mardi Gras parade,” Dad says.

“Is there one this afternoon?” Mom asks.

“Shall we?” he says. “To celebrate?”

“Do you want to stay for a Mardi Gras parade?” Mom asks me.

Dad is dancing. Limbo. The yellow envelope with their passports is under his armpit. It’s so embarrassing.

“Em,” I say. “No.”

Last year we came for Mardi Gras in New Orleans. The weather was sunny. We watched the Oshun Parade on Canal Street. I was trying to catch the beads people were throwing from the floats. I preferred the golds. My neck was weighed down. Mom kept yelling in my ear, “Oshun is African. People here don’t know. She is the Yoruba goddess of love.” Her breath smelled of the beignets we ate for breakfast. Dad was saying, “Don’t just reach out like that. That’s why you keep missing them. See, there is a technique to catching the beads.” “What technique?” Mom asked and Dad stepped in front to show us and a huge black bead smacked him in the face. Then we had to eat lunch. I said I wanted Chinese. They said they wanted Thai. Mom said it was all the same. “Chinese is not Thai!” I said, and Mom asked, “How come you know the difference when it comes to food?” We ate King Cake on our way back to Mississippi. It was creamy and glorious. I got the pink plastic baby Jesus inside and Dad said, “That’s great,” and Mom asked, “What if she choked on it?”

“It’s too wet for Mardi Gras,” I say.

Mom says, “The American has spoken. Back to Mississippi for us.”

Green is for Mardi Gras beads. Green is for sugar sprinkles on King Cake. Green is for green onions in Pad Thai. I had to pick them out last year.

* * *

There is a big lake in New Orleans called Pontchartrain with little bungalows on sticks. Whenever we drive over it, on a roller coaster type of bridge, I know we’ll soon be in Mississippi. The car is warm. Dad is going on about the elections again. Gay marriages won’t make a blind bit of difference, blah, blah. Mom is yawning. I know exactly what she will say very soon. She will call out the names of creeks and rivers we pass: Pearl, Wolf, Little Black, Bowie, Hobolochitto, Tallahala, Chunky. Then she will say, “It’s terrible. Names are all we ever see of Native Americans.”

My parents are predictable. Whenever I say this they laugh, but they are. My mom is for woman power. Everything in the world is her right. Even shopping is her right. In Mississippi, she argues in the mall whenever they ask her to show her ID. “That’s discrimination,” she’ll say. “That is dis-cri-mi-nation.” In JC Penney, too. At home, she acts like she’s the boss of me and Dad. “Eat up. What’s this doing here? Can’t you flush?” My dad says that’s because she is a lecturer. He is a doctor. He gets mad with the President, and still he wants the President to win the elections, to teach the people who are against the President a lesson, because they are not getting it together, especially with Health. Every day, when he comes home from work, he yells at the television because of the elections. Whenever the President comes on Mom says, “Ugh, turn him off. That man can’t string two words together.” Yet she tells me it’s not right to be rude to people who can’t speak English.

Last election, we voted in school. All my friends voted for the President—before he became president—because the other guy killed babies. “Who said he kills babies?” Mom asked when I told her. “Your teacher? Your friend? What kind of parent says such a horrible thing to their kid. Well, they must have heard it from somewhere. Well, I think grown ups should keep their political opinions to themselves.”

I told her I voted for the President. She said, “What! Why?” “Everyone else did,” I said. She said, “Listen, I brought you up to stand your ground. To stick up for what you believe in.” I said, “Oh, please.”

First of all, it was her ground not mine. Number B, I believe in fitting in.

“What’s it like being African?” my friend Celeste asked when we used to be friends. “I don’t know,” I told her. I was protecting my parents. I didn’t want Celeste to know the secret about Africans. Bones in meat are very important to them. They suck the bones and it’s so frustrating I could cry. My mom is the worst, especially when she eats okra stew. Afterwards she chews the bones to a mush and my dad laughs and asks, “What was that before your teeth got to it? Oxtail? Chicken Wings? Red Snapper? Crab?” I’m like, get some manners.

Being African was being frustrated again when my teacher showed pictures of clothes from all over the world. When she showed the pictures of Africans, that lame Daniel Dawson asked, “Why are they wearing those funny hats?” and everyone in class laughed.

Green is for the color I like most—yellow. Green is for a color I can’t stand—blue. Green is a mixture of blue and yellow. Green is for confusion.

Dad is still talking about the elections. “Where are the weapons of mass destruction?” he asks.

Mom points out of the window and says, “Pearl River.”

“You guys,” I say. “I have a soccer game tonight.” They start yelling.

“For goodness sake!”

“Again?”

“I don’t remember that being in my calendar. . .”

“Why didn’t you tell us before?”

“Soccer is meant for the summer. Only the British play in the spring. . .”

“Only Americans call football soccer.”

My parents are so predictable.

“These people are crazy,” Dad says. “The weather is not conducive.”

Mom says, “What people? Don’t put prejudice in my daughter’s heart.”

“I didn’t mention any race,” Dad says.

I’m like what, in the world right now? “You guys,” I say. “If you’re going to live in this country you might as well get used to soccer. It’s part of life. I’m American. How do you expect me to feel?”

“You know,” Dad says. “She’s right.”

I can’t believe he fell for that.

“What time’s the game anyway?” Mom asks.

“Six.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t cuss, Mom.”

“Sorry, baby, but I hated sports in Africa and I hate them here.”

* * *

We’ve passed Chunky River. I’ve finished my book. I think we’ll make it in time for my game. Mom asks, “Are you still mad with us?”

“A little,” I say.

“Sorry. Today has been a bit. . .”

“I know. Are you happy about your green cards?”

“You have no idea.”

“America will soon be number one in the world for soccer,” Dad says. “You wait and see. Look at the way they organize themselves. From the grassroots level. Everyone involved.”

“Girls too,” Mom says, and raises her thumb at me.

I’m not into all that. I know what girls like Celeste can do.

“Even if they don’t have any talent,” Dad says, rubbing his chin. “They have the money to import talent. Did you hear of that fourteen year old? Highest paid in the soccer leagues. Freddy Adu. His family came from Ghana. Immigration will save America.”

“Because of soccer?” Mom asks.

Green is for the Comets color. I hope we beat the Comets tonight. I really hope we beat them.

* * *

We made it to the game. Mom and Dad stayed, maybe because of guilt.

You should see me. My color is red. My number is 00. I’m ready to blast those Comets to kingdom come. I’m dribbling down the field. The lights are like stars. The grass is wet. I have to be careful because Mississippi mud can make you slip and slide. Everyone is cheering, Come on! Get on it! Get on it!

I kick that sucker. It zooms like a jet, lands in the corner of the goal post, neat as my bedroom when I get two dollars for cleaning up. Girls in my team are slapping my back, “Way to go! Good one!” My parents are cheering with other parents. This is it. Me, scoring. My mom looking like she loves soccer. My dad looking like he really loves the President. Three of us, looking like we really belong. It’s better than finding the baby in King Cake, and my team hasn’t even won yet.

