

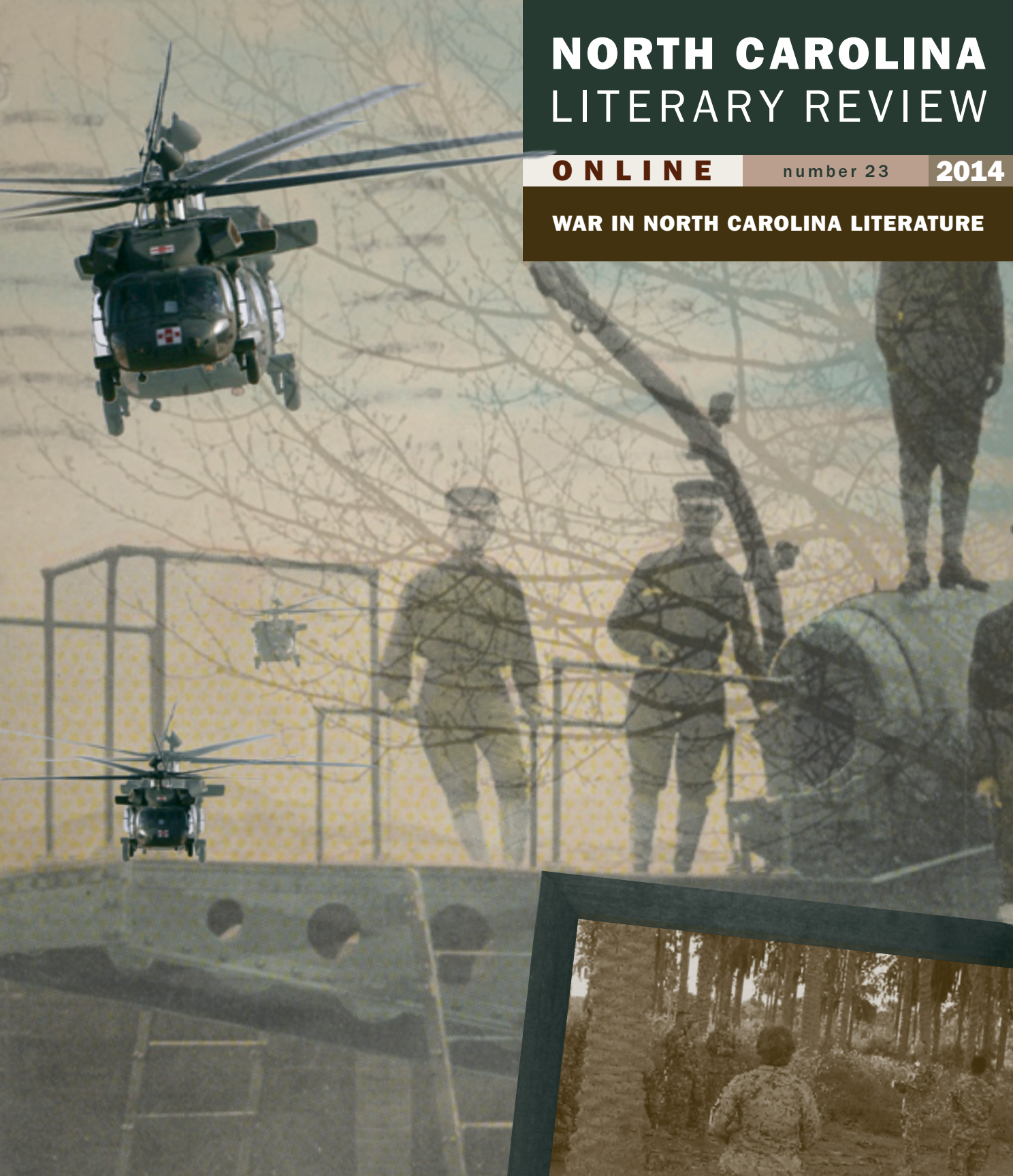
NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

ONLINE

number 23

2014

WAR IN NORTH CAROLINA LITERATURE



IN THIS ISSUE Fiction by Terry Roberts ■ An Interview with Anjail Rashida Ahmad ■ Essays by Fred Chappell and Michael McFee ■ 2013 Doris Betts Fiction Prize finalist ■ 2013 James Applewhite Poetry Prize finalists ■ Book Reviews and Literary News ■ And more . . .

COVER ART

FRONT COVER COLLAGE,
designed by Dana Ezzell Gay, includes:

Army Med Evac helicopter, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Al Asad, circa 2010; courtesy of Wes Hite

Postcard of soldiers standing on a piece of artillery aimed over the wall of Fort Caswell, near Wilmington, NC, 1912; courtesy of Digital Collections, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University

US Army members at a prayer gathering, Operation Iraqi Freedom, circa 2010; courtesy of Wes Hite

Published annually by East Carolina University and by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association

© COPYRIGHT 2014 NCLR

ART BY H. CHARLES MCBARRON; COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION COLLECTION, US ARMY CENTER FOR MILITARY HISTORY



COVER DESIGNER

NCLR Art Director **DANA EZZELL GAY** is an Associate Professor at Meredith College in Raleigh. She has an MFA in Graphic Design from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. Her design work has been recognized by the CASE Awards and in such publications as *Print Magazine's Regional Design Annual*, the *Applied Arts Awards Annual*, *American Corporate Identity*, and the *Big Book of Logos 4*. She has been designing for NCLR since the fifth issue, and in 2009 created the current style and design. In 2010, the "new look" earned NCLR a second award for Best Journal Design from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.

WAR IN NORTH CAROLINA LITERATURE

IN THIS ISSUE

7 ■ War in North Carolina Literature

includes fiction, creative nonfiction, book reviews, and literary news

Alison Arant	Gail Godwin	Terry Roberts
Peggy Dunn Bailey	Ron Jackson	Katey Schultz
David S. Cecelski	Jen Julian	John Milliken Thompson
Kelly Clancy	Seth Peavey	
Abraham Galloway	Ron Rash	

45 ■ Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues *includes poetry, nonfiction, book reviews, and literary news*

Wilton Barnhardt	Philip Gerard	Michael McFee
Jeffery Beam	Brian Glover	Jim McGavran
Barbara Bennett	Allan Gurganus	Susan Laughter Meyers
Tanya Long Bennett	John Hart	Dale Neal
Doris Betts	Anna Dunlap Higgins	Tara Powell
Kathryn Stripling Byer	John Hough, Jr.	Glenis Gale Redmond
Fred Chappell	Robert Inman	Gary Richards
Jim Clark	Randall Jarrell	Lorraine Hale Robinson
Sharon E. Colley	Kelly Starling Lyons	Lee Smith
Georgann Eubanks	Margaret Maron	Robert Wallace
Keith Flynn	Jill McCorkle	Samm-Art Williams
		Lee Zacharias

91 ■ North Carolina Miscellany

includes an interview, poetry, and book reviews

Kathy Ackerman	Terry Kennedy	Peter Makuck
Anjail Rashida Ahmad	Kristina L. Knotts	Susan Laughter Meyers
Hannah Bonner	Rebecca Lee	Valerie Nieman
Lee Ann Brown	Tom Lombardo	Amber Flora Thomas
Beth Copeland	Joan McLean	

■ Art and Photography in this issue ■

Donna Campbell	Kenneth Noland
Ray Elmore	Hans Curt Pfalzgraf
Dale Foshe	Maurice Sendak
Linda Andrea Fox	George Scott
Eduardo Lapetina	Vollis Simpson



North Carolina Literary Review is published annually by East Carolina University and by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. **NCLR Online**, which began in 2012, is an open-access supplement to the print issue.

NCLR is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals and the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, and it is indexed in EBSCOhost, the *Humanities International Complete*, the *MLA International Bibliography*, and the Society for the Study of Southern Literature newsletter.

Address correspondence to

Dr. Margaret D. Bauer, *NCLR* Editor
ECU Mailstop 555 English
Greenville, NC 27858-4353

252.328.1537 Telephone

252.328.4889 Fax

BauerM@ecu.edu Email

NCLRuser@ecu.edu

NCLRsubmissions@ecu.edu

<http://www.nclr.ecu.edu> Website

Subscriptions to the print issues of *NCLR* are \$25 (US) for two years for individuals or \$25 (US) annually for libraries. Add \$3 (US) for postage if subscribing after June 1. Foreign subscribers add \$15 in US funds per issue. Libraries and other institutions may purchase subscriptions through subscription agencies.

Individuals or institutions may also receive *NCLR* through membership in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. Find membership information on the [website](#).

Individual copies of the annual print issue are available from retail outlets (listed in the back of our issues and on our website) or from *NCLR*. Back issues of our print editions are also available for purchase, while supplies last. See the *NCLR* [website](#) for prices and tables of contents of back issues.

Advertising rates

\$250 full page (8.25" h x 6" w)

\$150 half page (4" h x 6" w)

\$100 quarter page (3" h x 4" w or 4" h x 2.875" w)

Advertising discounts available to *NCLR* vendors.

Submissions

NCLR invites proposals for articles or essays about North Carolina literature, history, and culture. Much of each issue is thematically focused, but a portion of each issue is open for developing interesting proposals – particularly interviews and literary analyses (without academic jargon). *NCLR* also publishes high-quality poetry, fiction, drama, and creative nonfiction by North Carolina writers or set in North Carolina. We define a North Carolina writer as anyone who currently lives in North Carolina, has lived in North Carolina, or has used North Carolina as subject matter.

See our [website](#) for submission guidelines for the various sections of each issue. Submissions to each issue's special feature section are due August 31 of the preceding year, though proposals may be considered through early fall.

Issue #24 (2015) will feature Global NC Literature.

Issue #25 (2016) will celebrate 25 years of *NCLR*.

Book reviews are usually solicited, though suggestions will be considered as long as the book is by a North Carolina writer, is set in North Carolina, or deals with North Carolina subjects. *NCLR* prefers review essays that consider the new work in the context of the writer's canon, other North Carolina literature, or the genre at large. Publishers and writers are invited to submit North Carolina-related books for review consideration. See the index of books that have been reviewed in *NCLR* on our [website](#). *NCLR* does not review self-/subsidy-published or vanity press books.

Editor

Margaret D. Bauer

Art Director

Dana Ezzell Gay

Poetry Editor

Jeffrey Franklin

Fiction Editor

Liza Wieland

Art Editor

Diane A. Rodman

Founding Editor

Alex Albright

Original Art Director

Eva Roberts

Graphic Designers

Karen Baltimore

Dave Cox

Stephanie Whitlock Dicken

Assistant Editors

John Bebeau

Randall Martoccia

Lisa Proctor

Editorial Assistants

Timothy Buchanan

Ben Hogwood

Justine McClarren

Interns

Emma Helen Calow

Erin Elizabeth Emmett

April Modigliani-Estraella

Lindy Elizabeth Sellars

Steven Aaron Smith

EDITORIAL BOARD**Tanya Long Bennett**English, North Georgia College
and State University**Peter Franks**

English, East Carolina University

Gabrielle Freeman

English, East Carolina University

Brian Glover

English, East Carolina University

Rebecca Godwin

English, Barton College

Christy Alexander Hallberg

English, East Carolina University

Donna Kain

English, East Carolina University

Dale KnickerbockerForeign Languages and Literatures,
East Carolina University**John Lang**English, Linguistics, and Communication,
Emory and Henry College**Joan Mansfield**

Art and Design, East Carolina University

Dominique Marshall

English, Craven Community College

Kat MeadsRed Earth Low-Residency MFA Program,
Oklahoma City University**Gary Richards**

English, University of Mary Washington

E. Thomson Shields

English, East Carolina University

Kristin L. Squint

English, High Point University

John Steen

English, East Carolina University

C.W. Sullivan, IIIProfessor Emeritus, English,
East Carolina University**Eugene Tinklepaugh**

English, Halifax Community College

Susan Wright

English, Clark Atlanta University

Introducing the Third Issue of *NCLR Online*

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

With this third issue of *NCLR Online*, I am convinced: these supplemental issues are a good idea. Without the worry of exceeding any page limit, we have been able to publish more reviews – two dozen books are reviewed in the pages that follow; that is 150 percent more book reviews than were in the print issues before *NCLR Online*. We are also able to publish all of the finalists in our James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition – all fifteen of the poems that Poetry Editor Jeffrey Franklin recommended for publication from the submissions we received for the 2013 competition. Seven of the finalists are in this issue; the rest, along with Susan Laughter Meyers's winning poem (selected by former North Carolina Poet Laureate Fred Chappell from among all the finalists), will be published in the print issue, due out this summer. Here, too, are announcements of other literary awards given around the state this past year, and we offer congratulations to all the honored writers. However, perhaps the best part of publishing *NCLR Online* is the exposure these authors, and of course, *NCLR* receive because each issue can be easily shared around the world.

I began writing this introduction while the 2013 issue featuring the "Changing State of North Carolina" is still in bookstores, but, as we know, the more things change . . . Indeed, war, the special feature topic of the 2014 issues, is one such constant. Wherever the fighting may be, the effects can be felt throughout the state, from the military installations across North Carolina to the hometowns (and homes) of the troops and their families. The special feature sections of this online issue and of our forthcoming print issue will include writing about war, covering the American

Revolution to the current conflicts in the Middle East. And the writing is certainly not all about the battlefield; in fact, it also focuses largely on the people left behind at home. In this issue, for example, Terry Roberts's fiction, set in Madison County during World War I, focuses on the family of the man assigned to run the German internment camp in Hot Springs, NC. In Kelly Clancy's nonfiction piece, a young boy growing up in the Appalachian mountains during World War II is instructed by his soldier brother, who moved to Raleigh to build military aircraft, that "it was up to him now to look after their sisters." In another nonfiction piece, we read about how teenaged Jen Julian learned soon after 9/11 that a bomb flying above Wayne County, NC, during the Cold War could very easily have destroyed her hometown decades before she was even born. The novels reviewed in this section are also stories of people back home during war time. But we also have a review of Katey Schultz's collection of short stories focusing on men and women in the service, as well as noncombatants (and more folks at home), dealing with the Middle East conflicts of the past twenty years. The special feature section then closes with Seth Peavey's short story, a finalist in the 2013 Doris Betts Fiction Prize competition, set in war-torn Afghanistan.

It should be no surprise that there is so much war literature and that so much of it focuses on the survivors. As Robert Morgan notes at the conclusion of his interview, forthcoming in the 2014 print issue, "when wars are over, the damage to millions of lives lingers. After the fighting the scars remain, the grief among the survivors, the heirs." The dead are at peace. Those trying to make sense of it all are the ones who tell the stories.



WAR IN NORTH CAROLINA LITERATURE

Be sure to subscribe to *NCLR* so that you won't miss the interview with Morgan, as well as an interview with Ron Rash and Terry Roberts; David Cecelski's essay on Arthur Miller's World War II visit to Wilmington, NC; Charlotte Cohen's 2013 Betts Prize story about a veteran suffering PTSD; John Gruesser's essay on Spanish American War-era African American poet James McGirt; and Kathaleen Amende's essay on William Forstchen's post-Apocalyptic novel *One Second After*, set in Black Mountain. And that is just what is coming in the special feature section of the issue.

In the [Flashbacks](#) section of this electronic issue you will find material about and by writers featured in previous issues, including an essay by Michael McFee remembering Doris Betts and their shared appreciation of a book by Randall Jarrell, and an essay by Fred Chappell on the occasion of his receiving yet another award to add to his numerous well-deserved honors.

And there is even more in this issue. Go to the [North Carolina Miscellany](#) section to read about more of the content and about the 2015 special feature section topic. ■

- 8 "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die"
an excerpt from *A Short Time to Stay Here*
by Terry Roberts
- 18 *The Circuit Rider in a Sable Suit*
John Milliken Thompson, *Love and Lament*
a review by Alison Arant
- 19 *The Great War Inspires Two Great Novels*
- 20 *Constructive Remorse*
Gail Godwin, *Flora: A Novel*
a review by Peggy Dunn Bailey
- 22 *Ragan Old North State Award*
for Civil War-Era Biography
- 23 *Economy*
creative nonfiction by Kelly Clancy
photography by Hans Curt Pfalzgraf
- 28 *Uranium Field*
creative nonfiction by Jen Julian
- 32 *Flashing onto the Scene*
Katey Schultz, *Flashes of War*
a review by Ron Jackson
- 34 *Of Lions and Sparrows*
a short story by Seth Peavey
art by George Scott



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 45 ■ **Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues**
poetry, nonfiction, book reviews,
and literary news
- 91 ■ **North Carolina Miscellany**
an interview, poetry, and book reviews

“EXCEPT A CORN OF WHEAT FALL INTO THE GROUND AND DIE”

BY TERRY ROBERTS

TERRY ROBERTS's ancestors have lived in the mountains of Western North Carolina since the time of the Revolutionary War. He was born in Asheville and raised in Weaverville, NC. This story was originally part of the working draft of his first novel, *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Ingalls Publishing Group, 2012), set in a World War I internment camp for German non-combatants who were stranded in the US at the beginning of the war. Roberts explains that this chapter was cut from the novel because of its overall length and because it seemed to distract from the main narrative line set in and around the internment camp. It does, however, reveal more about Stephen Robbins's original home and family, and in particular, his relationship with his mother. Perhaps, in that way, it illuminates who he has become as a man. Further, it shows Anna Ulmann's response to life in this deeper mountain community as her relationship with Stephen evolves. Although we witness the death and funeral of Stephen's mother in this version, keep in mind that these pages were excised from the final version of the novel, and so, I believe, Mrs. Robbins is still alive at the end of the book, living on in Anderson Cove.

Readers familiar with the novel will recognize the opening of this story, but in the novel, Anna stays with Stephen's family without him, and the reader returns to Hot Springs with Stephen.

The print issue of *NCLR 2014* includes an interview with Roberts and Ron Rash about their World War I-era novels. In Rash's novel *The Cove* (Ecco, 2012), the German internment camp set up in the Mountain Park Hotel in Hot Springs, NC, plays a key role as well.



COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY

If our previous journey to Asheville had seemed unconventional, the journey that Anna and I made to Anderson Cove was truly out of place, out of time. The brief train trip upstream to Barnard was unusually quiet for the two of us. She went through the box of glass plates that she had brought, pulling out and showing me one that was cracked. I opened our window and tossed the faulty sheet of glass against the rock bluff that was streaming past, where it exploded into shards of light.

My Uncle Walter met us at Barnard with the mule-drawn wagon that I had promised Anna, and the look on her face told me that she'd assumed I was joking when I mentioned it to her. Walter was going on to Marshall by train, and I was to return the wagon to his barnyard and the mule to his upper pasture. After I had made the introductions – Walter removing his hat and bowing his head in antique fashion – the three of us loaded Anna's camera and our other baggage into the wagon. Then Walter pulled me aside while Anna looked into the tiny country store beside the tracks.

“Stevie,” Walter said. “If you’as planning on lookin’ round a bit fore you go up home, I couldn’t recommend it.”

“Don’t worry, Uncle, I’ll get your wagon back in one piece.” Walter was famously possessive.



COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY

LEFT Broad River near the Tennessee-North Carolina state line

ABOVE Southern Express Company, Mount Airy, NC

"No. I ain't got no care 'bout the wagon. Worse'an that. Your mama didn't want you to know this, but she's slippin' down again."

"How sick is she, Walter? You can speak the truth."

"It's in her lungs, Stevie, and she can't seem to beat it. Can't get her breath and can't nobody up home do much for her."

"I should've come a hell of a lot sooner," I said, as much to myself as to Walter.

"You can't say that," he replied. "You ain't known how sick she is. Go on along and show off that woman to her. That'll raise her up."

Anna came out then. She, Walter, and I shook hands, and he hobbled up onto the one passenger car just as the train began to move.

Anna watched as I walked around to the mule's head and let the creature look at me. The mule was perhaps fourteen hands high, leggy but well fed. And as with so many mules, she had that deep, inquisitive gaze in her wet, chocolate eyes. She kept flicking her ears forward to me as I spoke to her and backward to keep track of Anna.

"Walk around to her head," I said to Anna, "so she can see you. Let her sniff your hand."

"What's its name?" Anna asked as she stepped tentatively around the mule's head.

"Her name is Janie, according to Walter. She could probably take us straight to Walter's barn if neither one of us knew where we were going."

Janie was lipping my fingers experimentally to see if she liked the taste, and I knew that in a minute she'd start on my coat sleeve. Anna patted her neck tentatively.

"I believe she's satisfied with us," I said. "We can climb up now."

I was distracted, I admit it, by what Walter'd told me and by the strange sensation of having the long, leather reins in my hands again. Janie started home – across the old wagon bridge at Barnard and on up Big Pine, the road dusty from the long, dry autumn. I could feel Anna watching me, wondering at my mood, even as she kept shifting her seat, trying to find some comfort on the rough plank seat of the wagon. I wanted to think of something that would get her talking; I wanted to ask her a good first question so I could rest and reflect inside the flow of her talk.

"Tell me please," I said, consciously matching my words to the rhythm of Janie's hooves striking the hard pan of the road. "Tell me truly why you want to make these photographs – of these *real* mountain people?"

"Are you sure you want me to talk about that?" she asked, in that kind of voice she sometimes had – the tone that had the power to seep into my mind like warm honey.

"I do want to learn about it. And right now I need to hear the sound of your voice." I could feel myself beginning to mimic Walter's slow, melodic drawl, just from being on home ground again.

"There are two kinds of serious photographs," she said. Still watching to judge my mood.

"And they are?"

"One is the artistic creation, a posed frame in the pictorial tradition. Mr. Robbins, did you know that you were riding in a wagon with a celebrated pictorialist?"

I shook my head. "No, but I'm most pleased to hear it."

"While I was still living with my husband, I took carefully posed art photographs. Carefully imagined and carefully staged. I worshipped Alfred Stieglitz and studied under Clarence White. I thought about symbol and metaphor as the messengers of the subconscious mind. I worried about the life and values of the artist, and –"

"And?"

"I produced the most mediocre photographs you can imagine."

"I thought you were celebrated."

She laughed. "In New York, Stephen, everybody who ever had an exhibit is celebrated."

"Then why do you say the photographs were mediocre?"

"They were stiff and cold and empty of life." She actually shuddered.

Janie had slowed as she came to the first curving hill she had to climb. And I let my edginess show through. "Well, no damn wonder, with all that care and anxiety you took in making them. What did you expect?"

She laughed again, out loud, joyfully. "Thank you, Stephen."

"For what?" She was infectious. A smile crept around my lips.

"Oh, I don't know. Just for being, I guess – anyway, my husband –"



PHOTOGRAPH BY R. A. ROMANES, COURTESY OF HUNTER LIBRARY, WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

“The analyst?”

“Yes, Herr Doctor Jellife. Imagine a tall, heavy man with an oily mustache. He found my pictorial photographs fascinating because they revealed the ‘sterility of my inner landscape.’”

“Was he a sadist, your husband?”

“No, that’s giving him a little too much credit. But he did love picking things apart. He was devoted to spreading the inside of your mind all over the dining room table. There was no subject too personal or private for him to discuss in front of dinner guests.”

“Too much brain?”

“And not enough heart. Not enough heart and not enough – other parts.”

I had to smile. Slowly the sound of her voice was massaging my worries about the Mountain Park, rubbing my fears of Roy Robbins out of the front of my mind.

“So you were an artist, but the results weren’t artistic?”

“Oh, I fancied myself an artist, and certainly I took photographs of artistic writers, editors, actors. And I did these wonderful studies of things like ‘the shadow of a leaf against a wall with texture.’ That was the title.”

“Symbolizing?”

“Shy, life haunted by death of course.”

“Reckon what the leaf thought? About being a symbol, I mean?”

“Leaf didn’t think about it at all. And the wall with texture didn’t give a damn either.” She laughed again – suddenly, spontaneously – as the wagon gave a lurch. And the incongruity of it all hit me: this woman to whom I was so easily attracted, trying to sit gracefully on an ancient farm wagon, talking about her New York artistry as a mule named Janie began to address the turn that would take us up to Bearwallow Gap. I forgot about my mother then, for those few easy moments, as Anna reminded me how to smile. How to laugh in spite of myself.

“And now?” I asked.

“What do you mean *now*?”

“Are you still the artist?”

“No, I shed that skin. Now, I want to look through the camera and just see what’s there. Not make what’s there suit my own notions of the world, but try to understand what’s there for its own sake. These days, I think that all the camera does is provide a frame so that when we look through the box we are forced to see one small piece of the world at a time.” She was talking faster and faster. “Oh, Stephen, that’s really all the camera does – capture light, and the light burns an image on the glass.”

“So, now you’re the keeper of the light.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“No. No, actually, I’m not. I believe I meant it as a compliment.”

We’d passed from under the trees when we turned up the old road to the gap, and she had to shade her eyes with her hand to look into my face.

“I meant what I said – keeper of the light.”

“Then thank you,” she replied, bringing her hand down to touch my arm. “Where are we now?”

“We’ve made the turn up from Big Pine,” I said. “Leaving the creek behind. In a bit, we’ll leave this road at Bearwallow Gap. From there, near where my grandparents are buried, we’ll climb up the Divide Mountain and over into Highlands.”

“Where your mother lives?”

I nodded. And all the deep and crawling fear as to just how sick she might be and just how she might receive us came swarming back.

I forgot about my mother then, for those few easy moments, as Anna reminded me how to smile.

“So what is the other category?” I asked, hoping to take as a tonic the sound of Anna’s voice again. “The kind of photographer you are now?”

“The documentary kind. That’s what they’re just beginning to call it in New York. You *document* something or place or person to reveal its significance. That way the person or place will never be lost.”

There was a long pause between us, and I could feel Janie begin to dig in, straining as she pulled up the first steep climb on the road. I realized too that Anna was looking at me curiously. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’d rather not talk about – some things just now.”

“Your mother?”

I nodded.

“Did your uncle say something?”

I nodded.

“She’s sick again, isn’t she?”

I just kept nodding.

“Oh, Stephen –”

“Tell me more,” I cleared my throat, “about the documentary.”

“I’ll pretend I’m giving a lecture. The role of a documentarian is to capture a vanishing way of life – oh darn, I’m sorry.”

“No, keep going. Everything up here. Every damn thing you’re going to see the next few days is vanishing. Or will in the next twenty or thirty years. None of it can last. The question is why photograph it?”

“Can I tell you the truth?”

“Oh, hell yes. What truth is there left to tell?”

“This one. Since I came down here. Since I’ve known you, I’ve begun to suspect that –”

“Just keep lecturing, Anna.”

“Documentarians believe that primitive communities, communities that most people assume are poor and ignorant and backward are in fact interesting to study. That more primitive people have something lacking in the city. Dignity maybe. Or spirituality. And so we – I – can capture the essence of such a community in the image of an individual or a small group. A single face –”

“Or a pair of work-worn hands?”

“Exactly!”

We were climbing into the deeper woods now and approaching the bowl between higher mountains that I’d always known as Bearwallow Gap. Trees overarched the narrow wagon road, so that it seemed we were traveling along inside the deep, shaded forest, inside a russet world. Here and there the road bed was spotted with sunlight, the deep ruts spangled with drops of dusty yellow like an old apple.

“Stephen?”

“Hmmm?”

“I promise you that I don’t think of your family or of your world as backward or primitive.”

“You want to prove to the outside world that we’re not.”

She patted my arm, always for her an almost passionate gesture. “Yes, yes!”

“Just remember the leaf.”

“What?”

“The shadow of the leaf in that first picture you described. On the wall. Just remember that the leaf doesn’t necessarily give a damn what you think about it. Or what you’re trying to prove to yourself by photographing it. The leaf just lives and dies.”

“And is more real than my photograph.”

“Perhaps.”

“Everything up here. Every damn thing you’re going to see the next few days is vanishing. Or will in the next twenty or thirty years. None of it can last.”

COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION,
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY



RIGHT **Satulah and Fodderstack Mountains, Highlands, NC**

COURTESY OF THE MADISON COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY, MARSHALL, NC



We were at the Gap, and I let Janie stop to blow before we started up the winding road to the Divide. We climbed down to stretch our legs, and I showed Anna the small graveyard there, most of the markers rough field stone stood on end with no markings, though several were engraved with the word FORTNER. One flat stone had chiseled into its face my family name, although a tired neck and arms had left the last letter “S” almost unrecognizable: ROBBINS.

“Anna,” I said. As we stood, staring at the crude stone that marked the graves of my grandfather and his second wife, the woman I’d called “Grandma” up until I had run away. “Anna, it feels like two or three lifetimes since I came up this road. Even so, I know for a fact that it’s steep and lonely up here and the shadows are long. I should warn you.”

“Warn me about what?”

“That what you see and hear may not seem the least bit romantic. That when it’s dark in the mountains, it’s so dark you can’t see your hand in front of your face.” I wasn’t even sure what I was trying to say, but I could tell I was frightening her. And suddenly, I didn’t want to frighten her – ever. “And I mean that from here to the top of the mountain, we’ll have to walk. Janie can’t pull us and the wagon too.”

“Why do you think I wore these shoes?” she said.

The walk up the steep, winding trail to the top of the Divide was mostly silent, both of us breathing too hard to talk much. Mostly silent, but all pleasant. She loosened the top few buttons of her bodice and began to fan herself with her hat. I took my jacket off and flung it in the back of the wagon on top of the camera. The one time we paused to catch our

breath, I told her how, when I was a boy, my mother had sent me down the other side of the mountain to Hot Springs, down Puncheon Camp Branch to sell a basket of eggs at the hotel. She’d sent me on a mule, intending me to be back before dark, and the mule had put his foot wrong on a steep bank and thrown me. I had the basket on the crook of my arm and when I was thrown had managed to break every single egg with my elbow except one.

“What did you do with the one that was left?” she asked.

“Threw it at the mule,” I admitted.

The trail, just barely wide enough for the small wagon, led along the top of the Divide, which was called such because it was a knife-edged ridge in places, with steep drops on either side. And then it cut down the far side to a gap in the wall surrounding Anderson Cove. From just beyond the gap, you could see down into the cove in winter. I stopped the wagon at the lookout, as we called it, so that if the trees were bare enough, Anna could have her first look at the valley.