* * *

Sefi Atta was born in Lagos, Nigeria and lives in Meridian, Mississippi. This story is dedicated to her daughter Temi. Her first novel will be published in early 2005.

Beth Bachmann

FIRST DANCE EPITHALAMION

Darkness overtakes the house – the shadow of Icarus' wing
or the sun sinking below the water.

A mosquito caught in the light crackles, hovers almost
and then arches his back and lets go.

It's too early yet for the stars to grace us
with a sacrificial dance,
a little one about spring, perhaps, or ecstasy.
Weeping after a riot. Abduction.

In the garden, a swarm refuses to listen,
waltzes frenzied on the broken roses.

WHAT THE DEAD DREAM

Hey gravedigger, bonepicker, kneller of bells
biting your nails won't keep us from reading your lips.

What we need here is not the rock on your finger
bright enough to spade a heart, rip open a glass eye.

We don't need your claw-footed spittoon
or your rendition of muttering waters,

a slow dance, a bouquet tossed
in the churchyard. Lover, just give me

a pocketful of stones to skip across the River,
a hipflask of Lethe.

Beth Bachmann's poems are forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *The Antioch Review*, and *Image*. She teaches creative writing at Vanderbilt University.

Photographs of Birmingham by Larry O. Gay





Larry O. Gay is a freelance photographer from Bessemer, Alabama. View more of his photographs at <http://larryogay.20megsfree.com>.

Tara Powell

WOMAN IN HIBERNATION

Snow has bent the trees in robes to kiss the streets
like disciples who mark the marvel of its passing.
Broken to piney angles, the genuflecting boughs
blanket and obscure the storm path,
grasp eyeless at its hems.

Three days in, I am still not here
among the jumbling radios,
the television, mincing, unprovoking,
but I am sleeping it all off, cocooned
in rumpled pajamas and mismatched socks
in my bed dented with the horror of my shape,
some hungry, sleepy monster-woman,
hungover with need and fear.

The object of my appetite has etched curls
and milk marble eyes,
a lilting tenor that punctuates
conversation with affirmations,
and like most new lovers,
it seems all who came before
were poor castings of him.

Loving him, I feel exposed.
Like the cold crystals to the late afternoons,
when the moon and sun both are pushing
back the clouds with need.

All these days, I have embraced the secret
of his strangeness. With the thaw,
he will be at my door,
his smile to me like sun on snow,
his affection beading on me,
though the chills of nights, each dropped degree,
have left ice beneath;
his arms will skid about me, clumsy as tires;
their heat will break us, one or the other.

Here, before the thaw,
I see nothing blighted and nothing rising again
from the deep, white wonder of it all.
Heavenly Father, stretch these frosted days to thousands,
this sleep to an endless dream!
These voices, all a copy of his own,
keep them without the stillness,
a loud, blinding, and bright igloo.

Tara Powell is the Hugh McColl Fellow in Southern Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is a Ph.D. candidate in English. Some of the publications in which her poetry has appeared include *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Crucible*, *Hidden Oak*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. She wrote a monthly column for the *Raleigh News and Observer* from February 2001 to August 2002, edited *The Carolina Quarterly* from May 2002 to August 2003, and has read her creative work by invitation at a variety of conferences.

Clay Matthews

A REVENGE FOR GRACE

After the Lynching of Cleo Wright in Sikeston, MO, 1942.

We were drinking peppermint schnapps, the poor man's julep,
when Miles, an old man I mowed lawns with, told me he was there
the day the city of Sikeston drug Cleo Wright down Main Street
and lit him on fire, naked, in the Sunset Addition on the other side of the tracks.

Miles said Cleo's head swelled up and was all open
after they'd drug him down the street behind an old Buick.
Said it was split like a watermelon that some opossums had gotten into,
that he would have thrown-up if he weren't too old to act that way.

This was only weeks after Pearl Harbor, and FDR on the radio
was as far away from Missouri as the sixties. Cleo had stabbed a white woman,
Grace. Her husband, called up, was off learning bayonets and choke-holds.
This is too easy to have made up. When the Marshall came, Cleo pulled a knife
out of his boot, stabbed the lawman in the mouth until it ended in gunfire.

How many times was he shot? Three? Four? Repeatedly is the word
the papers used. And Cleo bleeding to death in a jail cell while a mob
of four-hundred, five-hundred men amassed together outside,
as mad as hell about getting surprised in Hawaii and not gonna take it anymore.

Miles said he saw it all, hiding behind his father's car with a crowbar,
wanting to do something, saying, A man has to do something.
He took a long drink off the bottle after that.
I told him he needn't go on, but he said he had to finish,
that finishing was the least goddamned thing he owed.

A dump truck picked up Cleo's remains hours after his body went out.
But before that, when the crowd could smell the gasoline dripping
off his fingers, someone threw a match, and Cleo cried out once,
then shook, the mob dispersing at the site of flames and stillness.

Clay Matthews has had work in *Poetry Midwest*, *Taint*, *Big Muddy*, and *Oklahoma Review*, as well as in *storySouth*. His poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Imitating Art: Guy Cobb, Shelby Farms, and the Distillation of Life and Place

by **William Gill**

art by **Guy Cobb**

There is something sublime about Shelby Farms. With over 4,500 acres in east Memphis, Shelby Farms is one of the world's largest municipal parks. It is overgrown and unkempt, a place where development has been thwarted. Mostly pasture and woodland, it is a geographic muse that inspires the paintings of artist Guy Cobb, filling his mind with a tenuous equilibrium.

I am visiting Memphis shortly after a storm with hurricane-force winds leveled thousands of the city's trees. The damage is jaw dropping. Entire lawns are missing, having been pulled up by the tree roots that lay perpendicular to the earth. Sawdust and limbs are piled along curbs and the roads are full of dump trucks hauling the debris to be burned.

This is the fruit of the natural world: chaos and unpredictability. But Guy Cobb sees the other side of nature. To him, it is ordered and beautiful, spilling over with colorful light, radiating out from the Mississippi Delta like a healing liquid. Guy is a long way from his initial inspiration in southwest Missouri and longer still from his Mississippi days, when he pursued girls and beer, caring little for the quality of either.