And I confess the sight stunned me: the seven hundred-acre ocean of home, blue-green and rusty brown in the slant afternoon light.

Most of the dozen cabins and houses still showed a trace of midday smoke at the chimneys. The fields were a wrinkled patchwork of color, mostly tans and speckled browns, with the lazy curves of Anderson Branch snaking down the middle of the valley. The largest structures in the cove were the barns, larger even than the mill; I counted three large horse and

cattle barns scattered about. Herds of beef cattle and sheep were most evident, but I knew there were a dozen more brands of livestock and poultry. Just as I knew there were a half-dozen brands of people, interlaced and interrelated: Caldwells, Waldrups, Worleys, some few Fortners and Buckners, a very few Robbinses, as well as the Andersons, my mother's family, from whom the valley took its name.

"When was the last time you were here?" Anna asked.

"Over ten years ago," I admitted. "I came to visit my father's grave."

"Where is he buried?"

"Over on that little hill." I pointed. "Up behind the church in the trees.

I had grown up in a two-story log house in the north-west corner of the cove. Dozens of long, straight pine logs carefully notched and joined in the old way. And covered by a roof of dried cedar shakes split out of sawn logs.

Since my childhood, however, the walls of the house had been boarded over with wide chestnut and poplar siding, and the cedar shakes replaced a dozen times over through the years. The whole place had a slightly dog-eared feel as if lived in for a long, hard time.

Still, all in all, I could see the evidence of my mother's patient care. Flower beds carefully turned under beneath the laurel bushes Dad had transplanted for her before he died. The rain barrel fed by a steep angle of the roof such that each storm brought gallons of water for her plants. The yard boards laid out with geometric precision, so that you could go from house to barn to root cellar in wet weather without tracking through the mud.

I could almost feel Anna's bright eyes taking in the contours of the house and yard, following the play of light and shadow along the walls, the windows, and the front door as it opened and my sister Mamie emerged. A widow, Mamie lived in the house with my mother.

They had made a feast of country ham and fried chicken, green beans and stewed corn, biscuits and cornbread, apple and peach cobbler. Which feast they delighted in describing while we ate. My mother,

**And I confess the sight stunned me:
the seven hundred-acre ocean of
home, blue-green and rusty brown
in the slant afternoon light.**

Belva, had spent the morning in her rocker by the kitchen fire, directing the efforts of Mamie and our cousin Barbara, who'd come to help cook and stayed over to eat. Mother had sat in her rocker and nagged the two of them more or less constantly with the details they had both mastered years before: the fire in the stove too hot, the biscuits done too soon, the cobbler not kept warm, the entire meal being done too soon or not soon enough. And so they told it, laughing and playing with each other and with us as we ate and drank.

Mother had Anna sit next to her as we ate and talked, the two of them at one end of the kitchen table while I sat with Mamie and Barbara at the other end. She kept Anna "to hand" as she put it, so she could ask her a hundred questions about the outside world. About the Springs, as she called the town, and about the Germans sent there by the high-up men in Washington. Mother would ask questions as she drifted in and out of a doze, her eyes more closed than open, a benevolent smile on her lips even as she barely snored.

Anna, God bless her, kept up a constant stream of stories about the camp, telling things about the staff and about the internees that I would never have thought to mention because I was disoriented. Warmed by the stove on the one hand and the fireplace on the other, bemused by Mamie's and Barbara's loud fussiness, shocked by my mother's wasted appearance.

She was fully asleep by dessert, her lips parted and the muscles of her sweet face relaxed. The

The wrinkles on her face, I realized, all the more shocking now that they weren't animated by consciousness, were still the wrinkles of someone who had spent her life smiling.

wrinkles on her face, I realized, all the more shocking now that they weren't animated by consciousness, were still the wrinkles of someone who had spent her life smiling. The lines around her mouth and eyes pointing upwards, upwards to heaven she would say.

"She's exhausted, poor thing," Mamie whispered, just loud enough for Anna to hear as well as me. "She don't rest lying down any more, so the nights are hard on her. Plus, she was up all last night fretting that something would happen and you wouldn't come." And so we stared at her, we four, her form so slight beneath her clothes and the quilt that Anna had pulled up to her shoulders. Her face wreathed by a halo of white hair, cut short and swept back from her face. I could hear the painful rattle

inside her lungs each time her thin chest rose and fell. Even then, I think I knew what we were seeing. Her face had the sweet innocence of grace as her body fell away beneath her.

We moved my mother's bed to the kitchen where she was always close to the fire, and the next few days became a blur. I have scars on my senses from the passage of time: the taste of harsh, black coffee gulped hot from the pot on the stove; the ever constant odor of wood smoke, as much a part of that house as the air itself; the striking brightness of the sunlight through the door as I sat beside my mother's shadowed bedside during the long, late October days; the layers of Knoxville papers with which she had papered the walls of the kitchen to insulate the chinks between the logs, creating her own designs out of the ancient photographs and meaningless print.

The one day she rallied, Mamie helped my mother comb out her hair and wash her face. We helped her out to the porch rocker, where she could sit for an hour in the warm sun and enjoy the sights and smells and sounds of her life chirping and singing and dancing in the autumn breeze. Anna asked if she could photograph her, and, surprising to me, for she had never seen a camera, Mother agreed willingly. Anna set up her box in the yard and exposed a glass plate to the image of Belva Anderson Robbins, rocking gently on the front porch of her home. Highlands, North Carolina. Her wispy white hair tousled by the autumn air.

For the rest of that time, I sat by her bed day and night except for the few times that I walked out into the air, led there by Mamie or Anna as the other took my place. As Mother slipped in and out of consciousness, I tried to make her comfortable and tried to somehow erase my long absence by my sure presence beside her as she came and went. I sat and hoped she needed me. For isn't that at the core of each of us – the desire to be needed at the very moment we have something to give? Some warmth, some few words, some caress to give to one whose life is wound up in ours?

Anna, with my encouragement and the happy company of Mamie and Barbara, went all over the cove, leading a growing retinue of shy, grinning assistants who would carry her camera, help her over



COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY



PHOTOGRAPH BY P.A. ROMANES; COURTESY OF HUNTER LIBRARY, WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

fences, and protect her precious glass plates. And though I was largely unaware of it at the time, she took two dozen photographs at Mamie's insistence. The photographs of Highlands images later became famous in the *New York Times*. None of which I was tracking at the time, as I lived so completely inside the dream of my mother's passing.

In that swirl of time, I lost completely the realm of the Mountain Park, the threat of Roy Robbins, the outcast Germans who'd haunted my dreams for months. They were no part of that world and so seemed no part of me. Somewhere in my mind, I knew they waited, but beyond a far, steep horizon.

And in the same way the question of who Anna and I were together seemed to slip below the level of conscious questioning and answering. We just were. We often sat together at meals or beside my mother's bed while she slept. Once or twice we walked along the dirt roads and steep paths of the Cove, keeping company in the gentlest and quietest ways, she knowing how to comfort me with a touch, a word, a gesture. And even though I don't believe we kissed each other a single time in the passage of those days, we seemed always contained in

the physical presence of each other, even when we were apart.

Anna slept at night upstairs in a room with Mamie while I dozed in my mother's rocker in the kitchen beside her bed. And once, when I had taken an hour of my own to visit the little chestnut log church and my father's grave on the hill, I returned to find Anna sitting on the side of my mother's bed, bent over her in earnest conversation, both women focused supremely on the other as Anna stroked her hair and they whispered together. When Anna finally stood and turned to pass me, I saw the tears that she had damned up in her eyes begin to stream down despite her tremulous smile. Such is sunlight when filtered through a glimmering rain.

Once, later in the flow of those few days, my mother discovered a few hours of warm, afternoon peace, a respite from her desperate effort to breathe. A few hours when the angle of her body was just so and, when the coughing and congestion eased just enough, when the tides of troubled half-sleep rolled back to leave her brightly conscious. And grasping the moment, I asked her, as I knelt beside her, to forgive me.

"Forgive you for what, boy?"

"For failing. At marriage. At fatherhood—" And then I hesitated before I finally said it. "For shooting cousin Nathan. For failing at—"

She reached out then, to cut me off in my foolish confessions. Reached up with one firm, unshaken hand to touch my face. Her skin so dry, so whispery against my beard.

"Dear boy. Nobody blamed you for Nathan. Not really. Some said you'd been drinking when you did it as a way of putting it off on you. But people knew what he was like. People knew."

"I wasn't drunk," I said fiercely, feeling tears of frustration in my eyes.

I saw the tears that she had damned up in her eyes

begin to stream down despite her tremulous smile.

Such is sunlight when filtered through a glimmering rain.

“You are my own good boy,” she whispered. “And you always have been. You’ve never had a moment’s happiness, not with that other woman and not since the little one died. Besides –” she actually smiled; and I shuddered at the effort it must have taken, “she never cared for you the way this one cares.” She pointed at Anna’s camera where it stood in the corner, and her whole body arched with the effort not to cough. “The only thing I ever regret for you – is all the years you stayed away.”

“Can you ever forgive me that?”

“Oh, Stevie, that’s all over now,” she whispered. “You’re right here seems to me. And right here and now is all we have.” And her body overcame her iron will. The coughing fit exploded within her, so searing that I was sure it must kill her.

First Mamie and Anna from the porch, and then Barbara from the yard, ran into the room to stand behind me as I held my mother, feeling through our skin and our clothes, the tearing apart of her lungs. As I wept and cried out, and as she spit up the black clots of her blood onto my neck and chest, and as I tried in vain to hold her still with my arms.

That night, in the middle of a cool, candlelit darkness, while the four of us sat beside her bed and while dozens of people gathered quietly on the

porch and around a bonfire in the yard, while the stars wheeled over our heads in their eternal weaving, while the sliver of old moon ran her course across the corner of the sky, while Anna and Mamie held hands and cried, while all the world seemed to pause, my mother gathered her strength and died.

And thus the wailing of women began. The hard drinking of men. The howling of the dogs under the porch began. After a bit, my mother’s only living sister stood in her faded dress, her brogan shoes, her rough hands clasped before her, stood on the porch of that old, timeworn country house and lined out my mother’s favorite hymn so that all could sing. And sing they did, drunk with grief, singing to mark the time and place where one of the saints had passed us by and gone on to take up her place with the fathers and mothers beyond our ken.

The preacher in Anderson Cove was an old farmer named Buckner, a good old man who did well enough in the little chapel or in the brush arbor up beside the cemetery. But I have to confess here that when we’d carried Mother up the hill to the burying place, I pushed the old man aside. More roughly than I intended, but I had a desperate swelling in my throat like a swarm of angry bees, a voice inside me that I didn’t recognize as my own straining to get out.

And so I stood over my mother’s grave and preached the first sermon I’d spoken out since I was a boy. The Apostle John was the text, chapter twelve, verse twenty-four, which I unearthed from far lost memory. “*Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.*”

“You’re right here seems to me. And right here and now is all we have.”



COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION,
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY

My voice was shaking, I'm certain. I could see the look on Anna's face where she stood on the other side of the grave with Mamie and the others – a look of fear and perhaps awe at the same time, for I was speaking in a voice unknown to her. *“Jesus was nigh done when he said those words to the disciples. He was giving them a warning, sure, these men whom he loved, that he was about to leave them. He was called home to be with his Father, and he knew that they would grieve. He knew they would probably blame themselves for having no better love to give him. He knew they would dread the life after his passing because of the emptiness he would leave behind, the desolation of the spirit and the hollowness of heart.*

He meant them to know that he had not died but had grown. He had outgrown their meager time and place. He had outgrown his body as surely as the snake sheds its tattered old skin or that oak tree there sheds its battered old leaves. He had left the savagery of their world and gone on into that other one. Grown up and out into the light of a larger world, as does a seed that bursts through its own shell and the shell of the earth to reach up for the light.

My mother is called beyond. She has outgrown us but not left us. We shan't see her likeness again along the fence row because our eyes are the world's eyes. We shan't hear her voice again calling from the porch because our ears are the world's ears. But we will see her again by and by. We will see her along the ridge tops when we have learned enough and seen enough and done enough, and when we have outgrown this place and time. We will be allowed to see her again when we have earned the right. When we have grown into the stature of her kindness and of her spirit.

I know this to be true. Here, in the long, hard school of this world.”

By then, I was weeping myself and had to stop as the voice inside me had flown out of my mouth and into the sky.

We left the day after the burying, Anna and I. As we stood beside the wagon in Uncle Walter's side yard waiting on him to finish fussing with Aunt Sibby, I found myself staring at Anna. She was bareheaded, her hat eaten by one of the goats, leaving her thick hair to be tousled by the wind. Her collar undone,

T-38 Looking North from French Broad Lookout, French Broad River and Southern R. R. in foreground, Hot Springs, N. C.



COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY

her face and neck berry brown from the days of outside weather. Her shoes nearly destroyed by a week in the cove and the hem of her dress tattered and dusty. And there she stood, most unexpectedly, feeding an apple she'd picked up off the ground to Janie as if she'd spent her entire life treating mules. She surprised me, this new woman, for she looked as though she feared nothing in the world.

Then Uncle Walter came along, and we started back down the mountain. Anna and I were mostly silent until we'd boarded the train, and then the unreal world, the world we had known before, seemed imminent.

And each of us, I suspect, felt its approach as something strange and different. Each of us had changed somehow in relation to the world outside ourselves and changed as well in what we were together. There was a far richer, harsher bond between us now. A bond not quite of this earth.

“I'm afraid,” I said to her as the light came and went, came and went, through the windows of the train as it wound its way along the river, “I'm afraid you got more than you bargained for when you asked me to take you to Anderson Cove.” I wanted desperately to be kind to her, to care for her, but I wasn't sure exactly how.

“What's done is done,” she said, thoughtfully. “And having been up there with you, I am afraid as well. I've begun to see you clearly now, Stephen Robbins, and even though I barely know how to say the words, I'm awfully afraid of my feelings for you.” ■

THE CIRCUIT RIDER IN A SABLE SUIT

a review by Alison Arant

John Milliken Thompson.
Love and Lament. New York:
Other Press, 2013.

ALISON ARANT is a visiting assistant professor of English at Wagner College in Staten Island, NY. She earned her PhD in twentieth-century Southern literature at the University of South Carolina in 2012. Her research interests include Southern regionalism, gender studies, and race and reproduction, and she has published articles in *Southern Literary Journal* and *Modern Fiction Studies*.

JOHN MILLIKEN THOMPSON's essays and short stories have been published in a variety of periodicals, including the *Smithsonian*, the *Washington Post*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *South Dakota Review*. Born in Chatham County, NC, Thompson holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Arkansas and currently lives in Virginia.

John Milliken Thompson's *Love and Lament* takes its title from George Herbert's poem "Bittersweet," which ends with the lines "And all my sour-sweet days / I will lament, and love." Though Thompson's inversion of Herbert's line makes the better title, his novel, set between 1893 and 1919, places more emphasis on lament than love. The story opens with Thompson's protagonist, a six-year-old Mary Bet Hartsoe, convinced that she has not only seen the Devil in the form of a dark horse and rider, but also that he will one day come and take her away to eternal punishment. In a scene that balances dread with humor, as Thompson often does, Mary Bet's mother reassures her that the figure she saw was not the Devil but a Presbyterian circuit preacher. This alternate reading suggests that what seems supernatural may in fact be quite natural. Yet when Mary Bet's family members begin to successively die from sickness and freak accidents, her sense of foreboding appears confirmed, and the driving tension of the first two thirds of Thompson's novel stems from Mary Bet's fear that she and her family live under a curse of increasing potency.

Like Thompson's first novel, *The Reservoir* (2011), *Love and Lament* draws on Southern history, its plot unfolding through accumulating revelations. His setting for the new novel is Haw County, NC, a fictionalization of Chatham County, which Thompson describes with convincing texture and careful detail. In exploring the source, contours, and validity of Mary Bet's sense of doom,



Thompson deals with the burden of history, a familiar topic in Southern literature; yet the past he explores most fully here is that of the Hartsoe family itself, not of the postbellum South as a region. While Thompson naturally works in elements of the novel's turn-of-the-century setting – Mary Bet's birth coincides with the arrival of the railroad, for instance – he also focuses attention on the Hartsoes' history of generational tensions, religiosity, and mental illness. Mary Bet's coming of age involves recognizing her family's suffering not as a punishment for her childhood or adolescent "sins," like neglecting a pet crow or kissing her brother, but as the result of living in a period of hardship and flux. Against this backdrop, she takes on increasingly prominent roles, both in her family, as her father's mental health fails, and in the community, as World War I calls away the men of Haw County.

One of Thompson's strengths as a writer of historical Southern fiction is his restraint in incorporating elements of the grotesque, including incest, insanity, and

ABOVE RIGHT **The former Seaboard Air Line railroad depot in Pittsboro, Chatham County, NC**

ABOVE FAR RIGHT **World War I-era recruiting poster aimed at North Carolina males, circa 1900–29**



COURTESY OF ARTHUR PETERSON

disability. His treatment of the relationship between Mary Bet and Siler, her deaf brother, is compassionate in a stark environment where mothers stop showing affection to their children at an early age in the hopes of making them tough enough to survive. That the sister and brother are attracted to each other feels less like a rendition of the South turned inward and more like the byproduct of their particular sadness and isolation. The novel also represents the period's racial violence and the normativity of white supremacy in scenes like one where Mary Bet, working as a clerk in the Haw County courthouse, witnesses the double standard of a poll tax imposed only on

black would-be voters. However, throughout the novel, Thompson's black characters only occupy marginal roles, lacking the depth and complexity he uses in developing the Hartsoes. In this regard, the novel seems somewhat inattentive to its post-Reconstruction setting, especially in contrast to Thompson's treatment of World War I, which he recounts in several detailed scenes toward the end of the novel.

As Mary Bet comes to terms with her family's history and her persistent guilt for circumstances she could neither prevent nor control, her mother's alternate reading of the Devil takes on additional significance. In one of the novel's final scenes, the dark



COURTESY OF MILITARY COLLECTIONS, WORLD WAR I PAPERS, STATE ARCHIVES OF NORTH CAROLINA

rider figure reappears, captured in a photograph, but Mary Bet, now unafraid to form a family of her own, barely recognizes him. ■

THE GREAT WAR INSPIRES TWO GREAT NOVELS

Terry Roberts is the recipient of the the 2012 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction and the 2013 Raleigh Award for Fiction for his first novel, *A Short Time To Stay Here* (Ingalls Publishing Group, 2012), set in the World War I German internment camp in Hot Springs, NC. Roberts has made several *NCLR* contributions as a literary scholar – essays on John Ehle's historical Appalachian novels in the [2010](#) and [2012](#) issues and an essay on an Elizabeth Spencer North Carolina-set play in [2009](#). In the forthcoming 2014 print issue, *NCLR* will publish Zackary Vernon's interview with Roberts about this prize-winning debut novel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHEW WAERNER; COURTESY OF NC OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



ABOVE Terry Roberts receiving his Raleigh Award from the Historical Book Club of North Carolina, 22 Nov. 2013

Ron Rash is also included in Vernon's interview, talking about his recent World War I German internment camp-inspired novel, *The Cove* (Ecco, 2012). Rash is a 2013 literary award winner, too. In October, he received the Thomas Wolfe Prize from the Department of English and Comparative Literature of UNC-Chapel Hill. Rash is the author of several novels, including *Serena* (Ecco, 2008), discussed in *NCLR* [2010](#). See *NCLR* [1997](#) and [2000](#) for poems by Rash, *NCLR* [2004](#) for another interview with Rash, and *NCLR* [2008](#) for an essay in which Rash talks about how the Shelton Laurel Massacre that involved his ancestors on both ends of the executions has haunted him and his writing. Jimmy Dean Smith also discusses environmental themes in Rash's fiction and poetry in an essay in *NCLR* [2011](#). ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRAHAM TERHILME PHOTOGRAPHY



ABOVE Ron Rash, wearing his Thomas Wolfe Prize medal, delivering the Wolfe lecture at UNC-Chapel Hill, 2 Oct. 2013

“CONSTRUCTIVE REMORSE”

a review by
Peggy Dunn Bailey

Gail Godwin. *Flora: A Novel*.
New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

PEGGY DUNN BAILEY is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Philosophy at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, AR, where she has also served as the founding director of the Women’s and Gender Studies program. She has published essays on Romantic, Victorian, and contemporary literature. See her essay on Reynolds Price in *NCLR* 2009.

Alabama native GAIL GODWIN grew up in Asheville, NC, and received a BA in Journalism from UNC-Chapel Hill. Her novel *A Southern Family* (Morrow, 1987), set in North Carolina, earned the Janet Heidiger Kafka Award from the University of Rochester and the Western North Carolina Historical Association’s Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award. *Unfinished Desires* (Random House, 2010), set in a small town in the mountains of North Carolina, was inspired by her time at St. Genevieve’s Catholic School in Asheville. *The Odd Woman* (Knopf, 1974), *A Mother and Two Daughters* (Viking, 1982), *Evensong* (Ballantine, 1999; reviewed in *NCLR* 2000), as well as *Flora*, also feature North Carolina settings. See Renae R. Applegate House’s essay on Godwin’s *The Perfectionists* (Harper and Row, 1970) in *NCLR* 2010 and Janet Lembke’s review of Godwin’s nonfiction book *Heart* (William Morrow, 2001) in *NCLR* 2002.

Some narrators appeal directly to the reader for understanding and sympathy; others court that understanding and sympathy through eloquent explanations and vivid portrayals of suffering and grief. Helen Anstruther, the narrator of Gail Godwin’s latest novel, *Flora*, all but rejects it. She offers no excuses and accepts none for herself. Helen’s retelling of the events of a fateful summer when she was ten years old is an attempt to understand more than to be understood or to generate compassion. In fact, she dismisses others’ efforts to comfort or excuse her. Midway through the narrative, Helen writes, “Remorse went out of fashion around the same time that ‘Stop feeling guilty,’ and ‘You’re too hard on yourself,’ and ‘You need to love yourself more’ came into fashion. . . . But now I say alongside Thomas à Kempis: ‘I would far rather feel remorse than know how to define it’” (152, 154). Helen’s narrative is a manifestation of the “constructive remorse” that she identifies as both her motivation and her goal: “There are things we can’t undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service to life” (1).

A “haunted little girl” (278) who became a writer known for stories about “failed loves” (121), Helen has mined her painful past for characters, plot details, and, most of all, themes; decades after the events that activated the most intense of the hauntings, she tries to deal directly with foundational trauma – the source of her remorse and of her art. She does



not spare herself, but neither does she over-dramatize; she writes objectively of her own childish cruelties – along with the incidents of everyday life at “Old One Thousand” (1000 Sunset Drive, her family’s mountain-top home in North Carolina) and of the lovely and “single-hearted” Flora (47), her dead mother’s cousin who came to stay with her when Helen was ten and Helen’s father was in Oak Ridge helping build the bombs that would lead to the end of World War II. The adult Helen’s tone is restrained, even as she reveals the child Helen’s tendency toward the sarcastic (seemingly an Anstruther trait) and the overtly rude. With its restrained narrative tone, detachment, detailed character sketches, and accurate observation of behavior, the text reveals its roots in Realism. But it is not only the novel’s narrator who is haunted; *Flora* is a text influenced by the Gothic. Just as Helen’s art flows from the trauma that haunts her, much of the novel’s power flows from its Gothic Realism.

As Leslie Fiedler famously said in the revised edition of *Love and Death in the American Novel*, America's "most serious as well as our funniest writers have found the gothic mode an apt one for telling the truth about the quality of our life."^{*} The shadow of the Gothic is discernible in *Flora's* setting (an isolated ancestral home with a history – and a life of its own) and in its plot details that merge into thematic concerns: family secrets regarding parentage; found letters that bring skeletons out of closets; the specter of incest; crimes of/against blood; the omnipresence of the past; the workings of guilt and obsession. More specifically, the novel suggests a Southern Gothic heritage.

The tradition of the Southern Gothic – discernible in texts by authors as diverse as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, Reynolds Price and Lee Smith – is fueled by the need to come to terms with foundational trauma (often both individual and cultural), the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable. Southern Gothic literature is characterized by obsessive preoccupations – with blood, family, and inheritance as well as the construction, destruction, and blurring of the boundaries of gender, race, and class – and the compulsion to talk (or write) about these preoccupations. Themes of family and blood as destiny and the centrality of "place" (geographic and socio-economic) to identity abound in the Southern Gothic.

These same preoccupations and themes abound in *Flora*. Flora is of particular interest to

the child Helen as a source of information about Lisbeth, Helen's mother who died when she was three, and as the possessor of letters from Helen's beloved grandmother, Honora (Nonie) Anstruther, whose tolerance and even affection for Flora (whom Helen originally sees as dim-witted and overly emotional) is hard for the young Helen to understand. Furthermore, the blurring of racial and social boundaries makes the young Helen distinctly uncomfortable; she is especially annoyed by Flora's affectionate relationship with and respect for the African American woman, Juliet Parker, who reared Flora and Lisbeth: "It was Juliet Parker this and Juliet that, until I felt I needed to put in that this was their colored maid back in Alabama," Helen notes at one point when Flora is speaking (115). One of the earliest manifestations of the novel's Southern Gothic heritage is the depiction

of Helen's family home, Old One Thousand, which years before had served as a half-way house of sorts for people convalescing from diseases of the body and/or mind. After Nonie dies and before Flora arrives, Helen must spend some time away from Old One Thousand, and the separation not only makes her sad, it threatens her sense of identity:

But what made me far unhappier . . . was the sense that life at Old One Thousand was going on without me. It had a schedule and needed someone there to register it. I did my best to patrol its rooms and porches in spirit. Nonie seemed always to be there waiting, just around a corner or on the other side of a door. Sometimes the Recoverers [the convalescents] were there, the ones from her stories, discussing their rates of improvement. (21)

She then adds, a few pages later, "*the life of our house was going on without me. I needed to be*



ABOVE View of Haywood Street in Asheville, NC, with a banner hanging above the street that reads "Give Enough" as part of the campaign for war bonds, circa 1941–45

* Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Stein and Day, 1966) 8.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEVIN MANN

there to register it. *I felt the longer I wasn't there, the more of myself I would lose*" (34; italics in original).

Loss permeates Helen's life; so does guilt. By the age of ten, Helen has suffered the loss of her mother and her grandmother. Lisbeth died of pneumonia, contracted in the hospital after a miscarriage. "They'd been trying to get you a little brother or sister," Nonie tells Helen (4). Nonie died of heart failure while shopping for an Easter hat. Helen plays over and over in her mind how the result would have been different had she simply been there to give her grandmother the pills she carried in her purse. But Flora's

death is the one for which Helen believes she is the most culpable. Flora – at twenty-two, too young and temperamentally too immature (or so it seemed to Helen as a child) to be a true mother figure – was nonetheless the third female caregiver that Helen lost to death, and the grief combined with remorse for the part that she played in Flora's death created the writer that Helen became, one driven to resurrect textually what she knows she cannot resurrect bodily and (to use one of her favorite words) to "register" her own accountability, her awareness of the role she played in Flora's death.

"[W]hat is anybody's memory but another narrative form?" (72), Helen asks at one point. She remembers stories involving ten imaginary students, which she created to help Flora prepare, through role playing, to become a teacher that fall that Flora did not live to see. Still, the older Helen finds

some hope amidst the remorse that she is "still growing into": those classroom hours "were filled with hope and promise and mutual development and even closeness. We were making up a game that needed both of us. . . . But right here, *right in here* somewhere, in what we were making together, is located the redemption, if there is to be any" (140–41). In *Flora*, Gail Godwin has created a novel that is itself "something of service to life," a testament to the power of memory and narrative to shape who we are and what we become – and what we hope to achieve. ■



ABOVE AND RIGHT Gail Godwin reading at Malaprop's Bookstore in Asheville, NC, 19 May 2013



COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

ABOVE An illustration from Cecelski's book: African American volunteers for the Union army in New Bern, circa 1863, from Frank Leslie's *Illustrirte Zeitung*, 5 Mar. 1864

RAGAN OLD NORTH STATE AWARD FOR CIVIL WAR-ERA BIOGRAPHY

The winner of the Ragan Old North State Award for nonfiction is historian David S. Cecelski for his book, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway & the Slaves' Civil War* (U of North Carolina P, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). Presenting the award for the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, Robert Anthony, Curator for the North Carolina Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill, noted of Galloway, "It turns out he's one of the most important African Americans in the Civil War South."

A native of Craven County, Cecelski is the author of several books, including *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina, and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (1994), *A Historian's Coast: Adventures into the Tidewater Past* (2000), and *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (2001). Read essays by Cecelski in *NCLR* 2007 and 2011. His essay "The Voice of the Shipyard: Arthur Miller in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1941" will be published in *NCLR's* 2014 print issue. ■

E C O N O M Y

by Kelly Clancy

Some years after my grandfather died, my grandmother drove a camper from her home in Pittsburgh to Myrtle Beach, where she met a widower named Dick Cooper. They immediately moved in together, spending winters in South Carolina and summers back in Pittsburgh. They were together some five or six years, and during that time Dick was very much like a grandfather to us – my older sister and I didn't remember much of our real grandfather, and my little sisters had never met him. Dick was a quiet old man, a retired airplane mechanic ten years my grandmother's senior but built like a horse, the kind of old guy who eats bacon every day for breakfast but never seems to suffer for it.

Dick was a toddler when World War I broke out and later served in World War II as a mechanic. By the time we knew him, he was comfortably retired, but he'd grown up dirt poor in Appalachia. You could still tell it by his hands, by the way he counted out his change. You could tell it when he took us fishing, and seemed to know everything there was to know about the wild. He and my grandmother eventually broke up – she claimed to prefer solitude to his dry company – and he passed out of our lives entirely. The stories of his childhood took root in my mind, though, and have been growing for the past twenty years.

KELLY CLANCY has had work published in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Nautilus*, *The Florida Review*, and *Memoir (And)*. The "grandfather" who told her this story grew up in the Smoky Mountains of Western North Carolina.