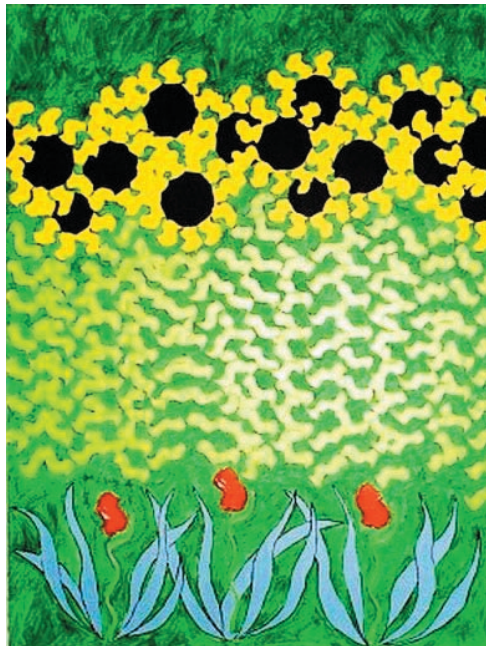
Playwriting was his first obsession, a suitable way to digest his youth. "I was trying to write a play about my

freshman year at Ole Miss," he says. "I thought that was such a pivotal time." The images from 1983 when John Hawkins became the first black cheerleader at Ole Miss left an indelible impression. Hawkins refused to carry the Confederate battle flag, sparking a visceral campus demonstration among some die hard Southern apologists. For Guy, the moment was a watershed. How could something as innocuous as cheerleading turn so ugly?

After all, cheerleading was a family institution for Guy's family. His sister, Dawn, had cheered at Mizzou; his older brother, Ty, was an Ole Miss cheerleader; and Guy was elected into the ranks for the coming fall of 1983. It was an honor he never accepted.

He left Ole Miss to travel with Ty's new acrobatic group, The Bud Light Daredevils. For Guy, this was cheerleading as it should be—it was physical, heartpounding and absolutely nonpolitical. They appeared across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, energizing basketball crowds with a blend of gymnastic precision and comedy. It was a job Guy would do intermittently for the next decade.

When he wasn't traveling, he was writing, polishing his craft with poetry and short story courses. By 1990, he had taken a furlough from the Daredevils and was living on twenty acres in Fair Grove, Missouri. It was an idyllic setting, pastoral and serene, but his writing



stalled. “Every night on the news was this litany of murder. Here I was in one of the most gorgeous settings in America, in the heartland, and all I was hearing about was meth labs, marijuana fields, and crazy acts of violence,” says Guy. He was becoming aware of a dark underside of rural life, a darkness that grew from loneliness and isolation, casting a shadow over an entire community. There was so much he wanted to say, but words were inadequate.

One fateful night he happened upon a documentary of Jackson Pollock that lifted him from his morass. As he describes it, on impulse, “I went into town and got some sheet metal and started working with it.” He peppered it using every type of gun he could find. The rigid metal held the shape of the exit wounds. “I then painted it a solid white, to give it... a sort of gessoed look.” In homage to Pollock, he then splatter-painted the surface. “I was thinking of some way to capture the essence of rural violence.” Not satisfied, he applied a dense array of projecting “horse apple” thorns, some more than four inches long. The sense of suffering that overlaid the punctuated fury of the bullet holes was almost Biblical. He called it, *Down in the Valley of Rural Violence*, the first of six major pieces exhibited in Missouri, garnering him notice as an artist whose work was impossible to ignore.

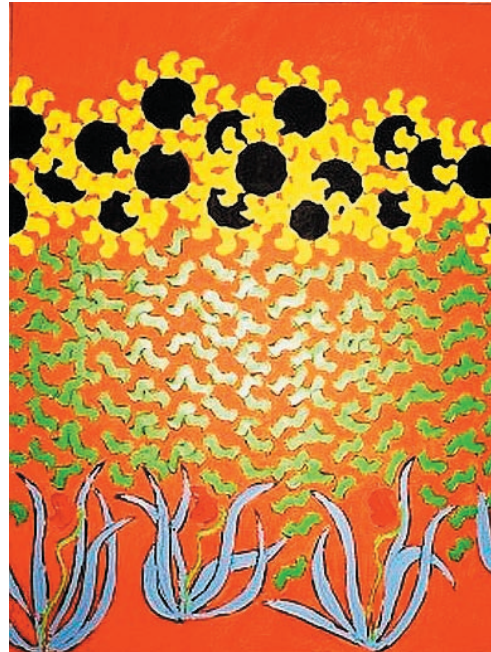
In 1992, he met Laura Wilson, a bride’s maid at Ty’s Memphis wedding. Attractive and fiercely intelligent, she was also an art history major. They eloped after three weeks and Guy experienced a sudden shift in self-awareness. Parts of his Y-chromosome were unlocking and putting age old responsibilities into motion. He signed up with the Daredevils for one last tour. “We were going to try to get some money and make a stake. I had no skills, other than jumping off trampolines,” he remarks. “No transferable skills.”

What had been routine ten years prior had become agonizing. “I discovered I had all these problems I had never known before, like tendonitis and arthritis in my hips,” he confesses. The repetitive impact of each performance and extended separation from his new wife made the season seem interminable.

He has no idea how Laura and he discovered Shelby Farms when he returned to Memphis in 1993. “All of a sudden, I found this place . . . this sanctuary.” They lay beneath the sun, letting the past burn away and the future take shape. “From that point on, we’ve always come back.” In this haven, this under commercialized antidote to the snarling traffic and ever lengthening corridor of strip malls that threaten to envelope it, Guy found his balance.

“We had no money, but I had it in my head that I needed to start painting again.” It had been a year since leaving Missouri and soon his home was filled with canvas rectangles. Everything had changed except the basic need to paint. The isolation of an Ozark farm had been traded for marriage and a bustling Southern metropolis. Summer was long and romance was fresh.

Soon, fields of flowers were flowing directly from his paint tubes. Shelby Farms became a central theme, and



a proliferation of vibrant luminosity gave each piece a living quality. Blooms seemed to writhe in the sunlight. He was trying to capture the new mood of his environment, but experimentation came with a price. The one opinion that mattered was Laura’s and she was not, at first glance, smitten. “My wife’s art [history] background means that I’ve caught hell from Mesopotamia on down.”

Stung by her judgments, he resolved to work harder. He displayed his work in public spaces like the airport, and the lobby of *The Commercial Appeal*. His brother

helped finance an exhibit at the Eades Gallery. With very few of the paintings actually selling, he gave the pieces away. By his own estimate, he donated more than 60 works to charity auctions and to anyone who expressed a fondness for his work. All the while, his style was developing strength. His painting became more speculative, less representational of specific reality, full of clean lines and intense color.

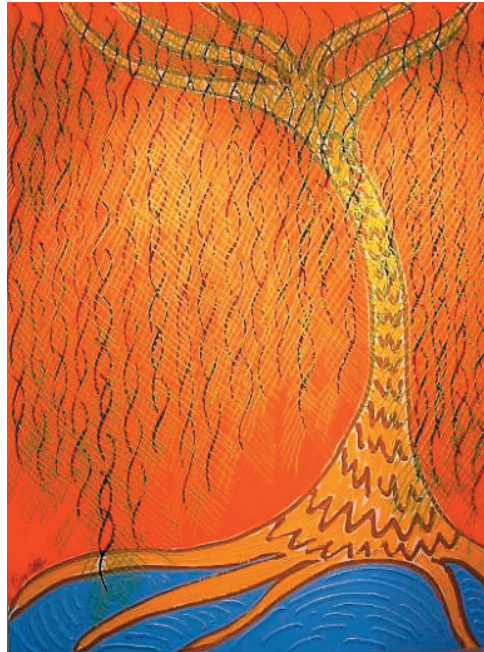
“It’s what I would call, Retro-Fauve,” he says, and indeed there is a familiarity of design with the Fauve movement of the early 20th century. But there are differences as well, more willingness to saturate the eye. Rarely does any white of canvas remain, and just as rarely does any man made object appear, save as a prop for some flowering plant or tree. One exception is a rendition of sailboats that hangs in the Shelby Farms Visitor’s Center. Like his other paintings that have been exhibited there over the past three years, it reflects a stylized vision of the landscape.

Wild Daffodils at Shelby Farms, Wildflowers at Shelby Farms, Willow at Shelby Farms, the park is prominent in his titles. The irony is that few of the painted scenes actually exist. “I dream of a lot of different scenes that I can see out here, that may not necessarily be out here,” Guy says with a shrug. “But you can see it, you can see that somebody could make those things come about.”

In response to the volume of differing Sunflowers at Shelby Farms paintings he produced, sunflowers were recently planted near the visitor’s center. It is a case of life imitating art. The sunflowers from which the paintings draw inspiration actually grow across Walnut Grove Road on property belonging to Agricenter International. Naturally, three of Guy’s paintings hang in Agricenter’s office building.

“Sunflowers have such great qualities. They feel like you’re with people. It’s like a quiet group of beautiful people who don’t ask anything of you,” he says as we walk amid the new blooms. The Agricenter staff has interspersed red sunflowers into the mix. Guy is snapping away with his camera. The predecessors of these same sunflowers indirectly influenced his artistic mission.

In 2002, he drove past the Memphis Mental Health Institute, thinking of Van Gogh, wondering, “How many artists have been institutionalized?” That day, he called the MMHI and asked to donate four sunflower paintings. It was the logical outcome of the past decade’s experience. Having previously donated his work to charity, he began donating entire collections to nonprofit institutions involved with either the arts or mental health issues.



“The MMHI accepted my work blindly,” says Guy, but in order to propagate his idea, he wanted people to have instant access to his body of work. Accordingly, he bought a digital camera and set up his website, guycobb.com. “Everything was clicking . . . I’ve always had respect for people who commit their lives to the betterment of society through the promotion of the arts.” He also felt his work should hang where it could be appreciated by persons who were in need of, “a cold splash

of brightness.” These are, he hopes, the beginning of a trend for his recipients: the seeds of a growing collection that will be held and displayed for posterity.

His puzzle was coming together when little else seemed to be going right. In mid 2002, he nearly died of sepsis. Shortly afterward, he was laid off. Out of work for six months, he continued to paint, while Laura scrambled to control the budget. The paintings were time consuming, expensive to produce, and weren’t generating a single dollar. A distinct difference of opinion was fomenting under one roof. Laura’s

childhood memories of West Memphis public housing were causing legitimate financial anxiety.

His job situation improved in 2003, not long before he completed a series of paintings for the Mississippi State Mental Hospital at Whitfield. Guy took Laura with him to deliver the collection and tour the facility. It was a trip that crystallized Laura's reluctant acceptance of his mission. She finally understood the motivation behind his ambition.

With his wife's blessing, Guy is on the threshold of achieving a delicate purpose. He has recently completed paintings for the Governor of Tennessee and the Mayor of St. Louis. In addition to locations previously mentioned, his work is on display at Union Mission and the offices of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. Once again, he is an artist whose work is impossible to ignore.

"What is driving all of this?" I ask. Art, he explains, is an essential part of being fully human. Thirty nine years of life have condensed into a burning desire to transmit joy. "I think that if someone [with an illness] looks at one of my paintings, and for even a moment they're shaken out of their depression, then that's enough. That's why I want to do this."

In the distance, the clearing of the wind-killed trees continues as smoke from a massive debris fire plumes into the air like a mighty dragon. Memphis will undoubtedly recover from nature's wrath until all but the memory of destruction is grown over. Guy Cobb's mission is more difficult than replanting trees. He is attempting to solidify his purpose and recultivate hope in the minds of those who may have lost it. He has wondered for years why he can't stop painting and how his past and present would combine to yield a future that made sense. Perhaps he is on the verge of understanding. His life has become something, the preciousness of which is measured more than by a backflip or a beer. Life has become meaningless if not given to others.

* * *



William Gill is a native of Jackson, Mississippi. For the past 12 years he has lived and worked in Kentucky. He says his wife and four children keep him and his writing focused on what is true and good in this life.

More of **Guy Cobb's** artwork can be seen at <http://www.guycobb.com>.

Portrait of the Artist as an Old Drunk

by **Christopher Orlet**

After the war my father worked on the Ford assembly line—not a bad job, really, for a man without much skill or intelligence, but not quite good enough for him all the same. We were all quite glad he wasn't a drinker like the other boys' fathers, and his beatings were rare, all things considered. Every evening, rain or shine, he would take my brothers and me to the racetrack and we'd watch the ponies run. Homework would have to wait till morning on the bus to school if it was to be done at all. Other than that my father was a responsible man. Afterwards he'd have us pick up all the thousands of discarded tickets searching for a winner. From my father I learned about hope. From my father I learned responsibility.

* * *

Later, in my twenties, I made a hardscrabble living as a ventriloquist, going on the road with my Nietzsche dummy. At first I got a lot of gigs at high schools and colleges since the English and philosophy faculties believed it would be educational to have Nietzsche appear at their schools, even though I tried to make it plain that Nietzsche was a dummy. I'd actually only read one book by Nietzsche called *The Anti-Christ* so I'd open with that. My dummy would say that the problem with Western Civilization was it had this Judeo-Christian slave morality, that instead of helping the best and brightest people, the Supermen, we wasted our energies helping the weakest among society, the ones who didn't deserve to live. Then just for laughs I'd have Nietzsche talk about how the fundamental flaw of the female character is that women are defective in the powers of reasoning and deliberation, traceable to the position that Nature had assigned them as the weaker sex. Actually, I believe Schopenhauer said that, but it sounded just as good coming from the dummy Nietzsche. Finally, for an encore I would have Nietzsche go crazy, and begin railing about the German people, how their souls were full of icy caves. I don't recall getting too many encores.