Dick's mother looked ancient that morning, the stark light drawing out even the faintest creases of her face and form. She'd looked almost like an ink drawing, all blanched and empty but for the sharp lines cutting her features out from the background. After serving Dick and his sisters and their father their lunch, she retreated to the ***SHE'D LOOKED ALMOST LIKE AN INK DRAWING, ALL BLANCHED AND EMPTY BUT FOR THE SHARP LINES CUTTING HER FEATURES OUT FROM THE BACKGROUND.***

bedroom without a sound. The tin forks she'd left tangled in the center of the table, lusterless. The children waited for their father to claim his utensil, then pawed through the pile to claim each their own. One fork remained; their mother had grown too used to doling out just so many. Dick's father looked at the fork and said, "We'd better go down and send a message to your brother today."

For the remainder of the meal, Dick's mouth could not muster any saliva, so he'd had to swallow each mouthful as though it were a pill. He finished quickly, then fiddled silently with his fork until the rest of the family was done.

As far back as he could remember, Dick had believed he could talk to things. He'd always had a certain affinity for the inanimate, perhaps owing to a rag doll he'd carried around as a young child. He was as considerate of it as he was of real people, careful of its jealousy towards the animate, pitying its acute sense of the injustices of the living, who went about blindly assuming ascendancy over other matter. Today, however, his plate was not speaking to him, nor did the fork complain when he licked it clean. That these silent things communicated with him was nothing remarkable in that wonderlessness of childhood, but this new quiet was. Normally the chair beneath him laughed when he tilted back in it; normally the water pitcher chattered on about the weather. Dick felt lost, so suddenly plunged into this sphere of mute insensibility. When it happened, the whole world had been struck dumb towards him; sounds dissolved into thin air before they'd rung out entirely; words precipitated to the ground before they'd fully left someone's lips.

Dick's brother had departed a year before to help build airplane parts for the war in the big city. He had rustled Dick's hair and told him it was up to him now to look after their sisters. The night he left was the first night Dick did not sleep wrapped around his father's arm, the first morning he did not rub his father's stubble upon waking, remarking at how a substance resembling skin the night before had changed its texture entirely in one night. That morning was the first morning he did not pull into his lungs the sour smell of nightmare sweat from his father's warm pillow once his parents rose, the first morning he got out of bed immediately and did not need to be roused out of sleep again some time later by his mother.

It was a long walk into town, and so Dick and his father would set out immediately after their meal. Before they left, Dick ducked into the bedroom, pretending he needed his hat but really to catch sight of his sister. Even though she'd been bedridden for several weeks, he was sure that some miracle would've occurred since the time his father had spoken those words at lunch. But his mother was wiping his sister's pale face with a sponge, the girl's limbs twitching at random as she dragged air heavily through her nostrils. The sponge was familiar to Dick: he'd often used it to wash the family's dishes. His mother was using the wrong side. The sponge hated having its face rubbed onto the dirty things, yet today it performed its duty silently, uncomplaining. Dick smoothed his sister's nightgown. He'd bought four pieces of taffy, which

he'd left on the bedside table, in case it might entice her to wake up. He leaned over the bed and tried to reach into his sister's eyes with his own, but her stare was opaque. In his school textbook

HE LEANED OVER THE BED AND TRIED TO REACH INTO HIS SISTER'S EYES WITH HIS OWN, BUT HER STARE WAS OPAQUE.

he'd read an essay about the brain. It had been illustrated with a cutaway drawing of a man's head, the inside of which was populated with complex machines spewing long ticker tapes. At the helm of these clunking automatons sat a tiny man, like an operator at his post, shifting gears and banging buttons as he searched out of the larger man's eyes. Perhaps it was this tiny man Dick sought to find in his sister's gaze. Dick spoke her name, but her seized vocal chords mustered no response. Did she wish to forgive him? Did she understand that this was what she was to do? Or was she too young to know that? Most likely, he imagined, she simply wanted to moan, to make any sound at all in order to communicate her pain.

"Mama, can she hear me?"

"I don't expect so."

Dick righted the sponge in his mother's hands and turned back to meet his father, failing to remember what he'd ostensibly come into the room to fetch.

Father and son strode down the hill into town, looking out over the valley congested with clouds dropping to earth. The sky was overcast and the pair's shadows flickered in and out of existence, now and again etched by the sun. Dick was struck anew each time their shadows arose: the bulk and the pure darkness of his father's shadow engulfed the weak shade his own body afforded. He seemed hardly a wisp, hazily projected there on the dusty trail. His father; on the other hand, had never appeared more solid. He stood taut, erect, as though an electricity coursed through him. His movement was mechanical, prescribed by the clicking of gears and not animate volition, a weaving of flesh, a great knot of muscle slackening and tautening in rhythmic turn.



COURTESY OF HANS CURT PFALZGRAF COLLECTION (P77.18.21),
D.H. RAMSEY LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNC ASHEVILLE

Dick hoped desperately that they might run into anyone else – even a crow or a deer would suffice – but the silence, the emptiness was absolute. He tried in vain to recall his favorite sound: ice clinking in a glass. He had never had the opportunity to drink something with ice in it, but he had recently discovered the sound when he went to fetch Dr. Morris from his house on the emergency call. Mrs. Morris waited silently with Dick as the doctor collected his things. She stood there square in the door frame as though to prevent Dick

WHEN FIRST DICK HEARD THE HIGH TINKLING, IT SOUNDED SO BEAUTIFUL HE DID NOT IMAGINE IT COULD BE TIED TO SOMETHING EARTHLY. HE THOUGHT IT WAS PERHAPS THE DISTANT JANGLING OF GOLD STARS.

from seeing into their tastefully appointed home. Her dehydrated face would peek out of the thick quilting of her housecoat like a turtle emerging from its shell as she moved to sip some chilled amber liquid out of a squat crystal tumbler. When first Dick heard the high tinkling, it sounded so beautiful he did not imagine it could be tied to something earthly. He thought it was perhaps the distant jangling of cold stars. He eventually worked out the correlation between the bored posturing of Mrs. Morris and the divine chiming, but not before the sound had taken root in his mind as something supernatural, something removed from the prosaic realm of cause and effect.

For the past few weeks Dick had always been the one to fetch the doctor for his sister. It was a task he would not permit anyone else to perform. In fact, he was volunteering for any chore he could now. While the rest of the family had grown too weary to bear even the thought of work, Dick labored himself into exhaustion, never resting for

THE SOUND HAD TAKEN ROOT IN HIS MIND AS SOMETHING SUPERNATURAL, SOMETHING REMOVED FROM THE PROSAIC REALM OF CAUSE AND EFFECT.

a moment. Often they'd find him asleep in the middle of some duty half-performed. He was even taking odd jobs from the neighbors, for though he knew his family could not afford to replace that shovel, he was bitterly determined to do so himself.

He had been sure – he was quite positive – that if they could get rid of it somehow, his sister's health would improve altogether. Dick felt bad for wishing the shovel away. It had served his family faithfully for years. There was history in its greyed wooden handle; in its curves were worn the memory of his father's hands. But it had to go. He had already saved seventy-five cents, and might have had more had he been able to help their neighbor Mr. Norman re-roof his barn today. Today, of course, there had been no question of who would accompany his father to town. Dick would be of help, surely – he was the only one who had any schooling – and he was glad to think he might finally get to do something for his sister. He was pleased to do anything at all for her – to change her chamber pot or wipe her clammy body down. This is a body, he'd think;

THIS IS A BODY, HE'D THINK; THIS IS IT WORKING; THIS IS ITS REAL SWEAT AND WARMTH; THESE ARE THE REAL AND TANGIBLE CAST-OFFS OF ITS MACHINATIONS.

this is it working; this is its real sweat and warmth; these are the real and tangible cast-offs of its machinations. Her mind was stalled, but the rest of her was functioning. This heat was a thing surer than prayer.

Despite his best efforts, Dick could not recall the beautiful sound of ice as he struggled to keep pace with his father; only that other sound, the sound of his sister moaning through her frozen jaw, only the bright laughter of that rusted shovel. If only she had moved out of the way! He'd only been joking!

"Papa? She can't understand us, Mama says."

"No, I don't believe she can."

"Papa, how will I know when she's forgiven me?"
Dick's father spit.

When his sister fell, it wasn't like anything. Her eyes and mouth were still open. It was like nothing. The blood was not frightening in itself, only his mother's reaction to it. He had not known it was bad before that. The shovel had laughed with him. Everything had laughed with him. We'd all *laughed*. It was a joke. We were only playing cops and robbers! The world, the whole world had laughed! Then all was silent.

Dick's father took a shortcut through the schoolyard where Dick had often taken his little sister to play on the seesaw. She would also cut across the small lawn, taking each step on the grass with a self-conscious relish. It felt so cool and lovely against her bare feet. But Dick always insisted on sticking to the sidewalk, burning hot in the sun. She teased him for it often.

"Why won't you walk on the grass? It feels so good! Don't you like it? It feels so nice on your feet. Come walk with me! Don't you like it? Does it itch you?"

He continued storming down the hot rocky path. "Of course I like the grass. That's just why I won't walk on it. See? It doesn't like to be walked on!" He pointed behind her, where her daily trampling had thinned a narrow swath of the lawn. "When you walk on it so much, you start to kill it. I don't want to ruin it. I don't walk on it, but only because I love it more than you do."

Now it was November, and nothing was left of the lawn but some spotty clumps of grass, dried pale and crumpled by frost. The grass made no protest as Dick followed his father, his feet crushing each blade's brittle body. What was happening? Was this death? No longer knowing what was right, no longer understanding anything that was outside of you? Had there ever been anything outside of him at all, or had it always been him, his own voice?

If only Mrs. Morris could come sauntering down the sidewalk with her long fingers spanning a glass tumbler, making careless gestures that caused the ice in her beverage to sing. If only something would break this silence. He prayed for anything, anything – and like a prayer he listed off the things he should have heard by now but had not: the faraway call of a mother for her child, a bird's song, the factory whistle, the braying of Mr. McNair's donkey, a dripping faucet, wood being chopped, the frenzied rustling of a hare come burst out of the woods, wild and running, running, running.

Dick and his father proceeded to the post office, setting a bell to jingle as they walked through the door. The telegraph operator pulled a tin of mints from his shirt pocket and rustled through the waxed paper. The man seemed an extension of the counter, his skin the same dull sheen of care-worn wood.

"I need to send a message to Raleigh," Dick's father announced.

The telegraph officer slid the tin back into his pocket, then wet his fingertips with his tongue and pulled a slip of paper out from under his desk.

"You'll need to fill out this form. The recipient's name and address here, your name here, and the message in this box."

Dick's father did not look at the paper and pen being held out to him. He shifted his loose pants and slouched over the counter.

"How much is this gonna cost?"

"Two cents a letter."

"And how long's it going to take to get to him?"

"To Raleigh? Well – if you'd like, we can send a night letter; it'll be delivered in the morning."

"Tomorrow? That's fine, I s'pose."

"So, if you could just fill out this form –"

"Can't you write it?"

"Well, sure. What do you want to say?"

"Just hold on." The man turned toward his boy, whose pants were even looser than his. "Help me now, son. What's less letters, Anne Marie or sister?"

Dick closed his eyes for a moment to count and, opening them again, replied, "sister."



COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION,
PICKENS MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASHEVILLE, NC

ABOVE US Post Office in Boone, NC, circa 1940–50

ABOVE RIGHT "Morning" by Hans Curt Pfalzgraf,
western North Carolina, 1940s

“Fine then, that’s fine. And – ”
 “But he won’t know which one you mean!” Dick interrupted. “How’s about we shorten it to Anne, he’ll know what we mean. And it’s – ” He closed his eyes and fingers sprung out of his fists in succession. “It’s a letter less than sister.”

“Fine, boy, fine; that’ll work. And – and now, what’s less letters – dead, or dying?”

Dick closed his eyes again and replied “dead” to his father.

The man turned back to the telegraph operator. “Tell him Anne’s dead. And come home.”

The operator wrote in a neat print, “*Anne dead stop come home stop,*” and read it aloud to the man.

“If you’d just sign here, then. Thank you, sir. And that’ll be fifty-two cents.” Dick’s father dug into his pockets for change as his boy signed the telegraph slip and filled in a grey box with his brother’s name and address.

**ANNE DEAD STOP
 COME HOME STOP**

For years, this is how I imagined it went: this terse telegram, the spare poetry of poverty. As Dick fell away from our lives, he acquired mythic proportions. I’ve had his stories ringing through my head for years, as clear as though they were memories from my own life. But while I’ve built a world around the stories he told us, I’ve never had the chance to ask questions of the source: when Dick Cooper left our lives, he left for good. I remember how he spoke with horror at hearing the word “dead” from his father’s mouth while he knew his sister was still

alive at home. But much later, I learned that telegrams were charged by the word, not the letter. Dick’s father must have shortened “Anne Marie” to “Anne” to save on the extra word. But his changing “dead” for “dying” seems even more shocking to me now. Perhaps he wanted to spare his son the agony of uncertainty or the cost of a trip from Raleigh. Perhaps he knew his son was needed elsewhere, that his work in the factory was worth more to their country than even the bonds of family. Or maybe he had no excuse but the deficit of hope. ■

COURTESY OF HANS CURT PRALZGRAF COLLECTION [P77.18.2], D.H. RAMSEY LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNC-ASHEVILLE



URANIUM FIELD

by Jen Julian

In January 2011, citizens of Goldsboro, North Carolina, remembered the fifty-year anniversary of a B-52 plane crash in Wayne County with an article in the *Goldsboro News-Argus*. A salacious title: “The Bomb – One Click from Armageddon.” A gripping event: the aircraft jettisoned two thermonuclear bombs as it was breaking up in the air; one of them failed to deploy its parachute and crashed into a plowed field. Later, technicians discovered that the bomb had gone through all but one of its six steps to detonation. Joel Dobson, a local writer who worked for Strategic Air Command during the 1960s, claims that we were all “one notch from having one big lake in eastern North Carolina.”¹

Half a century later, the harrowing might-have-beens are not lost to the writers at the *News-Argus*. They kick off their commemorative article with a passage of apocalyptic fiction:

In an instant, it was as if Wayne County had never been anything but a thick, red haze hovering above a smoldering crater that stretched for miles.

The land around Ground Zero was ablaze.

All signs of life had been annihilated – the livestock, wild animals and generations of people who never knew they had seen their last sunset gone in a blast.

The unthinkable had happened.

It’s an accurate speculation. While no civilians in the nearby community of Faro were killed or injured, had either of the bombs detonated, the name of my military hometown would’ve found itself shunted into every future discussion of anything to do with war or nukes, the culmination of Cold War paranoia and human error. As is, the crash puts Goldsboro on the map as one of two things: a testament to human courage and level-headedness in the face of unfathomable danger, or a nerve-wracking cautionary tale.

In high school, I was excited about war. Iraq. Afghanistan. Invade them all. I wasn’t politically invested, not really; the idea of war, any war, evoked an eagerness that went beyond politics. I wanted to make connections, weave identity. I ached for something bigger, something more explosive than the farmland our bus took us by each day, rich with the stench of wet earth and manure. I hated the South and hated our town. I believed in alternate dimensions. I believed a wormhole could take you to a place you dreamed up in your mind.

Post 9/11, sometime in 2002 or 2003, was when I first heard the story about the bomb still being in the soybean field. Current events had become a gurgling of loosely-connected political topics, filtering down to us teens in their simplest forms: Iraq, WMDs, scornful jibes at the president because he pronounced nuclear as “nukular.” I rode the bus with a crew of friends who were dreamers, theorizers, opinionated military brats. We didn’t just want to uncover the world’s atrocities. We wanted to one-up them, see through them. The day the Twin Towers went down, we kidded that all of us would probably be dead by Thursday, and in the atmosphere of nervous energy in the year to follow, we exchanged stories like currency, conspiracy theories we found on the internet, proven, disproven.



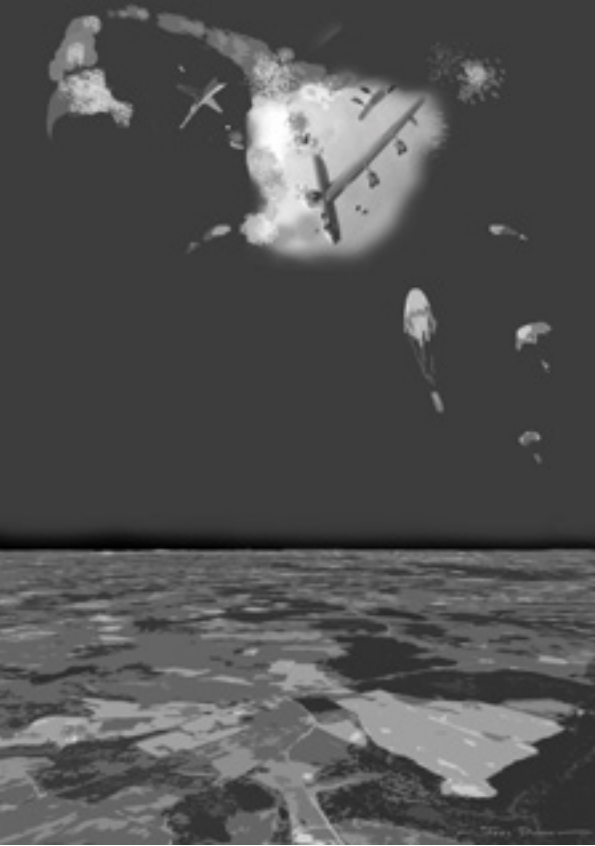
COURTESY OF SEMMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE

ABOVE The B-52 crash site in Goldsboro, NC, Jan. 1961

¹ Quoted from Kenneth Fine and Steve Herring, “The Bomb – One Click from Armageddon,” *Goldsboro News-Argus* 23 Jan. 2011: [web](#).

JEN JULIAN is from Goldsboro, NC. She has an MFA in fiction from UNC Greensboro and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Missouri. Her fiction and essays have appeared in the *Press 53 Open Awards Anthology*, *New Delta Review*, and *Four Way Review*.

I ached for something bigger, something more explosive than the farmland our bus took us by each day. . . . I believed in alternate dimensions. I believed a wormhole could take you to a place you dreamed up in your mind.



COURTESY OF JOEL DOBSON

The boy who told me about the bomb was a neighborhood kid. He would sit at the center of our group like a wise Buddha, worldly and absolute. When he told the story, he implied our town could wake up the following day to the decimated wasteland the 2011 *News-Argus* article depicts.

I thought it was just another story for the pile. When I asked my dad if it was true, I assumed he'd tell me the whole thing was bull.

"No, that's true," he said.

My dad is retired Air Force. He's a pragmatist. He rolls his eyes at excess and undue speculation. Ghosts aren't real. Nothing is out to get us.

"Seriously?" I said.

"Yeah, it's mostly true," he said. "It won't detonate, not now, but they couldn't dig out some of the core components – like uranium."

My dad smirked as he said this. There's something darkly funny about it; although the crash site has since recovered from its scars,

thermonuclear components are pulsing away in a soybean field twelve miles north of Goldsboro, bordered by skinny, hurricane-torn trees and honeysuckle vine, indistinguishable from the surrounding farmland. Today, deep underground, this uranium emits what the government calls "harmless background radiation." They test the groundwater in the area on a regular basis.

At the time, I didn't know much about military strategy. I still don't. My flawed understanding of the B-52's mission came from my neighborhood bus friend. According to him, the aircraft and its two 3.8 megaton bombs, each of which could have inflicted over two hundred times more damage than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were making rounds in the event that we needed to "bomb ourselves." That is, if Soviets somehow infiltrated Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, the military could simply incinerate the entire town – out of laziness, I guess. This inaccurate interpretation was consistent with things we already hoped and assumed. The world had become delightfully perilous. The folks with their fingers on the buttons were either stupid or cruel, and the fields our bus passed by to get to school had ceased to be rustic and simple.

The plane had been flying around on alert above the Eastern Seaboard. This was the dominant Cold War strategy of the 1960s. There were always planes, armed with nukes, flying around in the event of a nuclear strike. If a strike occurred, the hope was that in-flight aircraft would be



COURTESY OF SEYMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE

ABOVE Illustration of the B-52 explosion, by Joel Dobson

ABOVE The intact Mark 39 nuclear bomb retrieved after the 1961 B-52 crash

numerous enough to zip across the Atlantic, break through Soviet defenses, and retaliate. Mutually Assured Destruction.

“Scary times,” my dad said.

It might speak to the anxieties of the time that original news coverage of the 1961 crash was limited. There is no mention of how close one of the bombs came to detonating, only a confident statement that both had been “safely recovered” and that there was “no danger of radiation.”² While a newspaper nowadays may have sucked blood from the event for months afterward, the 1960s local coverage seems eager to close the case. Two *News-Argus* articles profile the five survivors and three deceased crew members, a third names the Colonel who would investigate the event, and a fourth is a notice requesting that anybody who’d taken a piece of the wreckage to please surrender it to a base official.³

Here, there are no speculative wastelands, no cinematic scene. There are only faceless technicians doing calm, efficient work, passive voice phrasing, as if the bombs deactivated themselves. Six days following the crash, the *News-Argus* published a feature article profiling the relationship between Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and the general public, unfailingly positive, a folksy paean to the base’s heroic role in the war effort: “Just in

case a foreign power decided to go on a war binge, SAC [Strategic Air Command] has the mission of delivering – air mail – the worst hangover the world would ever know.”⁴ This lighthearted reference to Mutually Assured Destruction precedes an exchange between a “visiting oldster” and an Air Force tour guide leading civilians through an alert facility:

“You boys going to have some atomic bombs when you get things completed?” . . .

“Wouldn’t do much good to carry fire-crackers would it? . . . Will that thought keep you awake nights?”

“I believe . . . it might make me sleep a little better.”

The crash isn’t mentioned at all in this profile, though the cavalier, rough-’em-up cowboy style highlights an unmistakable objective: *Civilians, don’t worry. It’s all under control.* It’s creepy almost, like elevator music, originally intended to soothe the nerves of claustrophobes. But those soul-deadening tempos have become anxiety-inducing in themselves. We can see through their game.

The Cold War Era – this undercurrent of suspicion and fear masked by plucky optimism – is beyond my comprehension. I was born three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was fully removed from whatever bogeymen dominated the childhood of my parents. For me, Soviets are movie villains in fur hats.

I wanted to see things happen with the Iraq War. I wanted the ground to shift. However, as early as 2002, I remember my dad telling me that Iraq would be a mistake.

“It’s going to be a mess,” he said. “Once we get in there, it’s going to be one sticky situation.”

My dad retired from the Air Force as a Lieutenant Colonel. Nowadays, he teaches a leadership course in East Carolina University’s nursing program, and people there tend to assume he’s conservative because of his military background and hair-off-the-collar, khaki-and-polo-shirt style. He identifies himself as a moderate, but the recent political climate has pushed him further left.



COURTESY OF JEN JULIAN

² Eugene Price and John A. Lynch, “Three Die, Five Escape as B-52 Bomber Crashes, Burns 12 Miles From Goldsboro,” 24 Jan. 1961: 1.

³ “Funeral Services Tomorrow for Two B-52 Crash Victims,” 26 Jan. 1961: 1; “Survivors Relate Story of B-52 Crash,” 25 Jan. 1961: 1; Air Force Board of Inquiry to Look into Crash,” 25 Jan. 1961: 1; “Air Force Wants All Parts from Crashed B-52,” 26 Jan. 1961: 1.

⁴ Eugene Price, “Air Force Has Unique Collection at Seymour Johnson,” 30 Jan. 1961: B2.



COURTESY OF SEYMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE

My understanding of Iraq changed drastically when my dad's prediction played out. In May 2003, the president gave his infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard an aircraft carrier. A new surge of conflict and violence immediately followed. Meanwhile, I went off to Governor's School, an academic summer camp for gifted students, where I saw a documentary about the My Lai Massacre. I returned for my senior year of high school harboring an idealized impression of the hippie movement and a white-hot core of anger and self-righteousness. I decided to stop eating beef and drinking Coca Cola (consumerism is exploitative!). I was ready to throw down against any Bush supporter, which made me a prickly presence in a rural North Carolina military town. *Tell me I'm wrong. The man can't even pronounce nuCLEAR right. Wars make people evil. Look at what happened in Vietnam. Look at what those soldiers did.*

My dad warned me against making too many connections. Vietnam was not Iraq. No war was identical to any other. "We're always applying old strategies to new problems," he said, "even when the climate changes, even when the circumstances are different. In the first Desert Storm, we were using tactics from Vietnam. In Vietnam, we were using tactics from World War II. But old tactics simply don't work."

This is how things fall apart.

Even with these warnings, I found myself connecting more with the 1960s than the 2000s, similar to the way conservatives connect to the McCarthy era perhaps, *Leave It to Beaver* and all that. It was harder to make sense of the present, which beamed at us in a series of images and fragments, lurid media coverage and Internet memes that rose and fell in popularity on a monthly basis. The two

ongoing wars in the Middle East remained little more than abstractions to many of us. They were the talking points of choice for winning arguments, symbolic in expressing the kind of person you were, where you rested on the political spectrum. Fellow students' fathers and mothers and siblings were deployed, surely. ROTC students went over there after graduation. These things happened and occasionally jarred us to the reality of our country's choices overseas, but otherwise many of us carried on unaffected.

They hadn't spent their childhood in a cradle of security and boredom, hungering for chaos.

The dissonance of the 1961 news articles strikes me as strange. The Cold War impulse to placate and pacify exposes a vein of anxiety that seems real to me, surreal, hyperreal. The busy swarm of coverage in my own decade reveals barely anything at all, nothing I already assumed I knew or felt. I feel shame for my detachment, for supplanting the real with the intangible. I assume prior generations were more affected, more aware, that they didn't have the fracturing lens that my generation sees through. They understood what was at stake. They hadn't spent their childhood in a cradle of security and boredom, hungering for chaos.

At the same time, I wonder if this too is an illusion.

We read these stories now, stories like the one about the B-52 crash. We can sense the tone of sensationalism and victory. Air Force officials swarm in to disarm the bomb. They succeed. The political context of the event is not considered, no mention of Soviets or Mutually Assured Destruction. The crash, a product of nothing and nowhere, seems as surreal as witnesses describe – the sky on fire, a jumble of blackened wreckage and scorched earth, the end of the world. In the end, however, the crash is only a fragment, a micro-apocalypse, small enough that the rest of us can still move on. ■

ABOVE LEFT Jen Julian with her father, Phil Julian, 2002

ABOVE The intact Mark 39 nuclear bomb retrieved after the 1961 B-52 crash

This is the second year that **KAREN BALTIMORE**, who designed this essay and the McFee essay in the Flashbacks section, has designed for *NCLR*. She is a wife and mother and a student at Meredith College in Raleigh, NC, where she is pursuing a degree in graphic design with an expected graduation of December, 2014. More of her work can be found on her [website](#).

FLASHING ONTO THE SCENE

a review by Ron Jackson

Katey Schultz. *Flashes of War*. Baltimore, MD: Apprentice House, 2013.

RON JACKSON served in the US Air Force from 1966 to 1970, after which he earned a BA in English literature from Temple University. His twenty-five-year writing career includes stints as a sports feature writer, marketing writer, science writer, ghost writer, web copywriter, and speechwriter. In 2009, he turned his attention to creative writing. His first published story, "The Shower," was a Doris Betts Fiction Prize finalist selected for publication in *NCLR Online* 2013. It recounts the reintegration of a woman into the social world around Fort Bragg after her Army tour in Afghanistan. Jackson is currently living in Durham, NC, and working on a crime novel set in his hometown of Philadelphia and a collection of stories, all military-related and North Carolina-based, spanning the period from the Revolutionary War to the present.

KATEY SCHULTZ grew up in Portland, OR, and is most recently from Celso, NC. A graduate of the Pacific University MFA in Writing program and recipient of the Linda Flowers Literary Award from the North Carolina Humanities Council, she is currently writing a novel set in Afghanistan. She lives in a 1970 Airstream trailer bordering the Pisgah National Forest.

Katey Schultz chose a tough genre to break into: the close-up war narrative. Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* crowned a long tradition that began with Stephen Crane. Dalton Trumbo exposed the horror of the battlefield and its aftermath in *Johnny Got His Gun*. In *The Things They Carried* and *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, respectively, Tim O'Brien and Robert Olen Butler brought the real face of the Vietnam War into American awareness through short stories. The best works in this genre paint unique and intimate portraits: people navigating the violence and absurdity of battle, playing out their dark and final hours. Or non-combatants feeling the tentacles of war reaching beyond the battlefield.

Flashes of War is Schultz's first book, a collection of intimate studies, mostly flash pieces, with a handful of modest-length stories mixed in. They offer glimpses of the men and women affected by the Middle East wars of the last two decades, including Americans, Iraqis, and Afghans.

The flash pieces are the grist of this book – quick-hitting moments of experience, at times with little plot, just a character, a situation, and a moment. Taken together, they offer a panorama of the warfighters, locals, and family members back home, all trying to make it through.

Schultz reveals her underlying point of view early, in "While the Rest of America's at the Mall." The story begins with an account of a secret operation, a Navy SEAL swimming the underwater darkness in the shadow of a bridge over the Kunar River, dodging gunfire as "Bullets glitter through the water in slo-mo, little Hershey's Kisses moving in silver arcs the way I remember Savannah tossing them to me on her fourth birthday" (1). Think Martin Sheen broaching the river surface like alligator eyes in *Apocalypse Now*. This very short story ends with the title phrase, "while the rest of America's at the mall" (2), taking the reader back to the comfort and commercialism of home. Two points of view are set in motion here and weave through the book as subtext – underlying questions that remain just beneath the surface: What do Americans know or care about what's happening over there? And what are the connections among the combatants, the local citizenry, and those waiting and hoping at home? The book is a call to awareness. And the lines in this piece make the first connection between battlefield and home.

In "With the Burqa," the intimacy shifts to an Iraqi woman looking out into the world through the mesh of her burqa. In her sleep, she dreams of bombs, bullets, and grenades growing rampant

in her garden, of taking them to market, selling them, and knowing without seeing the destruction they set in motion. This is a journey into the secret femininity of war, the story of the women who produce the sons and daughters who fight the wars, the women who produce these weapons of justice and revenge. This story also reveals how cruelly war can subvert even the most sacred, gentle, and socially honored roles.

“Poo Mission” is one of the more successful vignettes, combining humor and a ghostlike atmosphere. This one doesn’t go anywhere story-wise. It’s a trip to the bathroom – literally – a snapshot moment in the life of a Marine. The mood of danger in doing even the most mundane things is clear and present.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF WES HITE



The story with perhaps the most unrealized potential is “Sima Couldn’t Remember.” An Afghani mother loses one of her unborn twins, and the parents are embittered when the surviving child turns out to be a girl. The mother deals with the situation most unusually. This story’s poignancy would perhaps be improved by development into a longer piece that allowed more

room to explain the motivation for the action.

The longer stories are where Schultz hits her stride. Her prose speaks in an authentic voice that takes us deep into the complex worlds of her characters. In “Getting Perspective,” she paints some of her most beautiful scenes. We know at the beginning that the narrator lost her husband in the second Iraqi war. The story is a tribute to an enduring love transmitted from mother to children through history shared. She remembers her honeymoon in the Smoky Mountains:

There, in the hazy, purple light, a dozen elk gathered to graze. . . . They moved slowly through the grasses, like careful giants, and I marveled at their thick, dark fur – the way it blended perfectly with the dying light. . . . We must have watched for hours, first studying their dense silhouettes from antler to withers to legs. As night fell, we sensed them by sound: grasses rustling, then torn from the soil, followed by rhythmic, tooth-to-tooth chewing. (56–57)

In passages like these, Schultz frees her characters to act and feel according to their nature and situation – and she anchors them securely in the scene in a moment of love, reverie, or memory. Here Schultz’s prose hypnotizes, and we slip completely into the world on the page. But we lose some of this connection when the narrator offers commentary: “Those elk made a new start together in the mountains. They had everything they needed in life to survive. If we played our lives right together, we might, too” (57). The symbolism of the elk, the possibilities that lay ahead, the

comfort and longevity of this couple are all contained in the description of the elk. Schultz would do well to trust her reader to make those connections.

In “The Ghost of Sanchez,” Schultz demonstrates her storytelling range in an eerie first-person tale of a dead buddy, Sanchez, trailing the narrator around for days after drowning in a Humvee in Afghanistan’s Kunduz River. The story reaches back into the ghost’s past to his family’s dash across the Rio Grande toward prosperity in the US. The story departs from the author’s attention to emotion and connection and focuses on plot, atmosphere, and the ironies that the past visits upon the present.

Does Schultz bridge the distance from the suburban mall in the US to the environs of Kabul, the streets of Baghdad? Not the whole measure in every flash piece, but she does accomplish something noteworthy, which is to get us thinking about more than shoes, cosmetics, or massaging recliners at the mall – and asking that other question, “What have we done over there?” And in the longer pieces, when she turns her eyes fully to the world her characters inhabit, her prose draws her reader into the minds of her characters. ■



2013

Doris Betts Fiction Prize Finalist

*“Death already happens too randomly,
too abruptly, and too often in this country.
It strikes the brave as well as the innocent,
the lions as well as the sparrows.”*

OF LIONS *and* SPARROWS

BY SETH PEAVEY

The first time Aminullah Shah saw her, the American was sitting in the back of a white Toyota Corolla bouncing along the unpaved road to Bagh-i-Shir Village. It was late November and the cool winds from Central Asia were beginning to sweep across Afghanistan’s northern mountains and into the Kunduz River Valley. The red-orange sun hung like a ripe pomegranate overhead. The annual *Eid* festival had recently finished, and village life was gradually adjusting to the prospect of another harsh Afghan winter.

Aminullah stared as the foreigner’s car slowly made its way down the uneven road. The woman inside was wearing maroon-rimmed sunglasses and a loosely wrapped, peach-colored *hijab* that only partially covered her brown, curly hair. Two Afghan men sat in the front, but she was alone in the backseat. Her head turned as the car passed, and for a few seconds the ten-year-old Pashtun boy could sense her watching him through her reflective lenses.

After a moment, the woman turned her gaze forward. The car kicked up a whirlwind of dust as it rumbled on. Aminullah’s green-brown eyes followed the vehicle as it grew smaller. When it was a

hundred meters away, he glanced over his shoulder at the road that led toward his family’s small farm. He hesitated a moment before tightening his grip on his school bag and running after the car.

He lost sight of the vehicle for a few minutes but continued to run. He passed by two women in faded, sky blue *burqas* carrying jugs of water. One was also holding a bag of onions and cauliflower, while the other balanced several large pieces of *naan* over her head. The one carrying the bread muttered in Persian as Aminullah darted by them.

Halfway up the hill, Aminullah slowed to a jog, and then a fast walk. A few minutes later, he reached the top. The village of Bagh-i-Shir lay before him. Small adobe houses were scattered across the valley. In the village center was a white mosque and a recently rebuilt minaret with a pair of Chinese-made megaphones that blared the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer, five times each day. Nearby stood a two-room

SETH PEAVEY is a North Carolina native and graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill and the London School of Economics. Currently a Foreign Service Officer with the US State Department, he previously spent a year in Afghanistan monitoring development projects and conducting research for a local non-governmental organization. “Of Lions and Sparrows” was inspired by his travels and field research in northern Afghanistan.

Raleigh resident **GEORGE SCOTT** grew up in Monroe, NJ. He graduated, with honors, from North Carolina State University with a degree in graphic design. He spent five years in the Army and served in Operation Desert Storm as a member of the 82nd Airborne. His art has been exhibited in several shows in Raleigh, NC, including a solo exhibition at the Lee Hansley Gallery. The artist and his wife, Sara Birkemeier, own and operate 8 Dot Graphics in Raleigh. See more of his work accompanying the 2012 Doris Betts Fiction Prize finalist story by Kathryn Etters Lovatt in *NCLR Online 2013* and on his [website](#).

schoolhouse made of concrete blocks. There was also a small shop that sold cans of Coca-Cola, Fanta, and condensed milk alongside packages of Iranian dates. A few flies buzzed around freshly slaughtered mutton carcasses that dangled from hooks outside. Next door was a bakery with various-sized rounds of *naan* cooling from nails on the wall.

The village was mostly populated by Tajiks, with a few Uzbek families living near the far hill. In past decades, a few Pashtun families had also lived in the village, but they had fled elsewhere during the civil war of the 1990s. Now Aminullah and his family were the only Pashtuns left, although they lived about three kilometers outside of the village center and rarely interacted with the others.

Below, Aminullah saw the foreigner's car parked in front of the school building where he had been studying half an hour earlier. He could not see the woman, but a small crowd had gathered nearby. Aminullah hoisted his school bag higher on

his shoulder and trudged down the hill. When he reached the schoolhouse, a dozen other boys were already crowded around the door. Across the street, an older woman watched quietly through her *burqa*, while two young Tajik girls in white *hijabs* gossiped in hushed but excited voices.

The foreigner and one of the men from her car had already gone inside. Only her driver, a middle-aged, Hazara man with a wide, Mongolian-looking face, remained outside. He wore a black leather jacket over a traditional Afghan *shalwar kameez* and was leaning against the car, smoking a cigarette. Although slightly short, he had the broad, muscular shoulders and detached demeanor of a former soldier or policeman.

Aminullah turned his gaze back to the schoolhouse door, where a crowd of taller Tajik boys were still gathered. For a moment, he considered joining them, but instead walked across the street and sank to a squat by the mosque.

Aminullah looked at the school for a few minutes before opening his school bag. He pulled out his most valuable possession: a third-hand, paperback

Aminullah imagined himself as the broom-riding protagonist, soaring effortlessly through the sky like a fierce bird of prey as everyone cheered him on.

copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* in Persian. The faded, half-torn cover depicted a boy not much older than himself riding a mythical, winged creature. Aminullah had been given the book by a teacher after the teacher's own son had outgrown it. It was the only non-school book that Aminullah owned, and he had already read it eight times.

Aminullah carefully opened the cover and flipped to his favorite scene: the second Quidditch match, where Harry Potter rides his new broom, catches the Golden Snitch, and heroically leads House Gryffindor to victory. Every time he read that chapter, Aminullah imagined himself as the broom-riding protagonist, soaring effortlessly through the sky like a fierce bird of prey as everyone cheered him on.



Bookmark (mixed media acrylic, graphite, masking tape collage on hardboard, 24x32) by George Scott

Twenty minutes passed. Then forty. The sun had started its descent, and the temperature was slowly dropping. It was almost an hour before there was suddenly a loud murmur among the boys, who backed from the doorway. Aminullah rose and tucked the book away.

He watched a few village elders emerge from the schoolhouse, followed by the foreigner and her Afghan colleague. Along with her *hijab*, the woman was wearing a green, Pakistani-style shirt over khaki pants and white sneakers. In her hands, the woman held a blue binder and a stack of papers. She looked to be in her late twenties. In the fading daylight, Aminullah could see her pale, freckle-dotted skin and bushy brown hair that was easily visible beneath her head covering. Something about her reminded Aminullah of a grown-up Hermione from *Harry Potter*. Meanwhile, her Afghan colleague was Pashtun and looked about five years older. He was clean-shaven and wearing jeans with a dark blazer.

The group exchanged pleasantries in Persian and basic English. The woman smiled and bowed her head slightly as her male colleague shook hands with the village elders. Her Hazara driver tossed down his cigarette, his third one, and walked around to open her door.

As he did, a gust of wind sent a dozen of the woman's papers scattering across the ground. She exclaimed something in English. Without hesitating, Aminullah rushed and dropped to his knees, quickly grabbing six or seven of the pages. He saw three more under the car and crawled forward to reach them. When he looked back, the woman had already picked up the remainder. Aminullah climbed to his feet and stretched out his arms with the papers.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, using a few of the only English words he knew. His voice came out as a whisper. "You. For you," he said, slightly louder.

The woman laughed and smiled warmly as she accepted the stack of papers. "Thank you," she said, in heavily accented Persian. She turned back to the village elders and gave a brief wave before climbing into the car. Her colleagues followed her, and the driver started the engine. Aminullah watched as the Toyota backed up and started back along the dirt road that led towards the highway.

When the car was gone, Aminullah turned to the Tajik boys who had been standing by the door. "Who was that?" he asked. "And what did she want to talk to the greybeards about?"

"What does it matter to you, Amin?" said Khalid, a tall, sixteen-year-old Tajik, whose father was the *mullah* of the village mosque. "It is nothing that concerns an ignorant little Pashtun like you."

Khalid turned his back on Aminullah and continued talking to the other Tajik boys. Aminullah started to walk away, but then saw his teacher, a genial old Uzbek man known as Hajji Umid, emerge from the schoolhouse with his wooden cane.

"Teacher," Aminullah said, "who was the foreigner? A German from the base in Kunduz City?"

Hajji Umid shook his head. "She was American, and no, not from the base. She works for an education organization in the capital."

"What was she doing here?"

"Her organization wants to start a reading course for women in this village," he said. "They also want to teach them job skills, carpet making and such, so that they can perhaps earn a little money for their families. I don't know how useful the workshops will be yet, or how many of the daughters or wives in this village we will be able to convince to attend. But even if just one or two learn something, so be it. As I always tell you children, knowledge is Allah's greatest gift to humanity."

Aminullah pondered that. "Will she be back? I mean, will she be the one who comes to teach about reading and carpet making and such?"

Hajji Umid let out a short laugh. "She will be back, but not to teach. Our fellow Afghans will handle that. She is only here for the planning. There are still a few details, however, we weren't able to settle today. She and the Afghan gentleman will therefore return next Thursday at the same time. God willing, we will finish discussing the matter then."

Hajji Umid glanced up at the sun, which was already partially obscured by the mountains. "That is enough for now. Go and run along home. It is almost nightfall, and there will be militias patrolling

*“. . . As I always tell you children,
knowledge is Allah's greatest gift
to humanity."*

around soon. They are not as awful as the Taliban, but they are still a rather foul bunch. It is best to avoid them after dark if you can.”

Aminullah nodded. “Yes, Teacher,” he said. “*Khuda hafiz*. God protect you.”

“*Khuda hafiz*,” Hajji Umid said, before turning and starting to trudge slowly towards his house on the other side of the village.

Aminullah lifted his school bag and started back down the road toward his father’s farm. It was a forty-minute walk, and there was no chance now of making it back before nightfall. By the time he reached the top of the first hill, the sunlight was almost gone. The temperature was also dropping. He shivered beneath his loose-fitting, cotton clothing.

It was dark, but he knew the way well. After another fifteen minutes, he had already made it up the second hill that marked the halfway point. Up ahead, he saw headlights. A truck was idling on the side of the road.

As he got closer, he heard voices and a smattering of laughter. The headlights were in his eyes, and he couldn’t see clearly. After another minute or so, he gradually made out two figures standing and a couple more sitting beside the truck. One of them wore a faded khaki uniform, while the other three were dressed in local garb. A couple of AK-47s and a few other weapons lay on the hood of the vehicle. The two sitting men appeared to be playing cards while passing a glass pipe between them.

One of the non-uniformed men glanced up casually at Aminullah before looking back down at the cards and inhaling from the pipe. Aminullah lowered his head and continued walking. His nostrils caught a foul whiff of opium smoke and body odor.

As he passed, one of the militiamen called out, “Hey boy, where is an ugly little Pashtun like you sneaking off to so late?”

“Home,” Aminullah said quietly.

“Hm, what do you mean ugly? Look at that pretty face, and those slim ankles. He could almost be a dancing boy,” said the uniformed man. “Hey *baccha*, why don’t you stay and do a little dance for us? That’s what Pashtun boys do best, right?”

“Yeah, I know I’d sure like to do a little dance with him,” one of the others chimed in. “Do you have any ankle bells in that bag? Any perfume or colored scarves?” He smiled lecherously before sliding his tongue slowly along his upper lip.



A Storm is Coming (mixed media acrylic, graphite on canvas, 30x40) by George Scott

There was a pause, and then the four men burst into laughter. The one smoking the pipe laughed so hard that he started to cough uncontrollably. It took fifteen seconds for him to finally catch his breath.

Aminullah lowered his head. He clutched his school bag and quickened his pace. After he was past the truck, he took off running into the dark. One of the men shouted another taunt after him, but he didn’t hear.

He kept running. Twice he stumbled, but he continued until he found himself within sight of the three-room adobe house where he had been born. The light of an oil lamp flickered from the doorway. The humble structure had been built by his grandfather in the 1960s to replace a smaller dwelling that his great-grandparents had constructed when they first migrated from Jalalabad in the 1920s. In the late 1950s, the property passed to his grandfather, who farmed the land until he was arrested in 1988 for criticizing the Soviet puppet government. He died in police custody a few months later, and the land passed to his three sons.

Mohammad, the oldest son and Aminullah’s uncle, left the following year to join the *mujahideen*

As the dust of war settled and a new sun rose over Afghanistan, the Shah family thanked Allah for bringing peace after two decades of war and sparing their family from further hardship.

against the communists. When the Russians left and the country descended into civil war during the early 1990s, he initially fought for a *mujahideen* warlord during the chaotic Siege of Kabul, and then later for the Taliban against the Tajik and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance. After the Taliban unified most of the country, Mohammad returned to the farm to grow wheat, onions, and a few watermelons alongside Aminullah's father, Yusuf.

When news arrived in 2001 of the September 11 attacks and the impending American invasion, Mohammad briefly rejoined the fighting against the suddenly strengthened Northern Alliance. He participated in the defense of Kunduz City, the Taliban's last northern stronghold, but quietly escaped before the city fell to American airstrikes and General Abdul Dostum's advancing Uzbek troops. In the final days of the Siege of Kunduz, hundreds of senior Taliban and Al-Qaeda members and their Pakistani advisors were safely airlifted out of the besieged city in Pakistan Army cargo planes. The remaining Taliban forces, primarily boys and illiterate farmers, soon surrendered. Most were promptly executed by General Dostum's men or stuffed into airtight shipping containers, where they suffocated *en masse* while being transported to Sheberghan Prison in the west.

As the dust of war settled and a new sun rose over Afghanistan, the Shah family thanked Allah for bringing peace after two decades of war and sparing their family from further hardship. That serenity was broken two years later, however, when masked gunmen showed up in the night and fired a spray of bullets through their door. Four armed men then rushed into the house and dragged Uncle Mohammad outside, forced him to his knees, and put three bullets in his skull. After that,

the unknown gunmen vanished into the night, leaving Mohammad's body where it had fallen. Three weeks later, Aminullah was born, half a kilogram underweight but fully healthy.

"Little Amin, is that you?" a familiar voice called out in Pashtu.

Up ahead, Aminullah's younger uncle Jawid was sitting outside, leaning against the dried mud wall. He was wearing a brown *shalwar kameez* and grey vest and a beige wool *pakul* hat was perched over his shaggy black hair. A small tendril of smoke rose from a marijuana joint in his right hand. Jawid had several days of stubble on his cheeks, but lacked the thick, grey-streaked beard of Aminullah's father. He had arrived during the recent *Eid* holiday after spending the last four months looking for work in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Jawid had previously held a scattering of jobs, but never the same one for long. A few years earlier, during the midst of the drought, he had helped Aminullah's father secure a loan for seed and farm supplies from a money broker in Kunduz City, only to gamble away half of it on bird fighting in the next town over. That winter, they ate nothing but rice. Aminullah's younger sister Huma fell sick with a bad respiratory illness that forced them to spend their remaining savings to travel to a Western-funded clinic in the district center. She recovered, but the following months were difficult.

"So nephew, what brings you home after dark?"

"I saw an American. A woman," Aminullah said, excitedly. "She came to the village and talked to the greybeards. They want to start an education program for girls and women here. She will be back at the same time next week to talk with them more."

"Is that so?" Jawid said.

"Who are you talking to out there?" another Pashtu voice called out from inside the house. Aminullah's mother appeared in the doorway. She was wearing a green *hijab* with an embroidered black

"I saw an American. A woman," Aminullah said, excitedly. "She came to the village and talked to the greybeards. They want to start an education program for girls and women here."

dress. She clucked her tongue disapprovingly when she saw Aminullah.

"How many times have I told you to be back before dark, you stupid child?" she said. "Now come, come. Get inside. Dinner is almost ready."

Aminullah followed her to the doorway. He took off his shoes before stepping onto the cool, smooth floor and setting his bag down. Inside, his father Yusuf was leaning against a small, faded red cushion on the opposite side of the room, while Aminullah's older brother Asif sat cross-legged to his right, reading from the family's well-worn *Quran* in the flickering light of the oil lamp. In the middle of the floor, his younger sister Huma was setting down metal plates, while his fourteen-year-old sister Faiza was in the adjacent kitchen stirring a pot of rice. The scent of cardamom and cumin wafted toward him.

Upon smelling the food, Aminullah realized how hungry he was. It had been almost dawn since he ate last. He stepped forward and sat down eagerly in front of one of the plates.

His father looked up, eyeing Aminullah for a few moments before speaking. "A few of Mir Alam's men came by here earlier to collect their so-called taxes," he said. "I saw them by the main road later. They didn't bother you, did they?"

Aminullah shook his head.

"Good," he said, softly. "That's good."

A few minutes later Faiza brought out a platter of steaming *pulao* speckled with shredded carrots and a few raisins. His mother carried out a small clay pot of beans and a dish of lukewarm yogurt, which she set next to the cooked rice.

"Sister Maryam," she called out. "Dinner is ready." A few moments later, the radio turned off and his elder uncle's widow, a gaunt, fifty-year-old Pashtun woman, emerged from the bedroom wrapped in a brown wool blanket. She silently sat and began shoveling a few small spoonfuls of *pulao* and a dollop of yogurt onto her plate. Then, Uncle Jawid came inside and found a spot next to Aminullah. Asif, meanwhile, closed the *Quran* and carefully placed it on a shelf near the bedroom door.

"So has Little Amin told you who he saw today?" Jawid said casually, as he reached for the *pulao*. "An American."

"An American? Are you sure, brother?" Yusuf said, looking up sharply. "What was an American doing in Bagh-i-Shir?"

"It was a woman. She was at the school," Aminullah said excitedly. "She was talking to Hajji Umid and the other greybeards about teaching classes to women in the village."

"Really?" Faiza asked. "Teaching what?"

"Reading and job skills and stuff," he said.

"Do you think they will be teaching Pashtun girls, too?" she asked.

"I dunno."

"Hmph. Don't get any crazy ideas, Faiza," their mother interjected. "You already did four years of primary school. You can read and do numbers. If you learn any more, how will we ever find a good husband for you?" She shook her head. "We are already the only Pashtun family in this village. Do you want to make yourself stand out even more?"

"It is time for the Americans to stop forcing their culture upon us like this," Asif said. "What do they know about what is appropriate for proper Afghan Muslim women? At the sermon last week, Mullah Ahmad said that the foreign women are all heathens and whores, that they lay with dogs and then get abortions to purge their bodies of the abominable, malformed offspring."

"Mullah Ahmad is an idiot," Jawid said, chuckling.

"Mullah Ahmad is a holy man," Asif insisted. "He has been to Mecca. He knows the whole *Quran* from memory, and a lot of the *hadith*."

"Perhaps, but he is also a blind, bearded donkey who couldn't find his own ass if it was dancing in the air in front of him."

Faiza giggled. She quickly lifted her hand to hide her mouth.

"Uncle! That is too disrespectful," Asif said, his cheeks flushing. "But regardless, look what the foreigners have done for us. They have filled the government and police with Tajiks and Uzbeks. That pathetic Karzai is the puppet of warlords, and both of his vice presidents are butchers. Now the Americans have let every former Northern Alliance strongman and his brothers re-arm their old supporters, and send those militias out into the countryside to harass innocent families. Just look at the men who came by earlier, demanding yet more money from Father. Back during the Taliban –"

"Back during the Taliban, your sisters could be stoned to death for going to the district market without a *burqa*, or for talking to a boy on the street," Jawid said.

“You exaggerate a little, uncle,” Asif said.

“Do I? And what would you know, nephew? You were three or four when the Americans came,” Jawid said. He paused, his expression darkening. “When my beautiful, sixteen-year-old wife Jamila was pregnant, it was the fear of the Taliban patrols that stopped us from taking her to the clinic on the other side of the district. There were complications. A midwife came, but it was too late. She died three feet from where you sit, along with my first and only son.”

“If Allah willed it, there is nothing that could be done,” Asif said, shifting uncomfortably. “You should not blame the Taliban. After all, Uncle Mohammad fought bravely as a Talib and died a martyr so that Afghanistan could again be a true Muslim country. God willing, I will be brave enough to follow his example one day—”

“Enough!” bellowed Aminullah’s father, who had remained quiet until then. “Stop this nonsense. Your uncle was brave, yes. But also reckless, and he died needlessly,” he said, his gentle features contorted in a scowl. “I swear to Allah that no son of mine will speak so casually of death. Life is sacred, and there is nothing worth casting it aside for. Not pride. Not religion. Not money. *Nothing.*”

He shook his head. “Death already happens too randomly, too abruptly, and too often in this country. It strikes the brave as well as the innocent, the lions as well as the sparrows. If you truly want to

“. . . *Life is sacred, and there is nothing worth casting it aside for. Not pride. Not religion. Not money. Nothing.*”

teach a lesson to the foreigners or the warlords or the militias, it should not be by *jihad* or martyrdom, but by living longer and more humbly. I may not be a *mullah* or a *hajji*, but I am certain that is Allah’s will for this family.”

After that, the conversation ceased. The Shahs ate the rest of the meal in silence. Aunt Maryam was the last to finish, after which Huma diligently stood and began to collect the plates. The others



Unwanted Sound: NOISE! (mixed media acrylic, graphite on canvas, 48x40) by George Scott

gradually rose as well. Asif retrieved the *Quran* from the shelf, while Maryam returned to the bedroom. Jawid yawned and stretched his arms before pausing and looking directly at Aminullah. He held his gaze for a few moments, as if pondering something. Finally, he nodded to himself and glanced toward the door. “Little Amin, do you mind keeping me company outside for a few minutes?”

Aminullah nodded and followed him outside. “Don’t wander,” his mother called after them.

Outside, the temperature had fallen, and Aminullah rubbed his arms for warmth. Jawid fished in his pocket for his lighter and another joint. “Nephew, tell me. The American who came, was she with any soldiers or armed contractors?”

Aminullah shook his head. “No, it was just her, her driver, and another man from her institute.”

Jawid put the joint in his mouth and lit it. He inhaled and slowly breathed out. He said nothing for a minute. “Little Amin, do you know why I was in Peshawar for the last few months?”

“You were looking for work.”

“Yes,” Jawid said. “And I found some, of sorts. But as the Westerners say, it takes money to make money. So I took out a loan from an acquaintance in Peshawar.” He paused to inhale again. He coughed. “Unfortunately, that uh, business venture didn’t work out, and I owe some money in Pakistan.”

Jawid looked over at Aminullah. “I haven’t told this to Yusuf yet. After all, your father has his own money problems to worry about, with the drought

and the militias demanding taxes. He actually tells me he is thinking of taking you out of school next month so that you can help more with the land.”

“Oh,” Aminullah said, looking down at his shoes.

“Now, now, nephew, don’t look so sad,” he said, smiling. “I happen to know the perfect solution to all of our financial problems.”

He told Aminullah his plan.

“I dunno,” Aminullah said, when his uncle was finished. He glanced uneasily at the house, where the others were starting to get ready for bed. “I don’t think Father would like this. And I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Jawid laughed. “Don’t worry about your father. There is no reason to concern him with this,” he said. “And I promise you, Amin, no one will get hurt. I know a couple of friends in Kunduz City. They are professionals at this kind of thing.”

“I dunno,” Aminullah repeated. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Jawid put his hand on Aminullah’s shoulder and stared into his eyes. “Look at me, nephew,” he said. “I promise nothing will happen to her or to anyone else. Before Allah, I promise.”

Aminullah still looked uncertain.

“Just think of how much this will help your poor father,” Jawid said. “He has worked so terribly hard to feed you, your brother, and your sisters, and to let you go to school. This is the least we can do to help him. You want to be a hero, right, just like the boy in that Iranian book you are always reading – what’s his name?”

“Harry.”

“Right, just like *Hari*,” Jawid said. “If *Hari*’s friends or family were facing hardship, he would do everything he could to help them, right?”

“Look at me, nephew,” he said.

*“I promise nothing will happen
to her or to anyone else.*

Before Allah, I promise.”

Aminullah finally nodded. Jawid smiled and clapped Aminullah on the shoulder. “It’s settled then. Now, go help your mother spread out the blankets.”

That night, Aminullah barely slept. When he woke, Jawid was gone. His uncle returned the following evening, just before dinner. Aminullah watched him quietly throughout the meal, but his uncle gave no indication of what they had discussed two nights earlier. Instead, he chatted casually about Afghanistan’s cricket team and some Bollywood action movie with Shahrukh Khan that he had seen in Peshawar a few weeks earlier.

After the meal, he invited his nephew outside again. “It will happen,” he said simply. “Everything is arranged.”

Aminullah barely slept the next few nights, too, as he silently counted down until the day that the American returned. His family suspected nothing, and his uncle acted as if nothing was amiss.

Finally, the day arrived. Instead of heading to school, Aminullah took a detour along the main road, where he found his uncle waiting with three other Pashtun men in traditional clothing standing around a blue, secondhand Toyota Corolla. The car was parked twenty meters off the road. When Aminullah arrived, one of the men was chewing on a piece of day-old *naan*. He offered a piece to Aminullah, who shook his head.

“It is all ready, nephew,” Jawid said. “Now we wait.”

His uncle pulled out some cigarettes and began leisurely chatting with the other men. Aminullah stood by nervously and listened to them talk for a few minutes, but they ignored him. After awhile, he sank to his knees and began drawing figures on the ground. His thoughts eventually shifted to Quid-ditch and magic spells as the sun slowly crept across the sky.

At one point, a pickup truck of militiamen drove past. The vehicle slowed briefly when they saw Aminullah and the Pashtun men, but they didn’t bother to stop.

Around one-thirty or two, the men got out of the car and opened the trunk. Jawid grabbed a plastic bag and carried it over to his nephew. Aminullah opened it to find a blood-soaked sheep’s bladder wrapped in newspaper. “Take it. Rub a little on your pants,” Jawid said.

“But mother will be angry if I ruin my clothes,” Aminullah said, worriedly eyeing the blood.

“Don’t worry. We will wash it out,” he insisted. When his nephew continued to hesitate, Jawid grabbed the sheep’s organ with the newspaper and smeared some of the blood haphazardly on Aminullah’s pant leg. “There. Go and wait behind the car. It won’t do for anyone to see you until it’s time.”

Aminullah reluctantly did as he was told. The other three men were discussing something in low voices. After a while, one of them strolled off along the road in the direction of the highway. Aminullah watched him go for a couple of minutes before turning his gaze back to his dirt drawings.

Another hour passed, and then thirty minutes more. Finally, Aminullah heard a cell phone ring. One of the men answered, and then quickly motioned to Jawid and Aminullah.

“Now,” Jawid said. “Go.”

Aminullah gave his uncle a pleading look. He didn’t move.

“Go! What are you waiting for?”

“I’m – I’m not sure I want to do this.”

Annoyance flashed over Jawid’s face. “There’s no time for this,” he hissed. “Get out there. Quickly!” he said, shoving his nephew forward.

Aminullah’s heart was beating like a goatskin *tabla* drum as he hurried to the road. He dropped down on the side of the road, stretched out his blood-covered leg, and grabbed it with both hands, just as his uncle had instructed him.

Two minutes later, Aminullah heard an engine. The white Toyota appeared over the hill and gradually started making its way down the uneven road. As it drew close, the Hazara driver saw him, but showed no sign of slowing. When the car was almost to him, he peered up and caught sight of the foreigner. She was wearing a blue *hijab* but no sunglasses. Her brown eyes met Aminullah’s. A look of recognition passed across her face. And then she saw the blood. Her eyes widened, and Aminullah saw her shout something to the driver.