* * *

I remember exactly where I was when the Berlin Wall fell. I was a traveling salesman then and I sold sandpaper to Amish furniture makers. I was in the parking lot of a cabinet factory in Arcola, Illinois, a parking lot crowded with horses and buggies, and I was so excited I sat in my Dodge listening to the news for half an hour wishing I were back in my hotel room, the TV tuned to CNN. At length I went inside the office grinning ear to ear and asked the owner, a severe man with a long dusty beard, if he'd heard the news. He said he hadn't. I said, "No? The Berlin Wall has fallen." He looked at me with that deep, mistrustful look the Amish have of outsiders. "That's it for communism," I said. "It's all over, the end of history." "Did you bring the samples?" he said brusquely. I felt stupid for a moment. The Iron Curtain, I mean, what was that compared to the latest abrasive sample? The Amish had their own walls, you see, and they weren't made out of cement and razor wire. I apologized and got down to business. He ordered \$25,000 worth of product, and that evening I celebrated with a hotel hooker. Anyway, that's where I was when the Berlin Wall fell.

* * *

Many years ago I lived in a Siberian city near the Arctic Circle and often when I would walk past a group of local kids they would look at me and at my clothes, even if I were wearing their clothes, and they would ask me a question, something simple like what time it was. They just wanted to hear me speak. They just wanted to hear if I could speak. Maybe I was a German or an American, even a Brit. I would always answer back in Russian, saying something like, "I don't know." This would confuse them. They never knew if I was Russian or what.

* * *

I'd only meant to stay a year or two at my job, then I would move on to another job that I probably wouldn't like any more than this one, maybe less. But the years went by like so many billboards on buses and the days dragged by like so many dead cats tied behind bicycles and my children grew up like so many aspiring athletes and I got more money each year, not a lot, not enough to make a difference, but enough to buy an above ground pool for the backyard and pretty soon I was the only one left who knew anything and I was running the company which, looking back, I suppose I knew was going to happen the whole time. Even when I was telling myself that I only meant to stay a year or two, I knew.

* * *

In those days we would talk about how we felt shortchanged because there hadn't been a decent war in our lifetime. War stories are the best stories, after all. Not just that, but the whole wartime experience gives a person a certain attitude of philosophical resignation essential for good profound writing. Vietnam didn't count because it was way the hell over there and the only thing over here were wasted, longhaired crybabies. This was a difficult thing to discuss because war is no joke. Not that we were joking. We were dead serious. Sparks said he would give his left nut to have grown up during a good, terrible war with a genuinely evil enemy like the Nazis, but Sparks was full of crap. The women accused us of being shallow and selfish to even think of trading hundreds of thousands of innocent lives for a stupid story. We reminded them of what Faulkner said, about how the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is worth any number of little old ladies. "Faulkner, another misogynistic asshole," they said.

* * *

Sometimes after I was asleep, or pretending to be asleep, my wife would sneak out of the house. After a while I would get out of bed and pour myself a stiff one and wait for her to return. Sometimes I would wait three or four hours listening to the strange buzzing of early morning. You can pour a lot of drinks in four hours. Sometimes I'd even run out of booze. Then I'd smoke cigarettes while I waited. A pack or two of Camel filters was not uncommon. The kids would be asleep, but the dogs would usually get up. I'd hear them crunching their Gravy Train. Sometimes I'd go back to sleep, weary of waiting. After all I didn't want to make a fuss. We'd already played that scene, with the cops and all. But I always awoke when she returned drunk and stoned in the early morning. I'd take my pillow and go into the kids' room and lay down with them. They were good kids, young then, full of love for the both of us. Anyway there's nothing you can do. She would tell me to leave if I didn't like it. There was no point in arguing. There was no point to anything we did in those days.

* * *

Things according to plan haven't gone exactly like expected, to put it mildly, which is how I prefer it put, mildly, that is, things in general. The Yids say Man plans, God laughs, only no one I know ever heard God laugh, or even seen him crack a smile. Show me one one-liner in all of Scripture, one pun, one humorous anecdote and I'll show you the mummified remains of Christ, jowls frozen in a horselaugh. Paradise is like that, there's no joking around. Which reminds me. The happiest event of your life was the birth of your first grandchild. You have no grandchildren.

* * *

Christopher Orlet was born in a log cabin in southern Illinois—unnecessarily. His work has appeared in *The Simpering Nautilus*, *Inside the Female Ear*, *The Happy Hyena*, *High Noon at Midnight*, and many other high-brow publications.

D. Antwan Stewart

THE GHOST THE NIGHT BECOMES

Tonight the boy is lost,
his shadow the only companion
sharing moonlight along the stretch
of dirt road. Away from this boy
the road dusts and winds, and where
he travels, it collects flakes of him.
He wonders how he got to this place,
wonders how his body slips between brush
not wide enough to avoid the gnarled branches.
And one hand crosses to the other as if to soothe
the pain as one tree fallen in the forest
shoulders another. He walks deeper
into the mouth of this dark place, whimpering
as a child does, hands braced before him.
Beneath his feet, twigs bend and break
a trail behind him, and somewhere
some living thing will cock its ear and know
that in this forest a boy is lost, and the trail he is making,
some dead thing will cover it up.

D. Antwan Stewart currently lives in Austin, Texas where he is a MFA candidate and James A. Michener Fellow in poetry and fiction in the University of Texas Michener Center for Writers. He graduated with honors in creative writing from the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and was a 2004 June Fellow in the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *New Millennium Writings*, *The 13th Warrior Review*, *The Red River Review*, *Knoxville Bound: An Anthology of Knoxville Writers*, *The Seattle Review*, and others.

Flurries

by **R. T. Smith**

As Kingsley Fishpaw rocked his chair in the forest, the creak of bent hickory on the platform's barnwood planks spurred the ostriches to pace their pen. Nearly seventy, a half-breed with thousands of miles on his engine, he was not ready to be old or weary. The wicker seat beneath him, however, was rotting with weather, the boards of his raised sentry platform frayed and splintery. The sun paused briefly on the horizon, the pine spikes on Whidbey's Ridge an opal-blue with weather and distance. A few dogwoods waved their petals in the wind. Thank goodness, he thought, no one comes to gawk at the birds. Someday, maybe, boys will come to spook them, or adults to point and laugh, the world being full of mischief as it is, but not so far. Not this particular evening.

He sipped instant from his thermos and ran his hand along a bristly cheek and jaw. Soon the deer would be moving, foraging for the early shoots and remnant mast, leaving their sharp marks in the mud. The moon would come up, and he could go home to supper and Big Dipper's "Easy Grass" program on the radio, but for the moment, the aroma of the coffee was pleasure enough.

Since spring he'd followed this trade savoring all the solitude he could wolf down in the open air while shuttered from the sun and wind by three full cedars. He liked having freedom to move about with nobody watching over. Weekly pay envelope, steady shelter. The easiest job, his poor mother had said, would be the last one, and he wondered if that stage had finally arrived.

Afternoons he fed the creatures, watching them beak up the greens and dog food, their heads like war clubs with a jutting pike point like he had seen in the *Geographic*. Iroquois carried those. The black males with rude plumage, the females colored like cowbirds. They tended to drink peculiar, staring at the sky while the water runs down that long neck. Bald-looking. They could run fast as foxes, and their kind do not bury their noggins in the sand. O'Donnell tried to fill him in: African origin, kin to emu, omnivorous and so on. He didn't care. When did you feed them? How much water? What if one gets out? O'Donnell claimed they were the largest living birds, and King asked if that meant there were other species that got larger when they died. Bloat, maybe. He chuckled. These were already about seven feet, he reckoned. Almost two dozen. Weak wings like some creation joke, or just obsolete. Either way, just embellishment now. He'd grown tolerant of their squabbles and haughtiness, but even now, he bore them no affection.

What he savored was the quiet. Birdcall, a dog in the distance, cows lowing back in the pasture, pleading "moon, moon." At night there were coy dogs in the hills, but his own shift ended around dusk. Part-time. The main responsibility was to keep them fed and watered and contained. Not wrangling, just keeping watch. At night, it seemed, they were calmer, more content to nest, and the Stevens boy keeping the sheep safe from canine raiders of all sorts would patrol them steadily when he finished up his other chores.

Backward and forward in the ladderback rocker, like a small boat moored against a slow tide. Pulse-rate. He remembered the old jobs, ran through them daily, calling up the pictures and smells. Just this afternoon, thoughts of Lisel, a blue-eyed German girl, would not leave him alone.

He had been a pin boy in khaki coveralls where the lumbermen came to bowl duckpins and unwind. "Kingbird," they finally called him, but at first it had been "King Breed." He shared the work with Elvin, and they would alternate smoke breaks on a busted mattress behind the alley. You had to be nimble. Those woodjacks would roll the muskmelon-sized balls at you when they got a snoot full. He was already shaving then, not a small boy, and he knew how to glare at a man dangerously. The fishhook scar on his brow and the dark skin made him look like a fighter, and his name sounded like it was won in a ring. Nobody grabbed or swatted him like they did Elvin. They poked some rude fun and moved on.

Lisel worked in the Ty-D Laundromat next door and would stuff all the front loading machines, switch them on and slip out to stroll in the moonlight. First time, they talked about the timber company and the Peavey Grill. The second time she passed him smoking in the dark, his cigarette like a firefly beside the bricks. She twirled about and approached him, then said, "Fishpaw, you know you like me, do your duty." Then she was kissing him, and he was helping. Before long her pale breasts were visible, the olivewood cross swinging back and forth as the two of them swayed together. He could hear the rumble of bowls down the waxed wood, the clamor of pins scrambling. In the corner of his eye, white suds gurgled from the Ty-D's drains like some mechanical variation on snow.

Maybe that was what brought her back now, the rhythm of his rocker like sex after the suddenness passed. She was the dangerous one, and when he left the next summer to sell hardware in Silva, she swore to kill him. For a year she sent letters, general delivery, but after the first one, he never opened another. It had said, "King, there will always be women and women, but they can't all bury you. Just one. Lisel."

The cock ostrich brayed at him and stamped. He had the guard gun, an old Remington lever-action, and he had the power to free the world of this odd thing that made gargoyle noises and looked like a Martian. "Click-and-clack," it said like the rocker, like cranking a shell in. Who would eat such flesh? But tourists did at the Southern Grill, paid plenty. He figured it would be string meat, a bark taste. The feathers went in women's hats once, but now they were to decorate your guest room. He could shoot it and stop the racket, but then he'd have to find another job. Slip off by night. He'd done that enough times already, and what other boss would let him whittle, his shavings like pale fiddleheads spilling on the ground? Who else would let him cup a grass blade and call out to crows and sparrows across the green evening, all on the clock, the pleasure all twined up with making a wage.

The worst job had been cotton, fifty years back. He'd tried peanuts, but the crop went bad early from a slack farmer's fertilizer misstep, too much nitrogen, so there he was, central Georgia, a world of dust and the local cotton coming up. He hoed till his back nearly broke and blisters covered his hands. When he rode the wagon to the gin, he saw white men wave pistols at each other over money. The Thirties, hard times. Because crackers down there believed he was a Negro, he settled into Darktown, just an orphan boy himself by then, or so he reckoned. In the workers' shacks he tried his first frail at the banjo and saw he had a knack for it. Walking the pastures, he liked most of all to watch the egrets picking bugs off the backs of cattle. Sunlight sparked on the Chattahoochee River. Seeing no other prospects, he stayed for winter, helping mend things, learning to drive a nail straight without bending it or scaring it silly with near misses while he bashed and damaged the wood. He had gloves and a swollen thumb, but before long he was able to take pride in the unbent steel and nickel. The morning it snowed down there—people said first time in ten years—the children hid under the bed, afraid it was some new brand of winter cotton they'd have to pick.

When he went back to the highlands near Rabun Gap, his brother Spatch took him to the alley. "Duckpins," Spatch said. "You just set em up and set em up and set em up. Roll them balls back down the runnel. Keep moving. This here's Elvin. You watch what he does."

When a bluebird from nowhere darted in and perched in the service tree, King shook free of the reverie and wondered what the bird had to be shy about. He had reasons himself. It was at the Bristow furniture plant up in Carolina where he first met Taddy O'Donnell. He was thirty, "unskilled," as the foreman and bosses in string ties called him. It was a loud place, bad with shellac fumes, and it eventually took two of his fingers. That was where he had his first dance with John Law after a fight at the Fiddling Fool Club. Trouble will follow a half-breed, but Taddy had bailed him out.

Working wood. Skill saws and band saws, the blades always singing their war song. Men from the spraying room came out with their breather masks and goggles on, splattered and coughing, worse than the picture show's space monsters. He learned the draw knife and stain mixing, saw the wood dust spray out like snow in the wake of a roadplow. From across the room it was a flurry, a sweet scent, but up close, just so much grit-shot. It could choke you. It could blind you. One day at a time, it could make your death.

Even now he despised the grind and whine of a triple drum sander, its pitch a fierce yearning like a sequence of harrier hawks. He also hated the boring machine and the glue made of fish guts and horses. It was a nightmare, a prison camp for misfits who lived in shabby bungalows and rusting trailers. The routine of running the template and jigsaw, template and jigsaw, working the kiln-dried wood down to lazy curls, had been enough to drive any man crazy. It had snatched at him, a bent saw blade wobbling off center, and taken two fingers at the joint, like a tax it was owed. When he got back to work, his stubs stiff and tender, they put him on the lathe, no place for a cripple, but he'd managed well enough, learning how to turn a sweet spindle before they side-moted him to security guard, adjusting his banjo picking until it was a weird hammer-claw, comfortable and strange.

It pleased him now to scan about and know O'Donnell had no plans for these trees around the pen other than to stovewood the blowdowns. No Early American dinettes or Great Northwest bedposts. Maybe another shelter in summer when the eggs came, just a lean-to requiring no major felling. The leaves could just keep budding and curling open, blazing and browning and floating down to the understory according to the natural scheme of things.