The driver looked visibly displeased, but stopped the car. The foreigner began to reach for her door, but her Pashtun colleague in the front seat put a hand up to stop her. Aminullah did his

A look of recognition passed across her face. And then she saw the blood.

best to look pained as the outsiders talked fiercely among themselves. Finally, her Pashtun colleague reluctantly opened his door and stepped out. He frowned and started walking towards Aminullah.

A moment later, there was a shout, and two of his uncle’s acquaintances appeared in front of the car holding old Russian AK-47s. His uncle emerged from the other direction with a pistol.

The driver cursed in Persian, while the American instinctively tightened her *hijab* and sank down in the back seat. Outside, her Pashtun colleague stiffened and slowly raised his hands as the gunman approached. When they reached him, one of them grabbed his arm and shoved him roughly against the hood of the car. The other man motioned with his gun for the American and the driver to get out of the vehicle.

Jawid walked over to Aminullah. He lowered his gun, grabbed his nephew’s hand, and pulled him to his feet. Meanwhile, the Hazara driver whispered something in English to the American before raising his hands and slowly emerging from the vehicle.

“Her, too!” one of the men said, nodding his head towards the car as he held his gun against the back of her frightened Pashtun colleague’s neck. “Tell her to get out of the car, brother,” he growled in Pashtu.

“No,” the man whispered.

“What did you say, brother?” the gunman scowled, pushing the barrel of his AK-47 between the man’s shoulder blades. “I don’t think you heard me. Tell her to get out of the car!”

The man was breathing quickly. He squeezed his eyes shut before muttering something in Pashtu.

“What was that?” the gunman asked.

“I said, I am no brother of yours.”

The gunman's face flashed with annoyance. He squeezed his trigger, but the assault rifle jammed. There was a metal click, followed by nothing.

The world froze momentarily. Even the wind relented, dying to a whimper. For one long second, Aminullah could almost see the individual particles of dust hanging lifelessly in the air around him. He didn't dare to breathe, lest he disturb them.

And then there was a sudden gust. The dust scattered, and the world lurched forward. The gunman cursed and squeezed the trigger again unsuccessfully before reaching for the gun's magazine. The Hazara driver, meanwhile, made a slight movement. A pistol appeared in his hand as if by magic. Three shots rang out in quick succession. There was an anguished shout and one gunman collapsed, while the other dropped his weapon and turned to flee. A second later, the driver pivoted his arm towards Jawid and fired twice more.

The first bullet went wide, but the second seared through the fabric of Jawid's *shalwar kameez*,

five inches below the collar. Jawid staggered back a step. He lowered his head and stared down in surprise at the blood spreading in a circle around the small hole beneath his collar. Meanwhile, the driver ducked into the car and shouted to his Pashtun colleague, who did likewise.

Aminullah watched in horror as his uncle took an uneven step backwards and then fell to the ground. At the same moment, the Hazara driver put his foot on the gas and twisted the steering wheel to the right. The engine roared as the car swerved off the road and then quickly backed up. The driver swung the car around, slammed the gas pedal down, and sped off towards the highway.

A cloud of dirt and dust enveloped Aminullah. The particles stung his eyes as he rushed blindly to his uncle's side. He dropped to his knees. "Uncle," he said, shaking Jawid's arm. "Uncle!"

Jawid coughed. A few flecks of blood appeared on his lips. His mouth was contorted in fear and surprise.

"Uncle," Aminullah sobbed again. He continued to pull on the sleeve of Jawid's *kameez*.

Jawid gazed uncomprehendingly at his nephew for a few moments before a glimmer of recognition appeared to flicker across his face. "Little Amin," he whispered. "Is that you?"

"Uncle, yes, it's me," Aminullah said. "Please, please tell me what to do."

Jawid coughed again. A thin line of red dribbled from the corner of his mouth and down his chin. "I'm sorry," he said, faintly.

"Uncle," Aminullah said, as tears ran down his cheeks.

Jawid's eyelids drifted shut. "Tell your father – everything I did – it was just for family, I swear to Allah," he whispered, his voice trailing off. "For family – I swear –"

Afterward, there was a lengthy silence. Jawid's breathing gradually became fainter and fainter until finally his chest stopped moving altogether.

Aminullah lowered his head and cried for a long time. He sat there, his clothing still streaked with blood, as the Afghan sun continued its slow, apathetic arc across the late November sky. A flock of small, grey-brown birds passed overhead. They shifted directions two or three times before disappearing into the west.



Self Afflicted (mixed media acrylic, masking tape on canvas, 34x36) by George Scott



Bridge (mixed media on hardboard, 40x30) by George Scott

Aminullah squeezed his eyes shut and wished he were one of them. He envisioned himself as a small sparrow at first, and then an eagle, and finally a boy riding on a magic broom. Suddenly, he was soaring high above the rugged mountains that overlooked his village. The sun shimmered and flitted towards him. He reached out and tried to grasp it, but the golden sphere danced just beyond his grasp. Again and again, he lunged forward only to have his hand come back empty.

Aminullah's breath quickened as he became more desperate. With each frantic lunge and grasp, the sphere seemed to slip further away. Suddenly, he found himself falling. His broom vanished, and the ground rushed towards him.

His eyes shot open. For a moment, the world was a watery haze. Gradually, his uncle's body came back into focus. He stared at the corpse without processing it. A moment later, everything flooded back to him: the car, the sheep's blood, his uncle, Hermione, the stout Hazara man, the gunshots –

Aminullah felt an unbearable emptiness begin to grow in the pit of his stomach. Still dazed, he climbed awkwardly to his feet. He started to wipe his tears with his dirty sleeve. As he did so, a couple of glistening objects on the southern horizon caught his attention. He stared at them as he dabbed his eyes. After another minute, he heard the distant rumble of motors. Two trucks of armed men gradually lumbered into view over the top of the next hill.

Aminullah's heart froze. The vehicles were still too far to see if the men wore the green uniforms of the national police, the mixed clothing of the militias, or both. He stared at them for a few more seconds before turning and starting to run.

Tears still streaming from his eyes, Aminullah sprinted away from the road and scrambled up the side of the rocky hill. Behind him, the roaring motors were growing closer, and he thought he could hear shouting. Breathing rapidly, he reached the top and stumbled down the steep slope on the other side. He landed clumsily in a dry streambed and ran for twenty paces before dropping to his knees and crawling between two sandstone boulders.

He hid there, waiting for the militiamen or police to find him. Many minutes passed. His frantic breathing gradually subsided, and his pounding heart slowly returned to its normal pace. He continued to crouch there for another hour, and then two. But still no one came.

When Aminullah finally emerged, the sun was gone. He was alone, and there was no sound but the wind. His initial panic and distress had faded to a vague feeling of numbness. Above him, the stars and crescent moon were partially obscured by clouds. Thunder echoed in the distance, and a few rare drops of rain began to patter softly upon the dusty, cracked soil.

Aminullah lingered there for a few minutes, shivering lightly in the cold night air. He could already see the tears and shocked faces that awaited him at home. The thought of bearing such tragic news to his family was almost too painful. More than anything, he dreaded to see the quiet but crushed expression on his father's face. Aminullah wanted nothing more than to lie down in the empty streambed, close his eyes, and pray for the earth to open up and swallow him whole.

But there would be no easy way out. Whatever fate awaited Aminullah in the following hours and days, he understood what he had to do first. He took a hesitant step forward, and then another, more confident one. Finding his bearings, he began to walk home through the darkness. ■

He envisioned himself as a small sparrow at first, and then an eagle, and finally a boy riding on a magic broom.

FLASHBACKS: *Echoes of Past Issues*

- 46** *For Doris*
an essay by Michael McFee
art by Maurice Sendak
- 54** *Hanging on by a Thread*
Doris Betts, *The Scarlet Thread*
a review by Tara Powell
- 56** *We Are All in It*
an essay by Fred Chappell
- 57** *A Last Glimpse of the Traveler*
a poem by Fred Chappell
- 59** *A Poem Has Happened Here*
Susan Laughter Meyers,
My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass
a review by Fred Chappell
- 61** *Kathryn Stripling Byer, Former NC Poet Laureate
Receives Second Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Award*
- 62** *To Catch Big Fish: Advice from the Poet
and No Ordinary Birdsong*
two poems by Susan Laughter Meyers
art by Ray Elmore
- 64** *Guests on Earth, Eternal Strangers, and Lost Souls*
Lee Smith, *Guests on Earth: A Novel*
a review by John Hough, Jr.
- 66** *Attend the Tales of Allan Gurganus*
Allan Gurganus, *Local Souls*
a review by Gary Richards
- 68** *The End Before the End*
Jill McCorkle, *Life After Life*
a review by Barbara Bennett
- 69** *2013 NC AAUW Award*
- 70** *"The clock is ticking"*
Robert Inman, *The Governor's Lady*
a review by Anna Dunlap Higgins
- 72** *Samm-Art Williams Is the Fourth Recipient
of the Hardee Rives Dramatic Arts Award*
award presentation remarks by Lorraine Hale Robinson
- 73** *Blue Bottles*
a poem by Glenis Gale Redmond
art by Vollis Simpson
- 74** *"The Cruel Radiance of What Is"*
Jeffery Beam, *The Broken Flower: Poems*
Keith Flynn, *Colony Collapse Disorder*
a review by Jim Clark
- 78** *Odds Favor At Random*
Lee Zacharias, *At Random*
a review by Tanya Long Bennett
- 80** *Mystery Writers Receive NC Literary Awards*
- 82** *It's Complicated*
Dale Neal, *The Half-Life of Home*
a review by Sharon E. Colley
- 84** *Myers Park Misery*
Wilton Barnhardt, *Lookaway, Lookaway*
a review by Jim McGavran
- 86** *Words, Water, Wonder*
Philip Gerard, *The Patron Saint of Dreams
and Other Essays*
Philip Gerard, *Down the Wild Cape Fear:
A River Journey through the Heart of North Carolina*
a review by Brian Glover
- 88** *Savoring the Literary Landscape of
Eastern North Carolina*
Georgann Eubanks, *Literary Trails of
Eastern North Carolina: A Guidebook*
a review by Lorraine Hale Robinson
photography by Donna Campbell
- 90** *Available Beauty*
a poem by Robert M. Wallace
art by Kenneth Noland



PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK KURTZ

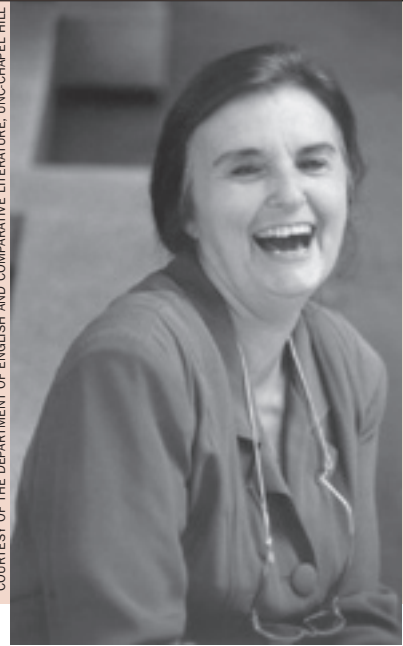
ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 7** ■ **War in North Carolina Literature**
*fiction, nonfiction, book reviews,
and literary news*
- 91** ■ **North Carolina Miscellany**
an interview, poetry, and book reviews

For Doris

by Michael McFee

COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, UNC-CHAPEL HILL



*“It’s a pleasure to
sing to such a
responsive audience.”*

—The mockingbird
in *The Bat-Poet* by Randall Jarrell

MICHAEL MCFEE was born in Asheville, raised in Arden, and educated in the south Buncombe County schools. He is a Professor of English at UNC-Chapel Hill, his alma mater. Author of numerous books, including ten collections of poetry, his honors include the Thomas Wolfe Literary Award (from the Western North Carolina Historical Association) and the James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South (from the Fellowship of Southern Writers). Read poetry by McFee in *NCLR* [1997](#), [2008](#), and [2010](#).

1.

I hadn’t been in Pittsboro, North Carolina, for almost a year, not since the funeral of Doris Betts in the little brick Presbyterian Church just off the traffic circle, on April 25, 2012. That was a very hard Wednesday morning for those of us who’d known and loved Doris, not just because our friend – one of the most vigorously *alive* human beings in this world – was gone, but also because the Service of Witness to the Resurrection was so impersonal and presbygeneric. Our spirits had *not* been resurrected that day.

In early April of 2013, I heard that some of Doris’s many many books were soon to be sold at the annual Chatham Community Library book sale.

I’d been trying to get rid of books in recent years, not buy more; the older I got, the less I liked overflowing shelves of read and unread pages. Too many words, too much dusty yellowing paper. But I knew how steadily and how widely and how well Doris always read. I knew this was as close as I’d ever get to seeing my dear friend again, by holding what she’d held and beheld and loved enough to keep.

DORIS BETTS (1932–2012) joined the faculty of UNC-Chapel Hill in 1966. In 1973, she received the Tanner Award for distinguished undergraduate teaching, and in 1980, she was named a UNC Alumni Distinguished Professor of English. Read more about this author after this essay in a review of one of her early novels, which was reprinted in 2013 by Press 53.

A native of Tennessee, the poet **RANDALL JARRELL** (1914–1965) came to North Carolina to join the faculty of the Woman’s College of UNC (now UNC Greensboro). An essay on Jarrell by Fred Chappell opens the premiere (1992) issue of *NCLR*. The 1996 issue included a short essay on the poet by his widow, and in 2003, *NCLR* published a sidebar on his “Wartime Flight Poems” by Maryscott Mullins.

Every minute with Doris was a blast; on the page and in person, she was dazzling – smart, feisty, hilarious, provocative, tenacious, and fearless.

2.

I heard a lot about the amazing Doris Betts when I was an undergraduate at UNC-Chapel Hill in the mid-1970s. But I was a shy poet and never made my way into her fiction classes or her office – which means that I first made her acquaintance through her books, possibly the best way to meet a writer. Once I read *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, whose short stories astonished and thrilled me, I was a Betts fan.

I'm not sure when we first met in person – probably later that decade, during my mercifully brief graduate student career at Carolina – but our connection was immediate and deep. We were both working-class kids from the western part of the state who had transferred to Chapel Hill as juniors and felt like we'd landed in paradise.

I was lucky enough to have Doris as my guide and colleague and confidante when I came back to UNC in 1990 as a lecturer in creative writing, then (thanks, in large part, to her advocacy) as a tenure-track assistant professor. I watched, and listened, and learned from her example how the department and the university worked, how to take teaching seriously yet continue to write, and above all, how to be a public servant at a public university.

This all sounds much more dry than it was. Every minute with Doris was a blast; on the page and in person, she was dazzling – smart, feisty, hilarious, provocative, tenacious, and fearless. Her fierce dark eyes pierced, sparkled, didn't miss a thing. Nobody was tougher or more tender. She sent the most entertaining emails ever, and her notes – written with one of her many fountain pens, held in a hard-working, ink-stained hand – were a treasure. I especially loved how she would sometimes sign them: "*More to come.*"

RIGHT Illustration of "the bat poet" by Maurice Sendak found in the Randall Jarrell Papers of the Stuart Wright Collection [#1169-005], East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC

3.

I went to the Chatham library's website to confirm the sale and found a twenty-page list of "special titles" to be offered from the personal collection of Doris Betts. There was plenty of prose, an intriguing range of fiction and nonfiction, but I was mostly interested in poetry and saw two signed Czeslaw Milosz books. Of course any poet would love to have those, but they had particular interest for me. He had been a visiting scholar at UNC one semester, and Doris and I and some other writers shared an epic lunch with him in May of 1991, which I remember as The Milosz Monologue – not uninteresting, but totally one-sided. Had he signed those books that day? And his poem "Meaning" (beginning, "When I die, I will see the lining of the world") had been printed in her funeral leaflet, surely at her request, over "In Loving Memory / Doris Waugh Betts / June 4, 1932–April 21, 2012."

But were a couple of poetry books worth the forty-five minute drive to Pittsboro? I was about to decide No, and close the booklist when I saw the item that stopped my scrolling hand, and very nearly my heart:

Jarrell, Randall

illustrations by Maurice Sendak

THE BAT-POET

Macmillan Publishers

inscribed & signed by Jarrell on front endpaper

\$20

What? A copy of my favorite book in the world? Not only signed but inscribed (to Doris?) by its author, near the end of his too-short life?

How could I not go?

COPYRIGHT © 2014 BY MAURICE SENDAK ESTATE; REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE WYLE AGENCY, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



4.

I'm not sure who introduced me to *The Bat-Poet*, but it was truly love at first sight. My wife and I read it aloud to each other, many times; we read it aloud to our young son, many more times; I have given it to who-knows-how-many friends over the years; I have read it to my introductory poetry writing students, for instruction and sheer pleasure; and it never ceases to delight me.

Why? Because – without ever straining to do so – it satisfies on several levels. It's a charming children's book about a bat who, inspired by hearing a mockingbird sing during the day, wants to become a poet, too. (Four of the bat's lovely poems are included.) It's also an instructive adult story about being different from others and discovering one's vocation – in particular, about figuring out how to become a writer. It shows what's involved in realizing one's poetic calling, poem by poem by poem, even if finding an audience is difficult. "The trouble isn't making poems," the bat realizes, "the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them."¹

And then, there's the added attraction of "Pictures by Maurice Sendak," as the cover and title page say. Sendak was at the height of his graphic powers in 1964, the year *The Bat-Poet* was published; in fact, he won the Caldecott Medal for his own *Where the Wild Things Are* that year. His atmospheric pen-and-ink drawings for Jarrell's book are marvels of crosshatchery – less illustrations of the scenes than a dreamlike deepening of the text's implications. There are wonderfully precise details in his rendering of the mockingbird's feathers or the bat's wings or the chipmunk's stripes, but Sendak takes imaginative liberties when needed: the book's one wordless double-page spread – with a lioness and her cub gazing from the scrub-brush shadows – seems to be set in an arid stony landscape far from Guilford County, North Carolina, where the book was written, an hour's drive west of Chapel Hill.

Though he was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and spent much of his professional/professorial life in Greensboro, North Carolina, Jarrell is underappreciated as a Southern writer. That's one reason I particularly enjoy *The Bat-Poet*: it's his most regional book, at least in its local setting and cast of familiar animal characters. And, apparently, in its composition: in one of her editorial notes for *Randall Jarrell's Letters*, his wife Mary said that in spring 1962 he "stationed himself outdoors in a hammock under the pines, among the cardinals and chipmunks, and, with the stereo volume turned up, wrote *The Gingerbread Rabbit* and started on *The Bat-Poet*."²



COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, J.Y. JOYNER LIBRARY, EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

ABOVE Randall Jarrell, circa 1960–64, found in the [Randall Jarrell Papers of the Stuart Wright Collection](#) [#1169-005], East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC

¹ Randall Jarrell, *The Bat-Poet* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 15.

² Mary Jarrell, ed. *Randall Jarrell's Letters: An Autobiographical and Literary Selection* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985) 455.



COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, UNC-CHAPEL HILL

5.

The library sale began on Thursday, April 11, 2013, at 9:00 A.M. – not the most convenient day and hour, since I had a class to teach at 11:00 A.M. in Chapel Hill, a half-hour north of Pittsboro. But if I was focused in my book-buying, I could make it back to campus in time.

It was a cool, sunny, early spring day, a fine morning for an outing. I left around eight and took the back way southwest from my home in Durham to the seat of Chatham County, driving through the green rolling Piedmont countryside. Doris – who had intensely loved this place and its people – was much on my mind. She’d died almost exactly a year ago, and I still regretted not going to visit her near the end; in fact, I hadn’t seen her since we had lunch with friends at Ferrington in October 2011.

But on this lovely Thursday, I was thinking about happier times – in particular the lively birthday lunches we would share every year, a pair of Gemini writers and teachers and Tar Heels born on the same day, June 4th. We’d talk, we’d laugh, we’d drink some wine (her second glass always took the literary gossip to another level), and we’d exchange gifts, almost always books – as if either of us needed another volume on our shelves.

6.

I was also thinking: Might Doris actually have known Randall Jarrell?

She was a student at the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina (later UNC-Greensboro) from 1950 to 1952, when Jarrell was a celebrated professor there. Did she ever go hear him read, or give a lecture? Did she see him crossing campus, or meet him at some English department function? Did she walk to his office, rap on the door, and announce, “Mr. Jarrell, I’m Doris June Waugh, and I’m a writer, too!”?

Because she already was. Soon she would transfer to Chapel Hill, and her collection of stories *The Gentle Insurrection* would win a national prize for undergraduates and be published by Putnam’s in 1954 – the year I was born, the year she turned twenty-two – with this italicized pronouncement:

We, her publishers, believe that Doris Betts possesses one of the most outstanding and unusual writing talents to appear in the past several years, and that the publication of this, her first book, will immediately place her well forward in the ranks of American writers of distinction.



COURTESY OF TARA POWELL



RIGHT Doris Betts with her horse Pretty Boy, 30 Oct. 2009



COURTESY OF TARA POWELL

7.

To me, there is no work so dear as teaching. . . . Teaching is something that I would pay to do; to make my living by doing it, here at the University of North Carolina, with the colleagues I have and the students my colleagues and I have, seems to me a piece of good luck I don't deserve but am immensely grateful for.³

Randall Jarrell said this in 1962, upon receiving the Oliver Max Gardner Award for being the outstanding faculty member for the entire UNC system that year. But I'm sure that Doris Betts, another devoted and prizewinning professor, would have said exactly the same thing. Both of these writers of distinction were teachers of distinction on their respective campuses – and, really, wherever they went in the state or nation or world: teaching was in their genes.

What made them great teachers? They took their students and their writing seriously, and they showed those young people how difficult but utterly satisfying it is to be a writer.

Once I asked Doris why some of her students had enjoyed such success – books, prizes, literary careers – when others hadn't. She said it wasn't a matter of talent, though a verbal gift or spark was needed to get things going; it was a matter of perseverance, of persistence, of simply not giving up in the face of rejection or indifference. *The trouble isn't making books, the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them.* She also said, "My pride in the achievements of every ex-student is nearly parental."

8.

As I approached Pittsboro, I realized that Jarrell had died – nearly half a century ago in Chapel Hill, where he had gone for treatment at the Hand Rehabilitation Center of North Carolina Memorial Hospital, after a failed suicide attempt had damaged his left wrist – only twenty-some miles north of where I was driving on the very same road, US 15-501. At 7:30 P.M., on October 14, 1965, walking alone in dark clothes on the shoulder of the highway, he was struck and killed by a passing car. The driver said Jarrell "appeared to lunge" into the path of the car, and subsequently many people regarded his death as a suicide; but was it, really? His widow Mary did not think so, and for the rest of her long life defended his reputation against the fate of Plath and others, saying that the death certificate's judgment of "accidental" was correct – his sense of balance may have been impaired by medicine he was taking, he may have stumbled on the uneven shoulder and fallen into the road, he was never seriously suicidal. Who can say, really?

I wrote a poem about that sad night, in the manner of his famous "The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner." It doesn't pretend to solve the mystery; it simply dramatizes it.⁴

The Death of Randall Jarrell

Chapel Hill, N.C., 14 October 1965

Was the unsteady man on the shoulder saluting,
or shielding his eyes from the blinding high-beams?
As the passing car sideswiped him, or he the car,
the last thing he saw was his uplifted bare wrist.
Look how the crooked ghost of those stitches gleams.

COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS. J.Y. JOYNER LIBRARY, EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY



³ Quoted in *Randall Jarrell's Letters* (453).

⁴ Michael McFee's poem "The Death of Randall Jarrell" was first published in *Threepenny Review* 116 (2008): 7.

9.

I descended into town, toward the county courthouse (undergoing restoration after a devastating fire), and into the traffic circle. As I took the first right and headed west, away from the cemetery behind the church where Doris rested, I remembered that gray day last April, and the little elegy I made shortly afterwards.⁵

Frosted Windows in a Small-Town Presbyterian Church

No stained glass
for instruction or comfort,

just these plain whitened panes,
their blankness

a smothered glow
filling already-numb mourners

with its anesthesia,
as if God's living breath pressed

against each window
from the cemetery just outside

or our own moist exhaled grief
fogged the cool glass,

leaving opaque pages
on which we wish we could write

her beloved name one last time
D O R I S

before the sun erases it,
before it becomes gray stone.

COURTESY OF TARA POWELL



10.

It was only a few blocks to the public library, where a crowd had already gathered – I should have left earlier if I really wanted any of the special titles. I'd brought a bag for my haul; others had brought boxes; the mood was bookish and happy.

One of the many retirees in line explained to me, in great detail, how the public library book sale worked in Manhattan; her husband remained silent. I had a nice conversation with a Chatham library volunteer about Doris and her typically generous work with the library over the years – Doris lived a mile or so up the road, on a horse farm just outside Pittsboro. He described the mountains of books they removed from her house; having often visited her gloriously messy campus office, I knew that “mountains” was not a hyperbole. He told me where the Special Books room was, so that, when the doors opened promptly at nine, I could hustle there. “That’s where the treasures will be,” he promised.



⁵ Michael McFee's "Frosted Windows in a Small-Town Presbyterian Church" is forthcoming in *Cincinnati Review* (Winter 2014).

ABOVE Doris Betts with her horse Pretty Boy and her dog Toby, 30 Oct. 2009

11.

By the time I pushed my way through the cheerful crush of bibliophiles, a number of books in the COLLECTOR'S CORNER had already been plucked from the tables – others had studied that twenty-page inventory as well, and had struck quickly. I looked for the skinny volumes that mean “poetry” and saw the gap where the two Miloszes had been, but no Jarrell. I was disappointed but not surprised, and prepared to consider whatever the dealers and connoisseurs ahead of me in line had left behind.

And then I saw a row labeled CHILDREN'S BOOKS. Wait, that's where *The Bat-Poet* should be, right? Was that its narrow brown spine, almost hidden by the big colorful picture books around it?

Yes. Yes, it was.

12.

I unfroze, pulled the book out, saw the yellow SIGNED BY JARRELL slip in it, could not believe my luck. The paperback was a bit worse for wear – one edge looked slightly torn or maybe chewed (Doris always had dogs), and those must have been her coffee stains clouding the sky of Sendak's cover illustration – but I was actually holding the holy-grail *Bat-Poet* in my hands and could not believe my luck.

It's a pleasure to sing to such a responsive audience.

13.

I retreated a few steps to the corner of that small room, so I could open the book and behold Jarrell's signature in private. I knew what it looked like – modest, undramatic: I'd seen a signed copy of his 1954 novel, *Pictures from an Institution*. But he would have written his name in this copy during the last year he was alive, when he was having the problems that would unfortunately land him in the Hand Clinic in Chapel Hill, so who knows what it might look like? And what in the world would the inscription be, and to whom?

I confirmed the price on the protruding slip: \$20.00. Though the value of this particular copy of *The Bat-Poet* was hardly the reason I wanted it, I had checked some rare-books websites the previous night. There were only two signed copies available anywhere in the e-world, with this note: “Scarce with Jarrell's signature – \$250.”

Her laugh was one of the most glorious sounds in the world, and this mix-up caused me to hear it clearly again.

14.

I opened it. I looked. And I laughed.

Here's what was inscribed on the half title page, under what Macmillan had printed there – THE BAT POET title in capitals, a decorative Sendak sprig or branch, and the author's dedication “to Mary”:

and for Doris,
who loves the campus chipmunks –
Happy birthday!
With love and gratitude,
Michael
4 June 95

The book was not signed by Jarrell at all, but by me. To Doris. At one of our birthday lunches.

15.

I could have gotten angry, I guess, at the library volunteer who mistook my signature and inscription for Randall Jarrell's and had caused me to drive so far out of the way on a very busy day, wasting time and gas, and dashing my bibliophilic hopes. I could have stomped to the elderly cashier and pitched a literary hissy fit, demanding – what? that he acknowledge their error? I could have explained, at great length, the levels of misunderstanding involved, including, “How does ‘Michael’ look like ‘Randall,’ except for a final ‘l’? And how could Jarrell inscribe a book nearly thirty years after his death?”

But why not just laugh? This whole misadventure seemed more like a joke than anything else, and I knew that Doris would have laughed with me at my folly. (“You should be *flattered*,” she'd tease.) Her laugh was one of the most glorious sounds in the world, and this mix-up caused me to hear it clearly again. That made the morning's trip more than worth it.

16.

I bought *The Bat-Poet* “signed by Jarrell,” though I certainly didn’t need another well-used copy, and not at that price. But it pleased me to think of Doris reading that wonderful animal tale about becoming a writer, one set in the Jarrell’s back yard in Greensboro, a city where Doris had lived before moving to the town of Chapel Hill and becoming the writer and wife and mother and teacher and mentor – self-sacrificing, inexhaustible, inimitable – who meant so much to so many of us. I’d inscribed that book to her at one of our happiest birthday lunches a few years before her retirement: she’d planned to write the books her multitudinous college duties didn’t leave time for, but instead ended up taking care of beloved family members – first her mother, then her husband, then her daughter – during their long, final illnesses, before she succumbed to the lung cancer she’d hoped to avoid by stopping smoking decades earlier.

I bought some other overpriced treasures, too, and left the sale happy. As I drove north from Pittsboro to the university on its hill, I wished I could walk into the English building and hear her voice quickening the halls. I also wished I had a recording, on CD or MP3, of the old Caedmon LP on which Jarrell reads – in a quavery, witty, precise voice – his tale which begins, “Once upon a time there was a bat – a little light brown bat, the color of coffee with cream in it.”