Thinking back on those years made him antsy. He would have rolled a smoke to calm himself, if he hadn't taken to wheezing a few years back. The doctor said tobacco would kill him. Now he reached down into the pocket of his denim coat for comfort and rubbed the porcelain door knob, feeling the hairline crack like tiny lightning. It wasn't a habit to start with, but more practical, the only way to keep his cabin private. He just twirled out the side screw and plugged the knob in when he came home, dropped it into his coat pocket when he ventured out. Sometimes he'd think he had forgotten to remove it and had to push his mangled hand in to make sure the knob was there. His palm found relief in the cool, polished thing.

Somewhere behind him, a limb snapped, but when he turned, nothing was visible. Jumpy, he thought. Just another hour. Just the wind.

The only trouble at this place had set in with O'Donnell's other hired man, Victor. Raising the pens, the foreman had caught him hiding some wire snips, and in his cabin behind the milk barn they'd found other tools and some silver knickknacks Taddy's wife thought she'd misplaced. King wasn't in the picture then, had settled, he thought, in the back of the community shelter. A broom closet, really, and what he did was sweep up, clean the toilets and lock the doors every evening. He had a bunk and a radio playing old time tunes, a library card and his Silvertone with a splint on the cracked neck. "Napoleon's Retreat," "Turkey in the Straw," "Shenandoah"—he could still strum up a few.

He washed his teeth in the big sink and bathed in the basketball showers. If it was like living in a cell, it was a welcome one, a sanctuary. Not easy street for a man in his sixties, but better than death or a hospice, he figured. Vigor still ran in him, and he liked to stroll about, get into things with his hands, carve a bird or cow out of softwood.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. Victor was an old rival from Bristow, somebody Taddy and King had known before Taddy's daddy left him the farm. King had pilgrimed about for two decades, had a wife and lost her. No offspring, which was lucky, considering his uncertain economics. Then he was back, stumbling onto Taddy at the Food Lion just after Victor's stealing episode.

"Come on out," his old friend had said. "We've got the renovated blacksmith cabin and need a man for some daylight hours. The birds are my great experiment."

And why not? Taddy was the cheery red-headed sort with a kind streak, and King could always get to his funny bone. "What about the talking gander?" he'd still ask, just to re-hear the story, just to have the laugh. "And the salesman and the Swiss farmer's daughter . . . andyouroladytoo." They both took a drink, but nothing to excess, and they were matched for working together, though the Irishman was ten years younger. Or had been matched. Now Taddy's boy did the real work, and the old man had his hobbies—wine grapes, the CB station, flat-picking an old Gibson, and now the ostrich scheme.

The real trouble at Bristow, King reasoned, had started with pranking. Victor used to like yanking on his chain and whispering “redskin” just barely in hearing range, just to get his goat. “Breed. Hey, breed.” A bunch of them would take their sack lunches to the canteen—Hawk (shipping), Preach from the rub room, Cleatus Moonrobin, a full-blood Chippawa who hailed from up north and was a finisher, Tayshan in spray. Victor had the sharp tongue, the smart mouth from the sanding room. The wood flour had worked into his skin so intimate he was oaky.

“Didn’t you do some chiefin, wear feathers up in Cherokee and pose for the gawkers? Didn’t you play one of the bare-ass savage avengers in that ‘Unto These Hills?’ I believe I saw you once when I was up on vacation.”

“Never been to that reservation,” King would answer. He didn’t even know for sure what tribe he was. His father’s side, and he’d not known the man.

“Wadn’t the Kingfisher some darkie in a TV mystic knights club?” asked Preach.

“You mean Boston Blackie?”

“Naw. Some smoothie city Knee-grow.” And some of them would laugh uncomfortably as King finished his pineapple and peanut butter sandwich. Then he’d open that hawkbill knife and commence to whittling on a remnant. Looking back, he no longer wondered if they saw it as a threat: he knew they believed he was brandishing, a warning to navigate the conversation in some other direction. That was alright. The banter swirled and dipped, repetitious, tireless, with Victor the engine of its predictable rhythms.

Once the sander asked if his name was a secret clan or society, “Fishpaw, like a raccoon using his sneaky paws to corral trout?” King didn’t know.

“I’m a loner. I’m not a raccoon, not so much nocturnal by nature. I like to see what I’m catching.” Then the knife again, whicking a chair scrap to a point, harmless but emphatic, the ominous sound of sharp steel moving. Usually Victor’s voice would back off and Preach would presto his mouthharp from nowhere to treat them to a golliwog song or “Betsy Gal.”

Friday nights they took the whole act to Stroud’s fish camp where Ester Jean was the target of jibes. She gave back as good as she got, always carrying a pot of scorching coffee, just in case. She sort of liked Cleatus, though King walked her once to the fire tower when the rhodies were in blossom and filled with bees. A hot day, and she shucked off her shirt, the braids tapping on her shoulders. King had to walk behind, but he saw enough, knew by the time they pried that lock on the ranger hut that he was going to get the high ride people whispered about. Unlike the others, he never told, but Victor eventually sensed it, saw the lack of teasing when she brought more hushpuppies, crispy and hot with cane sugar taming the cornmeal and onions.

They’d been enemies since Victor caught on. The man didn’t say it, but King knew. When the company moved him to night watchman, he suspected Victor of some of the petty vandalism—spray paint, missing drink crates, a jimmied outbuilding. No real evidence though, and since King wasn’t around for lunch, they passed from each other’s sphere.

Evidently hunting season pretty much occupied Victor’s thoughts and spare time. He was caught up in his archery feats and the tail end of a new cashier at Biner’s. He had a new audience, new victims. Within a year, King had gotten restless and moved on.

Now he was thinking of hen eggs splattered on the griddle, the briney ham hissing in the skillet like a varnish sprayer. He liked the sharp smell from marrow in the center ring of bone. The biscuits would rise golden, the ham fat crisp out. It was a deluxe daydream, but no ostrich eggs. He’d heard they were strong and gamey, likely to show a thread or two of blood. No, let the birds raise their kind and eat their salad and gruel. When he got home, he’d pitch in kindling and get the stove bolts to talking, fry himself a treat.

Suddenly, as much as he wanted to be wrong, he realized something was moving behind the stand of laurels. The wind was riffing the new blossoms of dogwoods. This was his favorite part of spring—the redbuds signaling Easter, the forsythia bushes around O’Donnell’s house gone hysterical with yellow. But something was lurking, creeping, holding close to cover. Then he heard, as if his memory had called up a ghost, Victor’s voice with its unmistakable edge.

“Fishpaw! Redskin! It’s over for you. I’ve got you surrounded.”

Nothing he knew about the ex-marine was promising. He was pretty much your standard-issue bully who used words like throwing stones but could not always be depended upon to back down when openly defied or thwarted. And now, evidently, a thief, caught and expelled several months ago, replaced by an old enemy. Victor was a man who might feel he had to avenge himself against somebody, and Taddy, who had fired him, was probably too settled, too known and respected to be the target. Maybe this was no more than a braggart’s ruse. But King knew he was himself no more than just a half-breed, a transient who had sort of stayed. He was not protected, would not be much missed in the event of trouble, and there had been a few stints—brief ones, misunderstandings—in custody when he’d been young. He couldn’t bear too much scrutiny.