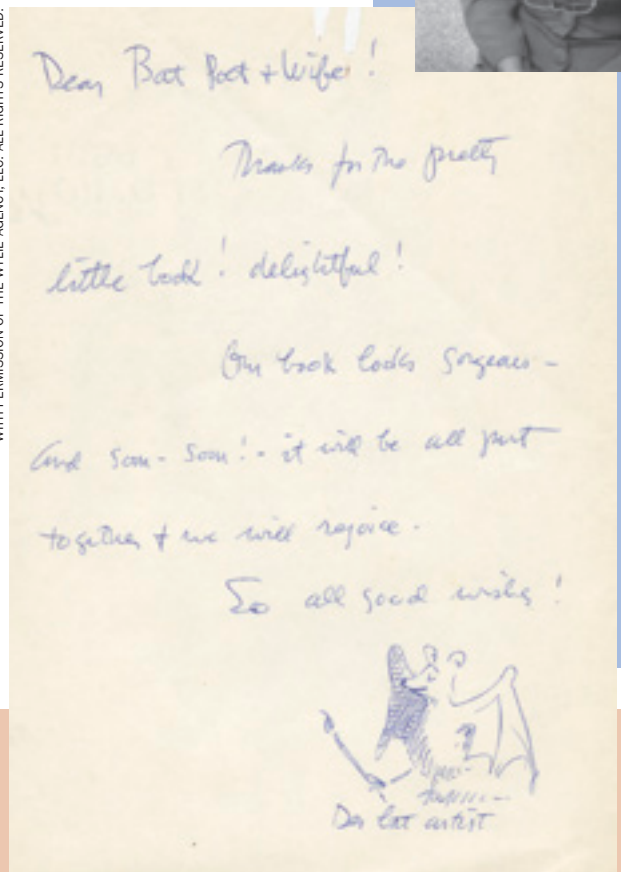
I slipped a note out of my shirt pocket, which I’d planned to tuck inside the precious signed volume. Doris had slipped the card into my department mailbox shortly after our birthday lunch in 1995. On it she had stamped Doris Betts, Professor of English, with this postscript message written in her spirited pen-and-ink hand:

Michael – I forgot one other thing in my email –
I meant to tell you how much I LOVED The Bat Poet!
doris. ■

COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, UNC-CHAPEL HILL



COPYRIGHT © 2014 BY MAURICE SENDAK ESTATE; REPRINTED
WITH PERMISSION OF THE WYLIE AGENCY, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



RIGHT **A letter from Maurice Sendak to Randall and Mary Jarrell, circa 1961, with an illustration by the artist, found in the Randall Jarrell Papers of the Stuart Wright Collection [#1169-005], East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC (For more about this collection, see Fred Chappell’s essay in *NCLR* 2012 and Thomas Douglass’s essay in *NCLR Online* 2013.)**

HANGING ON BY A THREAD

a review by Tara Powell

Doris Betts. *The Scarlet Thread*. 1964. Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2013.

TARA POWELL received her MA from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1999 and her PhD in 2004. Her publications include a chapbook of poems, *Physical Science* (Finishing Line Press, 2010), and a scholarly monograph, *The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* (Louisiana State UP, 2012). A co-edited collection on food in Southern literature is forthcoming from the University Press of Mississippi. Among her current research projects is a study on Doris Betts's uncollected short fiction.

Statesville, NC, native **DORIS BETTS** (1932–2012) is the author of six novels and three collections of short stories. Her numerous honors include three Sir Walter Raleigh Awards for best fiction by a North Carolinian, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Medal of Merit. Read more about Betts in *NCLR 2009*, which includes an essay by Maurice York, based on remarks he gave on the occasion of Betts receiving the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration.

North Carolina's visible literary constellation has brightened with Press 53's recent reissue of *The Scarlet Thread*, an early novel by the late Doris Betts. Betts was a celebrated novelist, short story writer, essayist, and teacher, whose storied public career spanned six decades and was firmly rooted in the Carolina Piedmont, even as her words reached for the wider world. Early Betts works, like *The Scarlet Thread* (which first appeared in 1964), have languished out of print for many of those decades, at times frustrating the efforts of scholars and teachers to give Betts her due. Though some original reviewers and even Betts herself were critical of elements of *The Scarlet Thread*, new and returning readers will find much to exclaim over in the excavation of this Press 53 Classic. Not only is Betts's distinctive treatment of the industrialization of small-town North Carolina in the historical backdrop of this novel deeply important to the fabric of our national literature, but its unforgettable characters and loving attention to the inner lives of everyday people are pure, unmistakable Betts.

The superficial materials of *The Scarlet Thread* are familiar as a family drama. Unfolding from the alternating perspectives of three children about to come of age in Greenway, NC, the novel follows Esther, Thomas, and David Allen through adolescence and young adulthood as their lives (and their family's fortune) are shaped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the coming of the mill to their hometown; the rise of the white middle class;

the vanishing rural South; and changing attitudes toward race, gender, and religion in small-town America. The novel begins at playtime under the Allen home, where Esther is persuading her younger brothers to practice going through the looking glass while they ignore their mother's call to come inside. Resentful, power-hungry Thomas and observant, artistic David are often swept up in Esther's imaginative play and the strength of her personality, whether they are going through the looking glass, learning to fly, or getting in trouble with their parents.

The children encounter a lively cast of memorable characters that border at times on caricature but then tumble back from the brink of it with unexpected and engaging human quirks that lend to the children's coming of age the kind of specificity and energy required to render the historical setting in vivid color – the cantankerous grandfather who secretly dotes on Esther, the knowing conjure woman with a weakness for cornbread, drunken Uncle Silas still tenderly in love with a mad woman, the non-sense Yankee who comes to set up the mill but also wanders by the creek in search of something more, a hardworking black moonshiner who collects jars of words, and the reclusive stonemason whose art may just rescue David from himself. And so on. This is a sweeping, capacious historical novel that is as personality driven as it is picaresque.

Elizabeth Evans reports that Betts thought of *The Scarlet Thread* as an unsuccessful novel constructed out of otherwise good short stories, and some reviewers

COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION,
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY

did criticize its episodic nature and lamented what one called its “Gothic excesses.”¹ And yes, it has an energetic share of quirky regional characters, violence of every stripe from the mill to the bedroom, and enough death, incest, and prayer to make William Faulkner or Flannery O’Connor blink. Even the Klan rides again. But *The Scarlet Thread* is rescued from the ridiculous by its humanity – the delightful dialogue of the children at play, the pathos of human feeling as even larger-than-life characters must manage the terrors and joys of the everyday. We see Esther, for example, facing her grandfather’s last illness alone, tasting stolen whiskey for the first time, resenting the advent of her menses, and navigating with curiosity and resilience the extraordinary world into which time and circumstance have thrust her.

As Sally Buckner observes in one of the appreciations of Betts’s life and career appended

to the Press 53 edition of *The Scarlet Thread*, Betts has long been praised for her treatment of “so-called ‘ordinary’ folks” (n.p.). It strikes me that in *The Scarlet Thread* it is not the novel’s excesses that are interesting but the ordinariness of the Allens’ encounters with extremity. If, as Lynn Veach Sadler has claimed, one of Betts’s great achievements is the “dignity” she gives to her characters regardless of class,² *The Scarlet Thread* is not only engaging reading for its own sake; it is also an essential window into the growth of Betts’s vision, as she worked to carve out her own distinctive place in a *Dixie Limited* literary tradition loaded with Snopeses and Sartorises, but not many Esther Allens or her brothers.

There exists a rich and underappreciated twentieth-century literature of the mills and the communities they unraveled, wove, and unraveled again across the Carolinas over the course of a century. Retrospective novels such as *The Scarlet Thread* and Pamela Duncan’s *Plant Life* (2003), as well as poetry collections like Ron Rash’s *Eureka Mill* (1998) and Michael Chitwood’s *The Weave Room* (1998) are important complements to nonfiction like Bessie and Marie Van Vorst’s *The Woman Who Toils* (1903), W.J. Cash’s *Mind of the South* (1941), Ben Robertson’s *Red Hills and Cotton* (1942), and Wilt Browning’s *Linthead* (1990), just to name a few, to chronicle the changing face of work in the

region. As Robert Morgan points out in his introduction to Press 53’s edition of *The Scarlet Thread*, this novel is nearly unique in its portrayal of the time and place in which it is set.

Of the fairly limited amount of ink that has been spilled on *The Scarlet Thread* over the years (no doubt in part due to its being hard to get hold of for so long), much of it has pondered the meaning of the title, which refers to, among other things, a literally unraveled knitting project of Esther’s and also to her mother Mildred’s interest in the Biblical story of Rahab and the spies. Frances R. Kestler has persuasively interpreted the title as pointing readers to a Biblical birthright theme, as well as to the theme of escape in the novel³ – which certainly each family member is trying to accomplish in his or her own way: escape religious, regional, and even literary tropes; their economic station; the realities of gender; and a specific strain of madness in the bloodline. Nonetheless, a thread ties back to where it starts, and escape from the gritty, madcap South of *The Scarlet Thread* is conditional and qualified and costly. At the novel’s most extreme, surreal moments, Betts keeps pulling us back by a scarlet thread to what O’Connor might have called the “mystery of personality.”⁴ Readers who hang on will find *The Scarlet Thread* an inspiring ride through another world that turns out to be not so unlike our own. ■

¹ Elizabeth Evans, *Doris Betts* (New York: Twayne, 1997) 66; William Pederson, rev. of *The Scarlet Thread*, *Saturday Review* 6 Feb. 1965: 32.

² Lynn Veach Sadler, “Bet[ting] on Getting West: Heading West as Re-Betts,” *The “Home Truths” of Doris Betts with a Bibliography: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Southern Writers’ Symposium*, ed. Sue Laslie Kimball and Lynn Veach Sadler (Fayetteville, NC: Methodist College P, 1992) 93–110.

³ Frances R. Kestler, “The Power of Esther in *The Scarlet Thread*,” in *The “Home Truths” of Doris Betts*, 51–57.

⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) 90.

We Are All In It

by Fred Chappell

on the occasion of receiving the
Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration

I am very proud indeed to have been given the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration. I do not know the names of the members of the inevitable committee that came to this surprising decision, but I like to think they are all women and men of impeccable literary taste, Solomonic judgment, and inviolable character. Yet – how am I to square this thought with the fact that they lit upon my name as a recipient?

Let us stipulate that I do not deserve the Roberts Award. There are two advantages in this proposal. First, it allows me to feel that I am getting away with something that doesn't belong to me. That is a nifty perverse pleasure, and at my age pleasures almost have to be perverse to be enjoyable. Second, it allows me to accept the award not as a single person but as an informal, self-appointed representative of so many other teachers of literature and literary composition in our state. If I may be permitted the latitude not to regard this honor as proceeding to an individual person, but to a member of a large, unorganized – or disorganized – group that believes that the task of literature is to describe our ways of understanding and misunderstanding our universe, then I shall feel even more greatly honored. It has long been my belief that the composition of literature and its dispersal and interpretation are all communal efforts.

Sink or swim, flip, flop, or fly – we are all in it together.

But there are some situations in which the thought does not apply. Some individual writers

decide purposely to lag behind the pace of the greater mass, adhering to a stance so conservative it almost seems subversive. One of the grand virtues of Dr. Samuel Johnson was that he was not an innovator. His achievement was to create an elevation from which the prior achievements of literature could be viewed. Other writers break out in front. The greatest strengths of Laurence Sterne were his initially puzzling innovations. Of writers like Sterne – some of them greater than he – we often say that they are or were “ahead of their time.” When those authors appear, it becomes our task to try to catch up. To try to understand Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake, Whitman, and certain other visionaries, their contemporary readers had to readjust their bifocals, scratch their wigs, and sneeze repeatedly.

Many if not most of us probably do not see the challenge of such newfangled writers as a pressing one. Even if we are not content with the state of things as they are, we are reluctant to expend the time, energy, and eyesight upon untried vistas. This situation must be a lonely one for those particular writers – or artists, composers, mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers.

I attempted to portray this set of complications in a little allegorical poem called “A Last Glimpse of the Traveler.” The speaker is an inhabitant of a lonely village in an indeterminate time period. He voices the sentiments of the townspeople when he addresses the visionary traveler whose goal he cannot sight, whose mission he cannot comprehend, whose strength of determination he cannot measure. This journeyer pauses for a moment in this small hamlet and the speaker addresses her:



PHOTOGRAPH BY DONNA KAIN


 PHOTOGRAPH BY
 DAWN MAWMWRIGHT

“The task of literature is to describe our ways of understanding and misunderstanding our universe.”
 —Fred Chappell

A Last Glimpse of the Traveler

With each step, divergent pathways open to the girl
 Who strides emphatically, attempting to outpace
 The empery of moonlight. One way wends
 To the snow-dapple mountain, one way to the river
 Where the moon stretches longwise on the water.

Where, girl, do you fare as night extends?
I go to every place my journey conceives.
 Why do you travel so, knowing not where?
I go to leave behind the things that I must leave;
I go to seek what yet has been unsought.

There is a grove ahead wherein the shadows
 Clutch and hold the wanderer with fearful doubt;
 Ravines on either side yawn so vast and black
 Moon cannot fetch their depths with her long spear.

So I have heard and do in part believe;
Yet if I stood just here and walked no farther,
All my destinies would wither, shrivel and decay,
And I would have no part in them, not even
As witness. I would give over to what is already over.

We shall not go your road. We wish you well.

I think you do not. I think you are eager to forget
The very sight of me in my silk dress, with my bright hair
Unbound upon my shoulder and all my happiness
Shining in my face. Are you not cowardly?
Are your hearts not withered and shrunken?

We have said what we have strength to say.

I admit that this is a dispiriting picture of the situation and it is not really fair to any of the parties involved. In the untitled sequel to the poem, the villagers at a later date strike out on the trail of the lonely trekker and follow her trace to a splendid place, though they are unable to name the kind of splendor they have been led to gaze upon. That poem remains unwritten. It has offered more difficulties than I had counted upon. But I do not despair.

Those thinkers who stride so far ahead of the rest of us must be lonely individuals. Almost no one is interested in what they may have to offer and of those who are interested, only a very few are qualified to judge the nature of the offering. This means that the seekers must sometimes take themselves seriously. We accept as a given that they take their art and their missions very seriously indeed. Otherwise, they have no motive for their deeds. But it is a very different thing to take oneself seriously. There is a lot of the missionary – and sometimes of the messiah – in writers like Shelley, Whitman, Blake, and the others, and if they do not have a sufficient sense of self-worth, they are likely to be overwhelmed by doubts and detractors. “Arms and the man I sing,” says Virgil, and the first-person pronoun is emphasized, marking this poet as different from Homer who eschewed first person. Virgil is engaged in a task no one else has conceived or can accomplish. This sense of burden must make things doubly difficult.

I know for a fact that if I allowed myself, when I sat down to work, to think, “Well, here is Fred the capital-P poet getting ready to indite one or two of his immortal phrases,” I would be dead on the spot from a mortal attack of the capital-G giggles.

ABOVE LEFT Fred Chappell delivering this address, with the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration plaque in the foreground (Watch the award presentation and this address on the event's [website](#).)

But maybe it takes a little, tiny bit of courage to admit that you lack that kind of moxie. And maybe there are advantages to be gained by taking the less grandiose avenues. Charm, for example. Many readers of poetry admire Milton, but few have called his epics charming, except for a few odd passages, like the one describing the elephant at play in the Garden of Eden. Milton is one of those writers who make you feel you ought to put on a coat and tie and get a fresh manicure before opening the volume. His is the kind of achievement that justly demands a certain formal level of respect.

That does not mean that his achievement is the most and loneliest greatest. Chaucer is his equal in greatness, and I have no qualms about reading Chaucer while wearing slacks and a sport shirt. Villon I can read dressed in torn blue jeans and broken-down sneakers – and he too is a great poet.

The grand visionaries to whom we owe so very much lack the power to disarm. Wordsworth has delivered us a vision of nature that is both transcendent and primordial, both personal and sublimely impersonal at once. He has done so partly by means of creating a first person speaker whom we always respect but feel a little presumptuous to identify with. With the members of Chaucer's crowd of speakers I feel immediate kinship, even when I don't like some of them.

Has there ever been a study of self-deprecation in literature? When Emily Dickinson begins a poem by saying, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?," don't most of us respond almost automatically, "I'm nobody too"? Why do we do so? Well, maybe because we want to be friendly with someone who so openly makes that kind of admission. Maybe if Milton or Shelley or Norman Mailer or Jim Dickey opened a piece by saying, "I'm nobody" – nah, that was never going to happen. Abraham Lincoln could do so; Thomas Jefferson could not, yet both are the very best writers and orators of their times.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN G. HENSLEY



Writers are like others who desire to think and to act; they have differing goals of aspiration. A writer may aspire to the sublimity of Aeschylus, and there are some who could not have achieved what they have done by aspiring to lesser levels. But to me it is acceptable to aspire to a middle ground, to try to join not a choir of angels but a community of men and women who are less extreme in ambition and more accessible to intellectual and emotional camaraderie.

I admire the men and women who can visualize great stones and from those envisioned stones construct the cloud-capped towers and contemplative gardens of Utopia, but I feel more personal kinship with the hay-cutter who once mowed a field clean except for a single tall tuft of flowers beside a stream. He never wrote a poem, this scything man; someone else took the pains to write it for him, someone who was able to know what his purposeful omission meant and in his mind held silent, brotherly speech with him, saying, "Men work together," I told him from the heart, / "Whether they work together or apart." Anyhow, that's what Robert Frost says that he said,¹ and I like to think Mr. Frost was telling the truth.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen and generous Roberts awarders. You have helped me to understand and appreciate the fact that I do not work apart. ■

STEPHANIE WHITLOCK DICKEN has designed for *NCLR* since 2001 and served as *NCLR's* Art Director from 2002 to 2008. For this issue, she designed this essay, the interview with Anjail Rashida Ahmad, and the review by Ron Jackson. She is an instructor of graphic design at Pitt Community College and can be reached at StephanieWDicken@gmail.com for freelance design work.

¹ Quoted from Robert Frost's poem "Tuft of Flowers" (1915).

ABOVE **Fred Chappell** on the occasion of another award he received in 2013, an Outstanding Achievement Award from the Western North Carolina Historical Association, Asheville, NC, 24 Nov. 2013



“A POEM HAS HAPPENED HERE”

a review by Fred Chappell

Susan Laughter Meyers. *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass*. San Diego: Cider Press Review, 2013.

FRED CHAPPELL, a former Poet Laureate of North Carolina, has [written for NCLR](#) since the premier issue: essays on Randall Jarrell, Jim Wayne Miller, Peter Taylor, and ECU's Stuart Wright Collection. His fiction was a special feature topic of *NCLR 1998*, and his work has been reviewed and the subject of literary criticism in [other NCLR issues](#). See also a collection of his poetry and prose in *NCLR 2013* and more poems by him in *NCLR Online 2013* and forthcoming in the print issue of *NCLR 2014*. In 2013, he served as the final judge of NCLR's James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition, then added to his list of honors the 2013 Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration, given by the Friends of J.Y. Joyner Library at ECU during the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming.

SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS's *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass* is the inaugural winner of the Cider Press Review Editors Prize. Several of the poems in this collection have appeared in *NCLR*. Read more about this poet with her poems following this review.

Susan Meyers's poems in *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass* seem to take place in certain emotional spaces which have been waiting for them. Maybe “fields” would be a better term than “spaces,” upon the analogy of magnetic fields, within which any motion that occurs constitutes a significant electronic event.

Alas. Both these analogies are insufficient, awkward, and misleading.

Let us propose that many poets write poems which have been triggered by events experienced or remembered. Something happens, or has happened; the poet observes, considers, and reacts. Until the occurrence, there was no possibility of a poem. Nothing had prompted the poet to compose. The necessary feelings could not come into existence.

With Meyers, it seems that a state of feeling, indefinable but patiently receptive, already exists. Then anything that happens, or sometimes does not happen, within that state constitutes a possible poem. Paintings and photographs sometimes embody this capacity. An interior by Hopper or a still life by Chardin may seem to declare, in subdued tones, “A poem has happened here.”

From a sequence, “Letters Lost to Wind,” here is “Dear Happenstance”:

Dear Happenstance

Last night I dreamed you
lost as an old shoe lying,
strings untied, on the macadam.

I'm speeding down the road,
and you are everywhere I look:
brushy bluestem, thick with abandon.

Dented mailbox, gravel drive,
fake flowers nailed
to the tree trunk at the curve.

A flock of small birds
darkens with synchronized turning.
Silers, veering back again.

The “you” is unidentified. The pronoun may refer to someone of the speaker's acquaintance who died in a traffic accident, or to a figure the dream state cannot specify. “You” may be a personification of “Happenstance,” a chance circumstance that entails vivid details – images of a mailbox, artificial flowers, and birds. But the circumstance is given no narrative context. The “you” connotes an intuited “field” to which certain images are attracted and collect as appurtenances of a poem.

The image of the shoe abandoned on the macadam may be sufficient to indicate that the lines are about the loss of a person important to the speaker, but that information is not necessary for the poem to be a complete work. The final image is of birds that present one aspect when

ABOVE RIGHT **Susan Laughter Meyers** reading her 2013 James Applewhite Poetry Prize-winning poem “Rain” after the competition's final judge Fred Chappell presented the award (Read the winning poem in the print issue of *NCLR 2014*; in the meantime, to watch the award presentation and hear her read “Rain,” go to the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming [website](#).)

the light strikes them from one angle and of their very different appearance when the angle changes. The opposed effects, light and dark, are equally vivid inside the intuited space. The poem *happens* as an event that the space allows, or invites, to happen.

Maybe I can make my distinction a little clearer by using comparisons with another poem. A number of pieces in the book deal in fairly straightforward fashion with a particular state of mind or feeling. I read “Dear Heavy Heart,” “Shelling, Hunting Island,” “Why Does Rain Cast This Longsome Spell?,” “The Tilt That Stumbles Me,” and a few others as addressing almost directly the subject of mental and emotional depression.

In “Shelling, Hunting Island” the image of a woman sitting on a log by the ocean is presented in detail. She is seen as a symbol, almost as a personification, of depression. “Her thighs have each fallen away from the other, / as if emptiness is all / she can make of the morning.” Detailed description makes her as inescapable a part of the landscape as the log upon which she sits, an object of nature indifferent to the observations of the speaker. But then her significance is revealed: “She is the reason you came.” This revelation brings the speaker to some understanding of herself:

... You walk back by, invisible again,
you who have spotted nothing but broken shells,
pearled black and amber,
and this beached stranger, almost your twin,
this woman staring down the sea.

Whole libraries of implication are stored in these phrases: “invisible again,” “broken shells,” “beached stranger,” “staring down.” Three words, “almost your twin,” recall irresistibly Baudelaire’s despairing apostrophe to Ennui: “*mon semblable, – mon frere!*”¹

“Shelling, Hunting Island” is a fine, strong poem for anyone to be proud of. I would like to suggest, however, that it is a different *kind* of poem from “Dear Happenstance.” In “Shelling,” the subject matter would have been foreknown and the materials, including particularly the central symbol of the “beached” woman, were arranged during composition to dramatize the speaker’s moment of self-awareness. “Shelling” is less ambitious than “Happenstance”; it is an intact object, complete in itself. No other poem could have occupied the space reserved for it.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DONNA KAIN

“Dear Happenstance” is the first of a sequence of thirteen poems called “Letters Lost to Wind.” The title of each of the thirteen includes the adjective “dear” and atop the pages of twelve of them are running titles, printed with brackets and ellipses. For instance, the poem, “Dear Village of Mushrooms,” is affixed with “[Dear Thicket of Brambles . . .]” and “[Dear Fledged Hunger . . .].” What these running titles signify, I cannot say. They may have been discarded provisional titles for “Mushrooms,” or completed poems Meyers decided not to include, or attempts at poems that did not pan out.

Whatever the case, the inclusion of these titles implies the possibility of alternatives. Another poem different from “Mushrooms” might have taken its place in the field of expectancy and could have occupied the space on that page.

Well, only a deluded few of us are interested in abstruse theorizing. I only want to suggest that a number of Meyers’s poems are to be read in a certain, special way. They may be complete in themselves. Most of them are. But they also permit unstated relationships to some of the others – maybe to all of them.

The title of the volume is taken from the closure of “Dear Atamasco Lily”: “Dear red-stained lily. Rain lily. / Zephyr lily. Dear fairy lily. / Wild Easter lily. / My dear, dear stagger grass.” This poem begins by praising the attractive qualities of the flower: “the surprise of you / and your sweet repetition. // Your boldness . . . / . . . // your plenitude.” But “the music in

¹ The last line of Charles Baudelaire’s “To the Reader” in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857); translated by Robert Lowell: “you – hypocrite Reader – my double – my brother!”

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER, FORMER NC POET LAUREATE RECEIVES SECOND ROANOKE-CHOWAN POETRY AWARD

NCLR congratulates Kathryn Stripling Byer on her 2013 Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Award for her fifth collection of poetry, *Descent* (Louisiana State UP, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013). This is her second Roanoke-Chowan Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association: she also won in 1998 for *Black Shawl* (reviewed in *NCLR* 1999). In 2012, she received the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association's R. Hunt Parker Award for her significant contribution to North Carolina literature. In 2012, too, Byer was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame after serving from 2005 to 2009 as Poet Laureate of North Carolina.

See *NCLR* 1996, 2008 and 2010 for poetry by Byer, *NCLR* 2007 for Kristina L. Knotts's essay on Byer's *Wildwood Flower* (1992), *NCLR* 2008 for James Smith's interview with Byer, and *NCLR* 2011 for Byer's interview with George Ellison. And read a *short story* by this poet in *NCLR* 2010. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDERSON D. ORR

ABOVE Kathryn Stripling Byer, City Lights Bookstore, Sylva, NC, Nov. 2013

your name, [Atamasco, is] hiding your poison." The last two stanzas are shadowed by that secret poison: "You are danger, deep-throated cup."

Twenty of the poem titles contain that ambivalent "dear." "Dear Snakeskin," for instance, and "Dear Melancholy." The intention is ironic, of course. "Dear" may be used here almost in the same sense as when we say "Oh dear!" or "Dear me!" when the Scottie once again bites the postman. It is an unfortunate happenstance – but what can be done? In this sense, the repeated use of "dear" indicates a resigned, rueful, reluctant acceptance of the conditions of existence. It is akin to another habit of Southern speech. "Aunt Matilda is an alcoholic shoplifter," we might say, and then add, "*Bless her heart.*" Or, "Uncle Haywood is the most incompetent businessman and baseball coach I ever heard of, but I reckon *he does the best he knows how.*"

If my conjecture about "dear" is close to Meyers's intention, then we would not expect to find here

poems of ecstatic jubilation, of unbridled passion, or of darkest despair. No hymns to Apollo or Elvis, no heartbroken laments for Dylan Thomas or Adonais. The tonality throughout is in the middle range of an odd major key – the mixolydian mode, so to speak.

My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass stands, then, as an intimate book, speaking to and of some of the most customary of our feelings. But it is not a personal intimacy. The most important thing we know about the poet is that she shares the feelings most of us have most of the time. And she is able to observe them and to give them a voice with numerous shades of inflection and intonation.

She is, we might suggest, prepared to be unprogrammed. "Red Hills" begins with this line: "I come to these hills ready to be lost."

Richard Eberhart wrote that he would like to "live at the pitch that is near madness."² Susan Laughter Meyers chooses to live in a state where, always, poetry is prepared to happen. ■

² Richard Eberhart, "If I Could Only Live at the Pitch that Is Near Madness" (1977).

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST*To Catch Big Fish: Advice from the Poet***BY SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS**

Be a child (shy as minnows)
and your fish will always look big.

Dress for the occasion
and wear your lucky blue cap.

Some days you must face the world
with a serious demeanor. Stand ready.

Take up your pole only when hungry
or when redbreast nibble the sky.

Mimic the comic's timing. Keep
a line of tension and play.

If you count nine on the stringer,
talk them into being the best nine.

Word gets out. Do not disparage
the least catch.

With firm grip (or loose hand)
raise your fish up, up to better glisten.

Let the stringer's heft dip
its light and dark. See the crescent moon?

No matter the weather, keep an eye out
for everything fish. And not fish.

Dare to cast elsewhere, beyond
the lily pads and weeds in the shallows.

Who can read the wind?
Be a fish. School the waters every day.

SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS has been a finalist for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize all three years of the competition, and this year she won first place for her poem "Rain," which will be published in *NCLR 2014*, along with two more of her poems that were selected as finalists (watch her read the winning poem at the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming [website](#)). Her poetry has appeared in several issues of *NCLR*. After her award-winning first collection, *Keep and Give Away* (University of South Carolina Press, 2006), her second collection, *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass* (2013; reviewed in this issue), received the *Cider Press Review's* Editors Prize.

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST*No Ordinary Birdsong***BY SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS**

I know not to look near the driveway
among the loblollies in the cushion
of pine straw and the gossip of bees.
Perplexing, these hours without you.
I am no longer any self I recognize

despite my favorite faded t-shirt
with its *maps are for lovers*.
If this is a treasure hunt
I'm getting warm. Close and closer,
I can tell, feeling the steady breath

of your coaxing. You are almost
beside me, sure footed and smiling,
a bag of birdseed on your shoulder.
Almost beside me. Or is the found path
thick with vines? Ones that mimic

the spell of small, tight strawberries –
impassable vines, studded with thorns.
How the least scratch makes you bleed.
And lately looms the greater danger
should you, out alone somewhere,

stumble on a root and hit your head.
Ants and spiders, curious,
unalarmed – would climb the sprawl.
Disaster, nothing new to these woods.
Once we saw a hawk on a limb pluck



"Flower Song" for Mockingbird (mixed media, collage, assemblage, 21x18) by Ray Elmore

a cardinal, that ravishing drift of red.
Gone, too, a few trees to pine beetles.
Jasmine has spilled its spring bash
of stars over the fence and up
the limbs of a cedar. Do you still want me

to prune the camellias on the side acre?
I'm listening for your clear whistle
that sounds like no ordinary birdsong
either of us can identify.
Or for you to call my name.

Greenville, NC, resident **RAY ELMORE** is Professor Emeritus of ECU, where he taught for over thirty years. His art has previously appeared on the cover of *NCLR* 1994. He received his BFA at the Maryland Institute, College of Art and his MFA at the University of Michigan. His works appear in many private collections, as well as in the North Carolina Museum of Art; Cornell University; the Fendrick Gallery in Washington, DC; and the Greenville Museum of Art, which will present a one-man exhibit of his work in 2014.

GUESTS ON EARTH, ETERNAL STRANGERS, AND LOST SOULS

a review by John Hough, Jr.

**Lee Smith. *Guests on Earth:*
A Novel. Chapel Hill, NC:
Algonquin Books, 2013.**

In addition to three books of nonfiction, JOHN HOUGH, JR. is the author of five novels, including *The Last Summer* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), *Seen the Glory: A Novel of the Battle of Gettysburg* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), and *Little Bighorn* (Arcade, 2014). In 2010, he won the W. Y. Boyd Literary Award for Excellence in Military Fiction.

LEE SMITH is Professor Emeritus of English at NC State University. She has written twelve novels, including *On Agate Hill* (Algonquin Books 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007) and four collections of short stories, including *News of the Spirit* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997; reviewed in *NCLR* 1998). Her novel *Oral History* (G.P. Putnam's, 1983) is discussed in essays in *NCLR* 1998 and 2008. See the print issue of *NCLR* 2014 for an essay on her novel *The Last Girls* (Algonquin Books, 2003).

The title of Lee Smith's somber and ruminative new novel is from a letter F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to his daughter Scottie in 1940: "[T]he insane are always mere guests on earth, eternal strangers carrying around broken decalogues that they cannot read."¹ Fitzgerald was referring, of course, to his wife, Zelda, the Southern belle whose fame and glamor had blazed as brightly as his and whose descent was as inexorable and, in the end, as pathetic. Scott died at the age of forty-four, alcoholic and broken. Zelda burned to death four years later in the terrible and mysterious fire at Highland Hospital for the insane in Asheville, NC. She was forty-eight and had been in and out of Highland for twelve years.

Highland Hospital during Zelda's intermittent residency is the setting of *Guests on Earth*,² with a brief prelude in New Orleans and a six-year interlude in a miscellany of venues that Smith folds into thirty pages. The narrator is Evalina Toussaint, daughter of a club dancer and high-end prostitute. Evalina is a born pianist and a loner, "a slight ratty sort of child with flyaway hair and enormous pale eyes that made people uncomfortable" (4). Her mother, Louise, dotes on her and fashions a pleasant, if unconventional, life for the two of them.

Enter Arthur Graves, cotton broker, family man, munificent client of Louise Toussaint. Mr. Graves, it turns out, is unstable, often absent, and by turns abusive and abjectly contrite. Louise has his child, who becomes ill and dies. The despair that lurks around every corner of this novel comes calling, and Louise slits her wrists. Mr. Graves takes Evalina into his home where his haughty wife and sullen daughter realize why this introverted

adolescent has come to live with them and treat her accordingly. Evalina, seized by a willfulness she doesn't understand, refuses to eat and burns herself with matches. Eventually, she is sent to Highland Hospital, courtesy of Mr. Graves.

"We shall give you a place to grow up a bit, and keep you safe," the director greets Evalina (21). Highland, in Smith's telling, is enlightened for its time and humane by any standard. Lobotomies are never performed, no small exception to the norm in those days, and the convulsion and shock therapies are, by contrast, "the most effective and humane treatment for mental illness found in America at that time" (99). The Highland grounds are green and beautiful, the staff compassionate, sensible. No wonder Zelda Fitzgerald returns here willingly with each new bout of depression.

And she is Highland's star patient. Her thoughts may be impenetrable, her behavior often capricious and baffling, but she has a queenly aura that draws people to her, even in her episodes of willfulness and pique. Evalina is captivated by this lovely and mercurial woman, who seems to mistake her for her daughter.

"This is not my story," Evalina advises us, "in the sense that Mr. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was not Nick Carraway's story, either – yet Nick Carraway is the narrator, is he not? Is any story not always the narrator's story, in the end?" (3). One could argue the point, but in any case Evalina is the heroine of *Guests On Earth*, even if she doesn't know it. Mrs. Fitzgerald's role is catalytic, inspirational; her "extraordinary beauty, that quality of intense and shimmering life that animated her when she was truly 'on'" awakens something

¹ Matthew J. Bruccoli, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters* (New York: Scribner, 1994) 475.

² See *NCLR* 2009 for Annette J. Saddik's essay on Tennessee Williams's play *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, another literary work inspired by Zelda Fitzgerald's time at Highland Hospital.



COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, PACK MEMORIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASHEVILLE, NC

vital in both patients and staff (57). The pulse of the place quickens when she is here.

Smith's heroines, always wonderful, tend to be an endearing blend of rectitude and impetuosity – Ivy Rowe, the spirited coal miner's wife in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988); Katie Cocker, the brassy country singer in *The Devil's Dream* (1992); Florida Grace Shepherd, the preacher's wife who runs away with the house painter in *Saving Grace* (1995), all spring to mind – and Evalina, in her diffident way, fits this pattern. Where she differs from her earthier predecessors is in her innocence. Voice is character, as Smith artfully demonstrates, and Evalina's voice is quaint, measured, touched with wonder: "My mother, Louise Toussaint, was beautiful, and kind, and I loved her with all my heart" (4). Evalina will love and be loved by three men, and their disparateness puzzles her:

"[T]here is no telling whom we may love, or when or why, or vice versa – for love is the greatest mystery of all" (69).

Evalina is released from Highland in her late teens, apparently cured, but innocence is vulnerability as well as wonderment, and the world overwhelms her, chasing her back to Highland, stricken and clinically depressed. She is treated, recovers, settles in. On a winter evening with snow blanketing the ground, impulse snatches her out into the moonlight to initiate a tryst with the cheerful, enigmatic simpleton Pan Otto, who works in the greenhouse and lives like some mythological being in a cave in the woods. She is courted by a staff psychiatrist, an unworldly longtime bachelor who adores her. And, when opportunity comes knocking, Evalina's impetuosity gives way to resignation, and she declines to leave Highland for an adventurous life making music. "I had no choice," she says. "I couldn't leave them now, my people, my kind" (296).

The years creep along unremarked, "for in the world of the mad, time is not a continuum but a fluid, shifting place, relative to nothing" (137). Evalina teaches piano, more a staff member now than a patient. Mrs. Fitzgerald choreographs a dance recital planned for Mardi Gras, with Evalina to provide the music. At rehearsals Zelda is driven, obsessive, demanding – thrillingly and almost frighteningly alive. Then the fire.

Guests On Earth takes on the question of the meaning of insanity, which is slippery and maybe unanswerable. What compulsion or incapacity makes one a "guest

on earth" and not a denizen, like the protagonists in Smith's previous fiction, who are so deeply engaged in the real world's grind and joys, its good luck and bad, its stunning reversals? "Illness infantilizes everybody," Evalina says, "even if it doesn't paralyze or wreck us forever. It holds us back, it keeps us from being adults" (219).

Zelda, says the kindly nurse, Mrs. Hodges, in her Scottish burr, "was too smart, too or-i-gin-al. She was too wild and she drank too much and she didn't fit in" (148). Guests on earth don't fit in, and that inability – or unwillingness – is their elusive mystery. Evalina's friend Dixie Calhoun, an Atlanta debutante with every advantage – beauty, wealth, a loving family – suffers immobilizing depressions. Jinx Feeney, liar and petty thief, was raped by a swinish uncle and ran off with a black man, an enormity in the 1940s South; she comes to Highland as a refugee after stints in reform school and the county jail. Every "guest" at Highland has his or her own story, and all the stories are sad ones.

Lee Smith has come down from the hollers and grassy balds of Appalachia, away from the vibrant, haunted, tradition-rich South that has been her stage for a run of extraordinary novels. There's some risk in this, but Smith is too good a storyteller to lose the gamble. *Guests On Earth* is a portrait of the forever homeless, those lost souls who, for whatever reason, have no landscape – no Hoot Owl Holler, no Agate Hill, no Scrabble Creek – that embraces and shapes and defines them. This is a poignant novel by one of our very best writers. ■

ATTEND THE TALES OF ALLAN GURGANUS

a review by Gary Richards

Allan Gurganus. *Local Souls*.
New York: Liveright Publishing
Corporation, 2013.

GARY RICHARDS, the author of *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936–1961* (Louisiana State University Press, 2005), is chair of the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication at the University of Mary Washington. See *NCLR* 2008 for his article on Allan Gurganus's *Plays Well with Others* and *NCLR* 2009 for his interview with and article on Jim Grimsley.

Read an essay by **ALLAN GURGANUS** in *NCLR* 2007, and hear his short story "Nativity, Caucasian" (from his collection *White People* [Knopf, 1991]), on *NCLR*'s *Mirth Carolina Laugh-Tracks*, a dual CD set of humorous readings and music that accompanied the 2008 humor issue. His novel *Plays Well With Others* (Knopf, 1997) is reviewed in *NCLR* 2000, and his novellas *The Practical Heart* (Knopf, 2001) are reviewed in *NCLR* 2003. And in the 2014 print issue, read Zackary Vernon's essay on Gurganus's annual Halloween haunted house "horror show."

RIGHT Allan Gurganus (right) on stage with novelist (and Gurganus's former teacher) John Irving at Barnes and Noble in New York City, 21 Oct. 2013

The publishing team at Liveright seems intent to link *Local Souls*, Allan Gurganus's superb new collection of novellas, to *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, his best-selling sprawling comic novel of 1989. This move is expected, given that both books take Falls, NC, population 6,803, as their setting and share in the ongoing literary interrogation of small-town Southern existence – a rich project that has long captivated readers. Mark Twain's St. Petersburg, William Faulkner's Jefferson, and Harper Lee's Maycomb all come readily to mind here, as do sites that share mythic North Carolina, such as T.R. Pearson's Neely and Randall Kenan's Tims Creek. And yet, save for a passing mention or two of the historical marker on Lucy Marsden's house (and the first novella's suspiciously Gurganus-esque narrator who has just finished a sprawling novel about the Civil War), *Local Souls* stands apart largely from *Confederate Widow*. The Falls of the new collection looks forward into the twenty-first century rather than backward into the nineteenth, as *Confederate Widow* does. Moreover, the novellas feature darker tones, motifs, and humor, and, even when the collection is considered in its entirety, it is far briefer than the earlier novel.

Therefore, instead of readers bringing with them to *Local Souls* a requisite familiarity with *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, they might productively recall the specifics of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's darkly comic Grand Guignol musical of 1979. Gurganus conspicuously begins "Fear Not," the first of the three loosely linked novellas, with the citizens of Falls – "the Fallen," as they are known –

attending the local high school's production of this musical thriller. He even includes it in his hand-drawn map of the town, placing the musical's title in parentheses below the label for Falls High. Chock full of reappearance and revenge leavened with cannibalism, *Sweeney Todd* allows Gurganus, with one deft, extended allusion, to prepare his readers for the considerable demands and delights that lie ahead in *Local Souls*.

Perhaps most significant, engrossing melodrama saturates the novellas as much as it does the musical. Just as *Sweeney Todd* features a procession of persons who have their throats slit by the crazed barber and are baked into meat pies before a final orgy of blood and coincidence, *Local Souls* proudly parades its excess. In "Fear Not," a dashing young banker dies in a boating accident – "How clean and effective: one stainless-steel propeller decapitates the smiling water-skier" (24). Also, a woman reunites with the son taken from her at birth and seemingly becomes his surrogate wife now that he has reached adulthood, allowing the narrator to conclude, "Same events that overwhelm Greek dramas live on side streets paying taxes in our smallest towns" (86). In "Saints Have Mothers," a cloyingly perfect high school girl reportedly drowns while do-gooding in Africa but returns to Falls in time to disrupt her own funeral. And in "Decoy," the last, longest, and most intricate of the novellas, a genetic defect dooms four generations of men and their hearts to lives of anxiety, an eccentric veteran of World War I wills away a small fortune in payment for honest carpentry and banana pudding, and a hurricane pushes the River Lithium out of its banks with devastating effects.

The flood swamps the toniest neighborhood in Falls, strands its residents atop roofs, and irrevocably adds the town's beloved retired doctor, save for one crucial fleeting moment of lucidity as his friend approaches death.

However, like Sondheim's lyrics, Gurganus's prose simultaneously tempers and enriches the energy and sweep of this melodrama by rendering its moments of crisis knowable through the detail and truth of intimate psychological insight. In *Sweeney Todd*, it is revenge that most preoccupies Sondheim; in *Local Souls*, it is envy and jealousy that most concern Gurganus, especially in the last two novellas. "Saints Have Mothers," for instance, anatomizes the competitive jealousy that self-martyred narrator Jean Mulray feels toward her over-achieving daughter. Likewise, "Decoy" centralizes the gnawing envy that tempers the affection Bill Mabry feels toward his too-perfect doctor, a brilliantly sketched amalgam of Atticus Finch and Dorian Gray. Even "Fear Not" begins with the narrator eyeing the attractive young couple who sit next to him at *Sweeney Todd*, envious of their seeming perfection.

But Gurganus's eye for detail, showcased in virtually every word he has written over his career, extends well beyond the psychological and into the all-too-physical. He is perhaps at his finest with the details of Falls's watery devastation: the compulsion to mark September 15 – in much the same way we mark September 11 – forever as "Some One Night When Everything Changes" (296); the urgent need to place blame, for instance, on a government that "should've known and warned us" (297); the bizarre humor that crops up amid

disaster; the family Bibles obsessively re-claimed from murky flood waters; and the mushroom camaraderie in which you "hugged your most casual friend, and why? because they'd also survived" (299).

As always, Gurganus's trademark wordplay complements his sharp eye for detail, and his readers will again encounter in *Local Souls* the delight in and virtuosity with language that rivals Sondheim's. Sly comic repetition abounds – "Parenthood is already a standing-order standing-ovation" (19) – and just-as-fresh similes pile up like ripe July tomatoes. Such treats include "traffic signals swinging like the severed heads of French aristocrats" (21), "red hair looking like his one cash crop" (201), and tobacco plants "rising silent, freakish as the National Basketball Association" (216), to name but a few.

Finally, beyond this common structure and linguistic adeptness, *Sweeney Todd* and *Local Souls* share a number of social concerns, including anxiety about aging, profound skepticism about middle-class economic and social power, and the unexpectedness with which desire, fleeting or otherwise, can erupt. But perhaps the most prominent of these

concerns is the social politics of a seemingly lost person's return. For Sondheim and Wheeler, Benjamin Barker's return as Sweeney Todd is doomed to bloody failure. Gurganus, however, depicts returns more ambivalently. On the one hand, "Saints Have Mothers" darkly depicts Caitlin Mulray's resurrection to be as traumatic as her drowning, and the story ends with the mother-daughter relationship in anxious limbo, no matter what consolation Jean may find in recited prayer. On the other hand, "Decoy" features Doc Roper's triumphant resuscitation of twin boys who then lead charmed lives, even down to orchestrating a Christ-like feeding of the multitudes after the Lithium floods. But the novella also limns a more problematic second life for Roper when he takes up carving exquisite duck decoys and alienates himself from the rest of Falls. Only "Fear Not" is forthrightly optimistic, with the returned son radically reconfiguring the family for the better.

There is, however, no ambivalence about Allan Gurganus's own masterful return to the literary limelight after a decade. In all their Gothic excess and meticulous craftsmanship, the novellas of *Local Souls* stand as triumphs. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM MENAKER

THE END BEFORE THE END

a review by Barbara Bennett

**Jill McCorkle. *Life After Life*.
Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin
Books, 2013.**

See *NCLR 2006* for BARBARA BENNETT's essay on Jill McCorkle's novel *Ferris Beach*. Bennett's books include *Comic Visions*, *Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998), *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), *Soul of a Lion: One Woman's Quest to Rescue Africa's Wildlife Refugees* (National Geographic, 2010), and *Sheherazade's Daughters: The Power of Storytelling in Ecofeminist Change* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).

Read a short story by JILL MCCORKLE in *NCLR 1997* and hear the author read her story "Your Husband Is Cheating on Us," available on *NCLR's Mirth Carolina Laugh-Tracks*, a dual CD set of humorous readings and music that accompanied the 2008 humor issue. *Life After Life* is McCorkle's tenth novel. She is also the author of four collections of short stories.

ABOVE RIGHT Jill McCorkle with her mentor, Louis Rubin (1923–2013), in Hillsborough, NC, July 2013

Writing a death has to be one of the hardest scenes to create. I've had to do it a couple of times in a nonfiction work, and it was, to put it mildly, tricky. You can't be too sentimental or your audience will feel emotionally manipulated. On the other hand, it is *death* we're talking about, so too much distance would seem insensitive. It's a tightrope walk.

Enter Jill McCorkle, who by my own count, describes no less than twelve deaths in her newest book, *Life After Life*. Maudlin – never. Insensitive – certainly not. In fact, most of her deaths are quite beautiful. Take this, for instance, in her description of Curtis Edward Lamb's dying vision: "The Ferris wheel is all she can talk about and he has promised her that he will go with her, turning and turning and turning, the lights so bright and buzzing in the distance he has to look away" (78). Or this one about Lois Flowers: "if she stands perfectly still, she can feel the building sway, the whole city below her is so bright and beautiful it leaves her lightheaded and she feels the building sway, back and forth like a song, like a slow and easy swaying song" (13). Each of these characters is at the place beyond belief, somewhere between life and death, seeing both places at once, and it is a spot the rest of us can hardly imagine.

McCorkle, though, seems to have a visionary ability to position us there, along with each character.

Why so many deaths? The novel is set mainly at a retirement home called Pine Haven Estates in Fulton, NC. (Fulton is also the setting of two of McCorkle's previous novels, *Ferris Beach* [1990] and *Carolina Moon* [1996], both of which have characters who are referred to in this novel – a little treat for long-term McCorkle fans.) One of

the main characters is Joanna, a hospice worker who sees innumerable characters through their last journey in this life. Each transition from life to death seems real, is somehow unique and monumental. Despite the number of deaths, each one feels important, and McCorkle never lets us forget that we are reading about *people* and *lives* that are significant in both their living and their dying.

In the novel, we hear many voices, and it often seems as if we're being told a story while we sip lemonade on the back porch. Joanna's voice – and the other seventeen voices the author uses in this complex novel – represents McCorkle's authorship at its most mature. She has taken on multiple points of view before – in *July 7th* (1984), *Tending to Virginia* (1987), and *Carolina Moon* – but never before has she been quite this convincing. This book gives us McCorkle at her most sure, a writer who knows what she's doing and does it brilliantly.

As with several of McCorkle's earlier novels, the plotline of *Life After Life* is hard to describe. With the exception of *Ferris Beach*, McCorkle has resisted the traditional order of exposition, climax, and denouement. Instead she builds a spider's web with plot and subplots intersecting, weaving, and shooting off in unexpected ways, creating an intricate and complex story that defies easy summary. She creates a world like the real one we live in – where nothing is simple and people's lives connect and disconnect sometimes with effect, and sometimes without our ever knowing it.

Also, like her earlier novels, she circles back around to her favorite themes and conflicts: success and failure, love and loss, truth and illusion. We watch while



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM RANKIN

characters think they are making good choices, stumble, reconsider, and finally resign themselves to the fact that life is messy, complicated, and hard to predict. In the end they do the best they can and hope to be forgiven for their inevitable mistakes – like Stanley, who decides that feigning dementia will be the quickest way to force his son to get on with his life; or C.J., single mother to a baby fathered by her married lover, who waits patiently for him to choose her over his wife. Both these decisions are made with the best intent – though the reader can see the folly – and

neither situation turns out as one might expect.

Lives are rarely pretty in McCorkle's fiction, but they are real. Each character's life feels full, and yet, the losses are tangible. There's Abby, a young girl who has lost her dog – and we fear her mother has had a devious hand in it. And there's Rachel, who has lost both her husband and a lover named Joe – her one indiscretion in life – a man who may or may not have been her only true love. In this book, it seems that everyone has lost something, and everyone tries to believe anything but the truth. Illusion is so much more comfortable.

McCorkle shows us that for most of these people, living out the last phase of their lives – the last of many everyone spirals through – is still *living*, and clinging to an outdated identity without embracing who we are at the end is losing out on precious opportunities. It is still a life, though maybe not what we've had before or what we think we want. Like Ben, the struggling magician in the novel who can make a girl disappear, many of these characters

feel invisible in their world, on the margins of society, but their lives are important and shouldn't be forgotten just because they are old or ordinary.

My favorite character is Sadie, a woman who is carefully and gracefully moving toward the end. In the meantime she creates pictures for other residents, inserting them into scenes they may not have ever experienced – an old-fashioned way of photoshopping – by cutting and pasting photographs together. Through these pictures, she offers people additional lives, different worlds, alternative realities. And in their less than perfect condition, characters line up for the illusion.

It feels like McCorkle has been moving toward this book for a long time. Watching her own father die in the 1990s and now seeing her mother age in a retirement home, McCorkle is perhaps envisioning her own future, as well as all of ours, and showing us that our final chapter may hold what we can't imagine and may least expect. Most of her characters find that in the end before the end, life after life may show us truths we could never see before. ■

2013 NC AAUW AWARD

Kelly Starling Lyons received the 2013 North Carolina American Association of University Women Award for Juvenile Literature for *Tea Cakes for Tosh*, published by G.P. Putnam's, which also published two other picture books by her in 2012: *Ellen's Broom* and *Hope's Gift*. Just Us Books published Lyons's first book, a chapter book called *NEATE: Eddie's Ordeal* (2004), and another picture book, *One Million Men and Me* (2007). Lyons is a native of Pittsburg, PA, but has family roots in Rockingham County and found the inspiration for some of her books in North Carolina. She has lived in Raleigh now for a dozen years. ■



COURTESY OF KELLY STARLING LYONS



COURTESY OF KELLY STARLING LYONS

“THE CLOCK IS TICKING”

a review by
Anna Dunlap Higgins

Robert Inman. *The Governor's Lady*. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2013.

ANNA DUNLAP HIGGINS, Professor of English at Gordon State College in Barnesville, GA, grew up in Blowing Rock, NC. She has written several essays for *NCLR* based on her interviews with North Carolina writers, including, in the 2002 issue, Robert Inman.

ROBERT INMAN received his BA in Radio and Television and his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama. He is the author of five novels, a collection of nonfiction, seven stage plays, and six screenplays. After working and living in Charlotte, NC, for years, he currently lives in Conover and Boone, NC.

Near the end of Robert Inman's most recent novel *The Governor's Lady*, a “crusty curmudgeon” of a reporter announces, “The clock is ticking” (321).^{*} Perhaps it's a line Inman himself said in his old days as press secretary for Governor Albert Brewer of Alabama; or when he covered national, state, and local politics for a Montgomery, AL, television station; or, later, as he prepared to anchor the evening news for WBTV in Charlotte, NC. I've never worked for a governor, a newspaper, or a newsroom, but I have worked for a member of Congress. I recall late nights in Washington, Congress in session, members of the press crowded together in little herds along the route I took from the Cannon House Office Building to the grounds of the Capitol. In my hands were the papers my member of Congress called for me to fetch, scribbled notes outlining favors received and owed that he needed quickly because *the clock was ticking*.

Some of this same heart-pounding intensity can be felt in *The Governor's Lady*. Robert Inman is well known as a craftsman of novels, screenplays, stage plays, and essays that tend to focus on Southern towns and local folks. There is a slow, sweet-tea kind of atmosphere to all he has written, even when the human story is intense. With this newest work, Inman has created a fast-paced novel of political intrigue, suspense, and mystery more akin to a John Grisham work than to Inman's own canon. From the opening paragraphs until the final page, there is a sense of urgency, a breathless race to uncover

mysteries and resolve debts. There seems with each page the possibility that this classically structured five-part novel may well end with as many dead bodies as one of Shakespeare's tragedies. In *The Governor's Lady*, a clock does indeed seem to be always ticking.

Part One begins in *medias res*, on the inauguration day of the protagonist, soon-to-be woman governor Cooper Lanier. It's pre-dawn; the forecast is predicting snow. Cooper's long-estranged mother, Mickey Spainhour, lies dying in a hospital bed, demanding whiskey, cigarettes, and access to news coverage. Local and state television crews jostle for a glimpse of the new governor, or, better yet, of her presidential candidate husband, Pickett Lanier, the former governor. The idea for this intriguing couple's story was actually planted in the author's mind years ago when the Alabama legislature turned down Governor George Wallace's request to run for a second term. The not-to-be-defeated Wallace simply “ran his wife,” as Inman puts it. Although Lurleen Wallace won out over a dozen men – in a race with no runoff – “there was no doubt that [George] was still in charge” during her stint in office. Likewise, long before the novel's first day is over, there is the sense that Pickett Lanier has a scheme similar to George Wallace's, though this puppeteer's plans seem more ominously secret, more darkly sinister. From this first day, however, readers can tell that Cooper Lanier is no Lurleen Wallace.

By early morning, day two of the novel, the skies have become heavy, the local news rooms still

^{*} The phrase “crusty curmudgeon” is from the reviewer's phone interview with the author, on 11 Sept. 2013. All quotes not otherwise attributed are from this interview.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL COSTON



buzzing with snow speculation, and the pace of the novel moves more and more quickly. Out of a mere second's worth of introduction the previous day comes Inman's crusty curmudgeon, Wheeler Kincaid. It is Kincaid who pushes Cooper to investigate the "understanding" she and her husband made regarding the governorship because Kincaid suspects that she is being lied to; it is he who warns her that someone is out to destroy her; and it is he who darkly cautions her that she is not "bulletproof" (54). Inman's brilliance here is his pacing, the dark hints creating a sense of urgency, the need for a reader to know what it is that Cooper doesn't know.

By midafternoon of day two, the snow is no longer just a threat, and within hours both snow and wrecks are building up. State workers are sent home, and a command center is set up – both done secretly, without the new governor's knowledge. Here, at about the twenty-fourth hour of her tenure, Cooper finds herself being driven through a blizzard in a Humvee "commandeered" from

the National Guard by Ezra Barclay (70), a character that whet my appetite for a viewing of *Die Hard*.

Inman understands his art, and so in both Part Two and Part Four – with the reader on the seat's edge waiting to get out of the political wheeling and dealing dark – he employs flashback to flesh out the main

characters. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Inman's newest novel (and the part that recalls the familiar artistry of his other novels) is his depiction of Cooper Lanier, her relationships, and the journey she has taken to arrive at the state's most powerful office. Part Two follows the girl and young woman, the deeply lonely Cooper who hates politics, "the way it [takes] people from her . . . the ones she should have been able to depend on" (19).

In this section, we look closely at Cleve Spainhour, the loving father who had a "deep respect for the office he . . . held" (141), a two-term governor whose seemingly effortless political savvy calls to Cooper's mind a "ship's captain with an easy hand on the tiller" (70). Cooper has only pride for her father; he is her role model in the world of politics. The case is vastly different with the mother-daughter relationship Inman crafted for the novel. Mickey Spainhour, the invisible force behind large numbers of Southern politicians, is "the consummate political operative" (42), a woman with the ability to see

which potential political players will rise to the occasion or "flame out" (211). In some ways, Mickey is old school, a behind-the-scenes Lurleen Wallace-era "Governor's lady," but this woman has real power. In describing the preliminaries of the past, Mickey says, "me and the boys got together in a hotel room and drank whiskey and smoked cigars and decided who to nominate" (6). Cooper acknowledges both parents in her "political pedigree" (42). However, she also blames her mother for a lifetime of hurts.

Despite her girlhood feelings about "politics as thief" (245), the college-aged Cooper of Part Two seems poised to begin a life like her mother's, a "governor's lady" to her first love, Woodrow Bannister. But Cooper rebels and chooses Pickett Lanier, a guitar-playing, laid-back professor she thinks will take her far from the world of politics. Inman brilliantly traces this couple's early sultry days – in prose that proves he can steam up the pages. Pickett sees Cooper, wants Cooper, and goes after Cooper. For her part, Cooper tries to play it cool with this "*Cheeky bastard*" (130) who pursues her even though he knows she is in a relationship with another man, but she finds herself hooked (as future voters will be) by this sexy, smooth man.

In Part Four, Inman skillfully traces the curves and bumps of this couple's road, the ways in which the world of politics changes their relationship, and the route that eventually carries Cooper herself into the political arena. Even though the young Cooper believed that freedom would come

from a relationship with an earthy, hot man, Kincaid later teaches her that for a politician – which she is, at heart – real freedom is entering politics without a “shitload of baggage” (207). As governor, Cooper could have the freedom to get things done because her position is not built on a tower of favors and bribes. She could have this freedom, as long as the clock does not run out.

In Parts Three and Five, Inman resumes the fast-paced action, “roads impassable, power lines down, motorists stranded, law-enforcement agencies at a standstill” (175). A school bus with its driver and three children is missing. And more and more dark

secrets are revealed, more and more threatening political moves made. Part Five, the final act, maintains the novel’s suspenseful pace with Cooper’s predawn escape from security’s ever-watchful eyes. The back-country road she takes that morning reaches deep into the dark woods of political intrigue. All the while, Cooper’s mother inches closer to death. Cooper’s dear father, who had confessed to her on his deathbed, “Sometimes, I think we’re the sum of our regrets” (139), had then asked her to mend her relationship with Mickey so that the daughter could one day die without that regret. But will there be time? The novel’s final chapters

race toward the point at which the daughter and dying mother cannot heal from an “unspeakable, unforgiveable decision” (316).