Last year’s dry leaves rustled again. Just barely, but he knew that Victor’s claim to manly reputation was outdooring. He’d brought trophies to work and medals. Canoes, ‘sang and galax gathering were his specialties, bass fishing, hunting. The bow was his boasted weapon, and he had liked, years back, to describe the way the razored broadheads went in, breaking bone and chewing up the vitals, dooming the target animal.

“You can kiss them stupid birds goodbye, Fishpaw. I’ll show you all who’s the king.”

An arrow zipped past him and stood trembling in the nearest cedar. It was aluminum, and it caught the light. King leaned over for the rifle and swept it up, moving at a pace he thought was pretty fast toward the shed with tools, water jugs and Purina sacks filling its shadows.” Victor, you don’t want to do this, man.” Holding the weapon, he let his right arm swivel in the socket, his stiffened wrist like a cam shaft, then back. The bullet eased into the chamber with a sweet click, the whole lethal machinery in sync. The hammer had cocked back, showing its bantam profile, and he was ready, but he had never before fired this rifle.

When Victor called out, “You ain’t safe,” King could hear the spirits in his voice, probably blended whiskey, cheap stuff you could get by the jug. Even on beer, the man could be a belligerent drunk, but this was beyond guessing. What next?” King wondered, but just then another arrow passed overhead, whispering through the evergreens, lodging nowhere. The words that formed in his mind were, “What is he planning?”

But that wasn’t quite it, either.

“I don’t know that I want you dead, breed, but I want you gone, and I mean to barbecue me some of that dodo meat before I light out. We got to figure a way to work this, you and me.” The hyena laugh that followed was no guarantee that Victor was to be trusted about anything, and King felt his recent promises under fire: he had told Taddy he’d look after the birds, he had said he was up to it. He had not said he was fearful. He had not said he’d abandon them if things got stormy.

“Not joking you, breed, not pranking you. I can pick off them goofies with my eyes closed.”

But his eyes evidently weren’t closed, as the next arrow thwacked into the huge body of a hen, which voiced an ungodly squawk and fell dead in a spray of its own blood. The shaft appeared to have kept going, perhaps in search of another easy victim, and King could imagine a scene of complete carnage, depending on how many arrows Victor had brought along. He thought six or eight was normal for a bow quiver, but there was no way to guess it, and he knew he would have to act, would have to use the rifle. He swiped sweat off his forehead, and he knew his shirt was wet. Would a warning shot solve anything? Maybe with a sober man, but this was different. Warning was not what he needed to do.

When King pivoted around the corner to get a look, he shouted, “Victor Westy, how many arrows you got there?”

The responding “Nuff” gave him an idea where the voice was located, right at the north edge of the stinkbush stand, just under a cloud of dogwood flowers, some of the petals flurrying down. What King meant to do was to shoot close, use the whole element of surprise, since his attacker didn’t seem to know about the rifle. If he got close, showed any hint of proficiency, even a fool like Victor was likely to turn tail. That was why he aimed high, but he had not counted on the drunk rising to run for another vantage, had not intended to even approach hitting the man. Neither had he expected the birds to stampede.

Everything went fast, like a whirlwind. The bow made a spanging noise as Victor flung it outward to grab his head. The arrow went off toward the meadow as the archer howled like a sledged calf. The noise the birds made as the herd broke through the rails was ghastly, so many angry ghosts, and they caught King stepping free of his shelter, terrified that he had killed Victor.

He took a minute to understand he'd been trampled, that the bushy bodies of his livestock had rushed out in full panic, pumping their tinker toy legs, leaving him mouth-down in the dust, feathers all over him, their footprints on his jacket, and of course, they had shat as they ran. The air was putrid with the smell of it. His good hand was grasping a glop. It was on his cords and in his tied-back hair. But the worst part, as he stood up and inventoried his bones and functions, was knowing he'd just killed another human being. Memories of lock-step marching and shake-downs, the cells and shackles and clammy grime of animal despair shook him. He breathed hard and trembled as he ran.

Maybe, he thought later, he had been lucky, but he couldn't say for certain if it was good luck or bad. Thrashing through the bramble, he heard the moaning, and as he stood on the small bluff above where Victor had fallen, there was blood everywhere. Victor's windbreaker had been a spruce green but now it was slick with red. Blood was all over his jeans and brogans, but he was lashing and kicking out with too much energy to be mortally hit.

When King got his tormenter still enough to examine, he was astonished to see the snaggle of flesh where the ear had been, but under the blood, which was now covering King's neckerchief, it looked like somebody had just snatched it off, cauterizing the remnant shreds. Victor's face was contorted like a face jug.

"Oh, God, I'm killed, goddamit. Damn it, damn it, you black Indian." That was pretty much his wail, and Kingsley could hear the riddled muffler of the Stevens boy's Chevy truck as it bounced over the pasture terraces. Maybe the shot had actually brought Jimmy, but it was about time for him to relieve Fishpaw anyway. The most astonishing sight before King's eyes was the clutch of ostriches, now calm and looking merely puzzled, clustering in the field and allowing themselves to be truck-herded back toward the pen, as if the muffler noise were the day's only distressing feature.

By the time the truck rolled to a stop where King was sitting back in his chair with the Remington across his knees, Victor had disappeared over the ridge, and a frosty wind riffled the leaves behind him.

"What the hell was all that noise? I thought I heard gunshots and people screaming."

"Rustlers, podner."

"What?"

"Ostrich rustlers. Redskins. A whole war party of them with bows and paint and shit."

"I reckon shit is right, seeing what's all over you. How many birds did they take?"

"Looks like you've rescued most. One's dead with an arrow in it. When you get the others rounded into the corral, we'll drag the casualty into the truck to show Taddy. I guess it's time that bird came to dinner." He was pointing to the single downed bird with his two nubs, which seemed to make the boy blink in confusion.

Wheeling back to the round-up work at hand, Jimmy said, "Looks like a little snow tonight, maybe the last of the year," then under his breath, "But rustlers?"

The bluebird lit again at the heart of the service tree, his azure chest flickering in the sunlight's last rays as he preened, a blue pilot light keeping the faith, keeping life glowing. King ran his palm across a whiskery jaw, sipped the last of the instant, rocked on, breathing the savory steam.

"Savage avenger," he thought and let his hand fall into the denim pocket where it found the doorknob's familiar contours, its satisfying heft and cool seam.

* * *

R. T. Smith's most recent stories are forthcoming in *Southern Review*, *Best American Short Stories 2004*, and *New Stories from the South*.



“Sweets for a Sweetie”
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acrylic on canvas, 24 X 30,
March 2004.

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