Robert Inman considers *The Governor’s Lady* “quite a departure” from his previous work, which is certainly accurate. While we do still see the brilliantly etched human relationships we’ve come to expect from this North Carolina writer, the scope is both Southern and national, and the pace is definitely new for the author. This novel is a beautifully crafted work that teaches us about the complexities of humans and politics – never letting us forget the ticking clock. ■

SAMM-ART WILLIAMS IS THE FOURTH RECIPIENT OF THE HARDEE RIVES DRAMATIC ARTS AWARD

*excerpted and adapted from the award presentation remarks by Lorraine Hale Robinson
North Carolina Literary and Historical Association Meeting, Raleigh, 22 November 2013*

The multi-talented Samm-Art Williams was born in Philadelphia but grew up in Burgaw, NC. After graduating from Morgan State College in Baltimore, he studied with the Freedom Theater’s Acting Workshop in Philadelphia. In 1974, he became a member of the Negro Ensemble Company Playwright’s Workshop and performed in such plays as *The First Breeze of Summer* (1975) and *Eden* (1975), and the company produced several of his own works, including *Welcome to Black River* (1975), *A Love Play* (1976), and *The Sixteenth Round* (1980). Williams’s award-winning play *Home* (1980) was first mounted by the Negro Ensemble Company, then moved to Broadway, and went on to tour internationally.

Williams’s work has been produced by the Billie Holiday Theatre, the Spoleto Festival, the Bulgaria Arts Festival 1983, the Caribbean Arts Festival, and the American Festival (in London, England). He has received critical acclaim for his adaptation of the Anton Chekhov story “Eve of the Trial,” transferring action

to 1919 Baton Rouge, LA, and incorporating richly evocative local color elements. Williams also enjoyed a successful career in television, writing, acting and eventually producing. He has been nominated for two Emmy awards.

Read more about the 2013 recipient of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association’s Hardee-Rives Dramatic Arts Award in “Writing His Way Home: An Interview with Samm-Art Williams,” by Laura Grace Patillo, published in *NCLR* 2007. ■

RIGHT VerShaun Terry in a 1999 production of Samm-Art Williams’s play *Home* by the Department of Visual and Performing Arts Theatre Program, directed by Frankie Day at NC A&T University, Paul Robeson Theatre, Greensboro, NC



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY RICHARDSON,
COURTESY OF DONNA BRADBY, NC ART UNIVERSITY



COURTESY OF GALLERY C

BottleCap (painted metal, 29x13) by Vollis Simpson

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST

Blue Bottles

BY GLENIS GALE REDMOND

See them limbs out yonder?
They can bear the brunt.

Branch the blue bottles there.
Better to house a demon in glass.

Siphon hate. Draw the haints.
Never anoint their stir with worry.

'Cause they walk this world
to and fro like tired don't exist.

Better to offer trouble a place to dwell,
because everythang is drawn to the light

'specially evil.

VOLLIS SIMPSON (1919–2013) spent his entire life in Lucama, NC. His fascination with wind-powered machines began in World War II. Stationed with the Army Air Corps in Saipan, he built a wind-powered washing machine out of junked parts of a B52 bomber. After the war, Simpson opened a machinery repair shop and built devices for his house-moving business. Upon retirement, he began creating large-scale (some as tall and wide as 60 feet) wind-powered towers built from parts leftover in his repair shop and found at the junkyard. These towers were installed on the family farm. Recognition soon followed, and his works were hailed as visionary examples of folk or outsider art. Art critics likened his whimsical creations to children's toys known as whirligigs. His works have been exhibited in such venues as the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan, and the North Carolina Museum of Art. Simpson was commissioned by the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta to create works that remain on permanent display at the site. In 2011, Simpson received the North Carolina Award, the state's highest civilian honor, and in 2013, his whirligig creations were designated the official folk art of the state of North Carolina. Also in 2013, the city of Wilson, NC, opened the [Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park](#). See more of his work at [Gallery C](#) in Raleigh, NC.

GLENIS GALE REDMOND, a native of Greenville, SC, graduated from Erskine College in Due West, SC, and received her MFA in poetry from Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, NC. She is a Cave Canem Fellow, and she has received a North Carolina Literary Fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council. She has also served as a trustee on the North Carolina Humanities Council. Her latest poetry collection is *Under the Sun* (Main Street Rag, 2008). See her poem "Carolinese," a semifinalist in the 2011 Applewhite competition, in *NCLR 2012* and her poem "Blanc," another finalist in the 2013 Applewhite competition, in *NCLR 2014*.

“THE CRUEL RADIANCE OF WHAT IS”

a review by Jim Clark

Jeffery Beam. *The Broken Flower: Poems*. Nottingham, England: Skysill Press, 2012.

Keith Flynn. *Colony Collapse Disorder*. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, 2013.

JIM CLARK is Chair of the Department of English, Modern Languages, Religion, and Philosophy at Barton College in Wilson, NC. He received his MFA from UNC-Greensboro and his PhD from the University of Denver. He is the author of two books of poems, *Dancing on Canaan's Ruins* (Eternal Delight Productions, 1997) and *Handiwork* (St. Andrews Press, 1998), and has also released two solo CDs, *Buried Land* (Eternal Delight Productions, 2003) and *The Service of Song* (Eternal Delight Productions, 2010).

In *Colony Collapse Disorder* and *The Broken Flower* we have strong, assured collections from two of North Carolina's most original poetic voices, Keith Flynn and Jeffery Beam. In addition to being fine poets and careful craftsmen, Flynn and Beam are also tireless proponents of the art of poetry and generous advocates for their fellow poets, especially those who reside in North Carolina. It is a testament to the diversity of poetry in the writer-rich state of North Carolina that these two poets, while most assuredly native sons, are neither what one might expect to find if one were to go looking for an exemplar of a "Southern poet."

Though Flynn's and Beam's poetic voices are distinctive and quite dissimilar, their new collections share some intriguing similarities. For one, both men are musicians – they speak often of music; critics, reviewers, and fellow poets reach for words like "singer," "song," "blues," and "gospel" to describe them; and in person, they are just as likely to sing a poem as say it. So the spirit of music informs and inhabits these poems. They are both "regional" poets, in the sense that they continue to live in a specific place (the mountains of Western North Carolina for Flynn, and the Piedmont for Beam) and vigorously enact Wendell Berry's elegant definition of regionalism, "local life aware of itself";¹ and yet the span of their poetry is markedly global. Indeed, Flynn's book is described on its back cover as "a geopolitical abecedarium," and Beam's poems borrow inspiration from Rilke, the French

Cathars, and a Japanese woodcut and transport us to France and Italy. And finally and perhaps most important, both books are artfully and elegantly structured. Flynn lays out the organizational pattern of his collection in his "Preface," describing it as "a place-based abecedarium in which each letter of the alphabet is represented by two places, cities, countries, or regions whose name corresponds to the letter and its assigned poem." Also alluded to as structural referents are the beehive, the Mayan calendar, and the fifty-two weeks of the year (given that there are twenty-six letters of the alphabet, each represented by two poems, for a total of fifty-two poems). Beam's book contains numerous epigraphs, a "Poem of Preface," followed by two titled sections, and ends with a witty, autobiographical prose "Post-script." Both books are also well-made artifacts, Flynn's from the San Antonio, Texas-based Wings Press (a new press for him) and Beam's from Skysill Press, in Nottingham, England.

Many of us are by now familiar with the phrase "colony collapse disorder," and have some interest in the continuing fate of the world's honeybee population, which has been precipitously declining since at least 2006. As the biosphere's primary pollinators, honeybees are absolutely essential to the food chain, and thus essential to our survival. In his preface to his book ***Colony Collapse Disorder*, Keith Flynn** chronicles this "terrifying apocalypse" of honeybees and concludes,

¹ Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) 65.



"It occurred to me that this was an ideal metaphor for our current global circumstance." As Flynn posits, the human race, too, is suffering its own apocalypse, though it might more aptly be called "colonial collapse disorder." Flynn continues, "As the great colonial powers slowly topple, they have left in their wake a host of impossible situations." Heady stuff, no doubt, and his willingness to tackle such concerns in poems links Flynn to the scathing sociocultural critiques of high modernism like T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," and perhaps later works like Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," and even songs by Bob Dylan, such as "Desolation Row," "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," and "Gates of Eden."

While Flynn's style could fairly be described as "postmodern" or "avant garde," his rootedness in the rural, agrarian world of Western North Carolina, as well as his talent as a musician, make his challenging, experimental poems somehow more approachable,



salient, and enjoyable to the casual reader. Looking for a way to characterize Flynn's poetic style, I was reminded of one of Hermann Hesse's novels, *Magister Ludi: The Glass Bead Game* (1943). In this futuristic tale, a geographical region, "Castalia," is set apart for those who are, or wish to become, adept at playing "The Glass Bead Game," which represents the pinnacle of intellectual, artistic, and cultural achievement in these times. Though Hesse is intentionally vague about the way the game is played, it involves the complex interweaving of aesthetic elements, such as philosophical precepts, mathematical equations, architectural proportions, and musical phrases, into a grand, self-perpetuating synthesis. And yes, that is what Keith Flynn's poems do. They establish often unlikely but deep connections between seemingly unrelated topics.

To take just one example, "On the Boardwalk," the first poem in the book, one sees this aesthetic synthesis of social, cultural, historical, and artistic elements at



play. "On the Boardwalk" (the title can't help but remind one of The Drifters' "Under the Boardwalk") begins in Atlantic City, NJ, that beacon of American middle-class high life whose casinos hold the allure of the effortless, instantaneous realization of "the American Dream." References to Dinah Washington ("The Queen of the Blues") and big band leader Billy Eckstine are used to evoke the "glory days" of the resort city. Then, the contemporary speaker of the poem tells us that this is where he "bought a classical bust / of a woman with a mirror for a face" (sounding much like the cheap, crude artifacts of modern society mentioned by Pound in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"). Furthering the depiction of debased modern culture, Flynn mentions the "blackjack altar," where he "tabled [his] expectations," and then apparently attended an intriguingly global, multicultural boxing match between "the Ukrainian doctor" [sic] and "the Nigerian slugger," presumably Vitali Klitschko, a Ukrainian boxer with

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RENATO POTOLO

KEITH FLYNN is the author of four collections of poetry, including *The Golden Ratio* (Iris Press, 2007; reviewed in *NCLR* 2009), and one collection of essays. He is the founder and managing editor of *The Asheville Poetry Review*.

ABOVE Keith Flynn performing at the Diana Wortham Theatre in Asheville, NC, 2 Aug. 2011

a PhD and the nickname “Dr. Ironfist,” and “The Nigerian Nightmare,” Samuel Peter. The third stanza contrasts littoral nature (“the realm of the gull and piper”) with the tawdry confections and baubles prof-fered on the boardwalk (“candy factories of nubile / Oriental dolls and steed-mounted / Genghis Khans”). Stanza four offers an erotic reverie featuring “the petite angel of my dreams” that occurs within the “art deco” splendor of the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino (“art deco / trumped the disposable concrete tower,” in a nice pun), under renovation, with “cranes managed by Mexicans charging by the hour.” One can’t help but think of the similar tryst in “The Waste Land” between “the typist” and “the young man carbuncular.” A repeated formal element of Flynn’s poem is the use of sentence fragments beginning with “Where,” reminding one of the climactic passage in Bob Dylan’s apocalyptic “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” describing “the depths of the deepest black forest” with lines like “Where the people are many and their hands are all empty / Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters.” Though in the case of Flynn’s poem, it is mercenary capitalism that triumphs: “Where the dollar is hidden and is King.” And the enervated soul “clenched / in its shell” can only admire the physical “body’s muffled heartbeat.” To conclude, the brutally incongruous artificiality of the place is evoked – “where the Tropics meet // the Hamptons and both succumb” – which leads to the tour de force of the concluding lines:

. . . where
the prelapsarian middle class of all rotted
American Dreams comes to be fleeced
and calls it fun, where the spiral helix
of our DNA is mounted and washed gospel
clean, licked by so many tongues.

Like a scary funhouse or a carnival midway (or Dylan’s gruesomely bacchanalian vision of “Desolation Row”) Flynn’s poems are cleverly crafted, surprising, surreal, and often pointedly satirical.

In the Postscript to *The Broken Flower*, titled “Teaching Daylilies How to Read,” **Jeffery Beam** humorously presents himself as a man of many contradictions. “I’m born redneck and White Trash, and bred-in-the-

bone Yallah Dawg Democrat,” he says, but one who nevertheless was “Eastern Indian in my past life” and so embraces “Vedanta and Jesus.” And despite the “practical Calvinist and Pennsylvania-Dutch fire” in his veins, his “Scots-Irish and Cherokee bloods” allow him visions of “all kinds of beings in the blessed outdoors and next to the hearth,” including “fairies and leprechauns” and even a “goblin.” This mystical background would suggest that Beam is in the line of spiritual, visionary poets like Blake and Yeats, yet a final seeming contradiction is that Beam’s poetic practice is clearly in the tradition of William Carlos Williams and the later Objectivist and Black Mountain poets. Perhaps, at least in his overall approach, he is most reminiscent of the poet Robert Duncan, who coupled an abiding interest in mysticism, spirituality, and myth with the Objectivist focus on direct presentation of natural things and the poem as object. And lest we forget, even the visionary Blake celebrated the primacy of “minute particulars” in poetry, and Yeats was “this-worldly” enough to become an Irish senator.

It is human nature to be drawn to a poem in a book of poetry titled “Credo”; with apologies for excessive literal-mindedness, this is where we’ll begin. And indeed this choice proves fortuitous, for it’s a poem about liminality: “To say what is / between” becomes, for the speaker, a linguistic spiritual practice, a way “To my own self / be true.” The poem opens on an echo of William Carlos Williams’s famous poem “This Is Just to Say”: “Now, when I talk / it is not just to say / this or / that.” And then we arrive at the poem’s *raison d’être*: “But it is to say / what is between.” Note the Objectivist focus on lineation, so important to this poem. The first time it appears in the poem it is straightforward: “But it is to say / what is between.” That is, the poet hopes to tell us of indeterminate, liminal, “between” things. In the poem’s final strophe, the phrase appears this way: “To say what is / between.” This time, it’s much more definitive: “to say what *is*,” but to say it “between.”

In addition to Williams, one also hears a bit of Section V of Wallace Stevens’s famously playful “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” though here it’s the “chickadee whistle / and blue / bird”:

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

Beam's poem, "I Have Never Wanted," seems almost a companion piece to "Credo," articulating the Objectivist preference for viewing a poem as "process":

the poem
perfected
by its being
and me being
human
also that

Much like the betweenness featured in "Credo," "I Have Never Wanted" privileges the imperfect:

I have never wanted to
write
the perfect poem, only
the im
perfect

And again we note the playful visual pun provided by the lineation: "the imperfect." The second strophe provides lovely imagistic examples of the imperfect:

I have always wanted the
under
side of things, the side
shaded
by moss

and "the silver and / spotted / backside of the *Elaeagnus* leaf." One might think of the imperfect, mortal "dappled" beauty described by Gerard Manley Hopkins in "Pied Beauty"; indeed, these lines from that poem seem almost a touchstone for Beam: "All things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)." The conclusion of Beam's poem, "I have / always wanted / the poem / perfected," is perhaps just another way "To say what is / between."

The scientific name *Elaeagnus*, for the oleaster, or silverberry, reminds us that Beam devoted his professional life to the position of botanical librarian



PHOTOGRAPH BY BARBARA TRESLER

for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the quirky poem "The Man Who Ate Butterflies," the speaker, who may well be Beam, "likes flowers and / so spends many after- / noons visiting gardens," just like the butterfly he has impulsively eaten, being reminded by it of the confection "Turkish Delight." This brings us to the book's title poem, "The Broken Flower," which is where we'll end. This poem fits right in to the betweenness of "Credo," and the celebration of imperfection in "I Have Never Wanted." The poem's two totems – the broken flower and the solitary bird's feather – are discovered in "The last place we would think / to look // there in the discarded / shattered world." Discarded, broken, shattered, isolated, they nevertheless "speak" and can "tell symbols" that "amaze us." The poem proposes its Emersonian faith, that "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact."² Under the speaker's human, integrative gaze, these two forlorn items are "Rediscovered: / the most perfect flower the most / perfect feather." And so one sees that like Blake and Yeats before him, Beam, too, manages to integrate the spiritual and the visionary with the physical and the commonplace.

Thankfully, as the two strong and varied voices of Flynn and Beam indicate, it is a good time for poetry in the Old North State. We need its salve, its irreverence, its balm, and its élan perhaps as never before. ■

ODDS FAVOR AT RANDOM

a review by
Tanya Long Bennett

Lee Zacharias. *At Random*.
Greensboro, NC: Fugitive Poets
Press, 2013.

NCLR Editorial Board Member **TANYA LONG BENNETT** is a Professor of English at North Georgia College and State University. Her publications include articles on writers such as Lee Smith, Lorraine Lopez, and Ana Castillo. She is also a regular reviewer for NCLR.

LEE ZACHARIAS is Professor Emeritus of creative writing at UNC-Greensboro, where she directed the MFA program and served as editor of *The Greensboro Review*. Her books include a short story collection, *Helping Muriel Make It through the Night* (Louisiana State University Press, 1975) and a novel, *Lessons* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), which received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for fiction. Read essays by Zacharias in NCLR 2004 and 2008.

ABOVE RIGHT Lee Zacharias reading from *At Random* at UNC-Greensboro, 21 Mar. 2013

Lee Zacharias recently produced a new novel, *At Random*, well worth our attention. In this work, Zacharias, clearly a seasoned writer, explores the events in life that seem to occur not only unexpectedly, but despite our often careful and diligent efforts to avoid them. Eva Summer and Guy McFerrin, married for over a decade and living in fictional Random, NC, when the novel opens, respond to tragedy with the subconscious assumption that terrible accidents, and the snowballing effects of their aftermath, should not happen to people like them. Guy's recent layoff as district manager of the *Random Herald* and the reclassification of Eva's job, from Gardell College's art gallery administrator to tenure-seeking faculty member, seem to the couple merely annoying setbacks, but nothing that cannot be conquered with rationality and determination. After all, they are educated, ethical people. But the world is unpredictable, and, Zacharias reminds us, even Eva, Guy, and their ten-year-old son Nick are subject to its random happenings. Approaching her subject with courage, honesty, and great craftsmanship, Zacharias has produced in *At Random* a story with the power to make us question the assumptions underpinning our daily actions and personal values.

On a rainy evening in November 1991, as Guy and Eva drive home from the opera, their car collides with a young boy. Although they feel sure they have done nothing wrong, the event will change their lives. At points during the following weeks, they feel that even their rock-solid marriage will not withstand the legal, social, and emotional challenges that result from the incident. Yet through the story of this family's negotiation

of an ultimately indifferent universe, Zacharias pays homage to love, intimacy, and compassion. Although there is no stable set of ethics to order the world portrayed by this novel, Zacharias suggests that in the middle of the mess, love happens – perhaps in spite of the disorder, but more probably because of it.

The boldness with which the novel confronts its toughest issues is both provocative and moving. Ultimately, Eva and Guy are faced with decisions that must be made without the benefit of clear-cut righteousness or blame. What is right and wrong becomes, on some level, irrelevant. For example, until his legal guilt or innocence in the death of nine-year-old Y Bhan Buon To can be established, Guy insists that Eva have no contact with the boy's family, a seemingly reasonable request in light of the American legal process. Any gift, even one meant to help the family through the loss of Bhan, could be treated in court as an admission of guilt. Yet when circumstances, partially orchestrated by Eva herself, but also resulting from coincidence, bring her into acquaintance with Bhan's sister H'ngchai, what is right for Eva becomes much less clear.

Similarly, Eva and Guy's relationship is portrayed as a fluid thing, subject to time and material reality rather than transcending daily factors, as "true" marriages are often believed to do. Although Eva and Guy have endured the challenges to their partnership longer than many of their friends, daily circumstances affect the quality of that partnership, situations as seemingly trivial as whether Nick cleans up his fishing tackle and, if not, whether his parents will support each other in punishing him for his disobedience.



PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY KENNEDY

At times, the narrative of their intimacy – the kind that can only be realized after years of knowing and caring about someone – is quite touching, reminding us of the unnamable rewards of such investment in another person. For example, when Eva struggles out of an anxiety dream one night, “[s]he woke sweating and reached to [Guy’s] side of the bed, where her hand struck bone, and he grunted and rolled over. She listened for the reassuring whistle of his breath” (137). Even as the legal process threatens to drain Guy of his psychological reserve, he experiences this stress in the context of his bolstering connection with Eva. Zacharias writes, “Guy took his coffee from the microwave and brought it to the table, wondering how many hours he and Eva had spent in these same chairs, reading the paper, eating breakfast, eating dinner, exchanging the quotidian of dialogue whose very banality is the mark of intimacy: *We’re out of birdseed. The upstairs toilet is leaking. Our mice are back*” (431).

Yet, Zacharias juxtaposes the comforting undertone of their relationship with other,

less pleasant moments, just as common to most relationships. For example, Guy, out for his jog one morning, experiences a sudden surge of optimism, considering the very real possibility that he will be found innocent of the boy’s murder. In this state of unexpected hope, he becomes suddenly and acutely aware of what Eva means to him. Returning home after his run, all he can think of is holding her familiar body and making love to her. But the very real factor of her elderly mother Ruby, who is visiting for Thanksgiving, disrupts Guy’s experience of heightened connection to his wife. When he tries to initiate sex, Eva is irritable and nervous and not at all receptive to his attentions, angrily rushing out the bedroom door and dashing, in the process, all the optimism that had permeated him only moments before. Such occurrences in the novel help to establish its realism and also move the reader, confronted with the heights of human hope as well as the complex factors that constantly both feed and mitigate it. Similarly, later in the novel, as Eva cooks a stir-fry of chicken with snow peas and red peppers for dinner, for a few minutes, the family allow themselves to bask in a kind of euphoria, immersed in the scents and tastes of simple joy. But when Eva interrupts their pleasure to castigate Nick for not wiping off the table properly and will not let the issue go, the scene ends in Nick’s tears and Guy resentfully absconding with the boy to Wendy’s for a cheeseburger. The novel’s conclusion leaves us with the understanding that whether the couple does marriage “right” or “wrong,” the relationship can only exist in the present – it cannot transcend time or situation.

Zacharias addresses racial and gender prejudices as boldly and honestly as she examines the complexity of marriage. Although Eva and Guy consider themselves enlightened people, they both lapse, at times, into thinking based in fears and assumptions about people of gender, race, and culture other than their own. Guy considers the possibility that the black policeman who arrested him purposefully “misplaced” the blood alcohol report in order to implicate him in a murder charge. Although Eva responds to the suggestion as though stunned by the racist implication, only moments before, she herself entertained the thought that “[n]o black liked whites too much, for all the camaraderie on the loading dock or basketball court” (350). While neither expresses such generalizations aloud (except Guy to his lawyer, who has, to some extent, planted the seed for Guy’s suspicions about Officer McThune), Zacharias confronts the very real possibility that we all harbor thoughts from time to time that compromise our apparent ethics, and more specifically that the prejudices of Southern culture permeate the consciousness of even those claiming the most lofty morals. The transparency with which she portrays these characters results, perhaps unexpectedly, in the reader’s sympathy for them. Like us, they are striving to do what is right, despite challenges to what they would like to believe is a stable and fair moral code.

Further developing this notion of the inevitably unstable life narrative, Zacharias provocatively suggests that while *language* is generally meant to order ideas and information, it is often itself an agent of disorder. For example, during a tense period after an

PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRY KENNEDY



argument with Guy, Eva feels that “[e]verything they said distorted itself and hid inside some other meaning” (92). In a more direct experience of language’s opacity, when speaking with H’nghai, Eva must overtly engage in the slippery negotiation of meanings. When the sixteen-year-old is told by a doctor that she is pregnant, H’nghai responds, “‘No, baby.’ . . . The doctor looked at Eva. Now what? their exchanged glances seemed to say. Did H’nghai mean she didn’t believe them or that she wanted an abortion? . . . Surely an interpreter could explain. [The director of Christian Relocation Services] should be able to provide one. *Maybe* she could supply one. ‘We’re none of us fluent,’ she had said” (226–27).

Further developing her assertion that words and their meanings are not stably related, Zacharias illustrates the role that printed text can play in disrupting “reality.” When Eva receives a letter from an anonymous community member containing only the words, “Go home Motherfuckers” (255), she must perform some mental acrobatics to interpret the message. She finally decides it is a clumsy attempt to support Guy against the Montagnard “foreigners,” pitting them as an outside threat to the well-being of “real” Americans, a disturbing sign of prejudices based on shallow assumptions. The strange logic of the letter emphasizes the disorientation that can result when text runs up against one’s reality:

Eva stared at the piece of paper, not sure she could trust what she read. For years she had believed herself to suffer a mild dyslexia, if that was the term for her tendency not to transpose individual letters but to mix up entire words. And

once she misread she found it almost impossible to reread correctly, for instead of scrambling words into senseless letters, her faulty reading sent her on with the wrong antecedents, left her to solve crosswords armed with false clues, permitted her to digest hallucination as irrefutable fact. (254)

A strong sense of irony is generated by the fact that while Guy once worked for the *Random Herald*, the local newspaper portrays him harshly in its reports on the case. One key news story about the incident transposes the numbers of Guy’s blood alcohol report, from .02 to .20, alerting Eva and Guy to the discrepancy in the police records from that night. They assume reasonably that until they can find *printed* proof of the original report, the story’s “facts” will be perceived as truth for the public regarding Guy’s guilt. These illustrations of words’ potential for betrayal contribute to the novel’s portrayal of a world where ordering and planning cannot ultimately save us from tragedy.

In addition to the novel’s compelling assertion of an indifferent and “random” universe and its often disturbing effects, Zacharias weaves into it the story, a

MYSTERY WRITERS RECEIVE NC LITERARY AWARDS

Durham native and graduate of Davidson College, John Hart received the 2013 North Carolina Award for Literature. Hart is the author of four books, including *King of Lies* (2006), *Down River* (2007), and *The Last Child* (2009), which were reviewed in *NCLR 2009*, and *Iron House* (2011), which was reviewed in *NCLR Online 2012*. Hart has also received the Crime Writers’ Association’s Ian Fleming Steel Dagger Award in 2009 and is a two-time recipient (in 2008 and 2010) of the Edgar Award for Best Novel.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHEW WAHNER. COURTESY OF NC OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

ABOVE John Hart at the ceremony for the North Carolina Awards, Durham, 21 Nov. 2013

heretofore mostly buried one, of the Montagnard people (or Dega, as they call themselves). In doing so, she reveals that randomness can also result in compassion. Motivated by her desire to know about Y Bhan Buon To, Eva becomes increasingly fascinated by these displaced Vietnamese tribes, and as her investigations lead her further and further from her comfort zone, she finds a new, and as it turns out badly needed, source of passion. While Eva's position as protagonist locates her at the center of the narrative, Zacharias takes this plot thread as a chance to reveal the history of the Montagnards, native Vietnamese refugees who came to the US in the 1980s to escape the abuse of the Vietcong. Through this part of the narrative, she reminds us that such people live on the edge of middle-class American consciousness and draws us, as Eva is drawn, into a fascination with this particular group, who fought fiercely to protect American soldiers in Vietnam from the Vietcong and then were abandoned by the American government as soon as US soldiers were out and safe. When the

Montagnards were punished by the Vietcong for their aid to the American military, many fathers like Bhan's escaped to the US, hopeful that their American "friends" would help them get their families to safety, as well. Yet, living in Random, NC, Bhan's family and many other Dega are still marginalized, supported only by religious and social aid organizations, and even then only minimally.

Eva's fascination with this community is based partly on her new cosmological link to them through the death of Bhan, but is strengthened by the incredible stoicism and loyalty she witnesses, traits fostered not by the comforts of a middle-class life, but by terrible hardships such as hunger, enemy threats, and even domestic abuse. Through her experience with H'ng hai and other Dega, Eva comes to appreciate the opportunities that occur only outside one's comfort zone. By finally acknowledging the impossibility of protecting even her own son from the risks of being alive, she opens herself to the chances for human connection that may result from the random happenings of an uncontrollable universe.

If there is a weakness in the novel, it is Zacharias's lapse, now and then, into exposition to provide backstory about the Montagnards. The limited information Eva finds about them in articles and books makes its way as almost straight exposition onto pages of the novel. Similarly, when Eva visits the Christian Relocation Services office, the director, Carole Eisen, serves as a vehicle for a short lecture on Montagnard history. The narrative momentum is somewhat slowed and compromised by these passages. However, one cannot help but be fascinated by the story of these people, a story that ultimately becomes integrated into Zacharias's overarching theme, after all.

At Random succeeds as an exploration of human vulnerability and, more generally, as a novel, engaging the reader through well-drawn characters and a compelling plot. In artfully crafted language, Zacharias portrays a world both frightening and beautiful, a place where often unforeseen and uncontrollable factors can nevertheless lead us to self-knowledge and love. ■

After nineteen books in her Judge Deborah Knott mystery series – the first of which, *Bootlegger's Daughter* (1992), received both the Edgar and the Agatha Awards – Margaret Maron received the 2013 R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for her significant contribution to North Carolina literature. A native of Guilford County who grew up in Johnston County, NC, Maron is also the author of an earlier crime series set in New York, though the detective in those mysteries has North Carolina roots, too – and, in fact, meets up with Judge Knott in *Three-Day Town* (2011). Maron's other books include *Last Lessons of Summer* (2003), which received the 2004 Sir Walter Raleigh Award. Maron is also the 2008 recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHEW WAHNER.
COURTESY OF NC OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

IT'S COMPLICATED

a review by Sharon E. Colley

Dale Neal. *The Half-Life of Home*. Sacramento: Casperian Books, 2013.

SHARON E. COLLEY is Associate Professor of English at Middle Georgia State College in Macon, GA. Her research interests include Southern and Appalachian literature. She has published on such writers as Lee Smith.

A graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, DALE NEAL has published short fiction and essays in such literary magazines as *Carolina Quarterly*, *Crescent Review*, and *Marlboro Review*. He also writes about religion and books for the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. See *NCLR* 2003 for a sample of his writing. He has just completed and is looking for a publisher for a new novel currently titled "Appalachian Book of the Dead."

Dale Neal's novel *The Half-Life of Home* initially seems to belong to a familiar category of Appalachian texts dealing with failing family farms, invading developers and bittersweet urbanization. (Texts such as Lee Smith's *Oral History* [1983] and Catherine Landis's *Harvest* [2004] come to mind.) Neal's book on changes in land ownership and usage employs an impressively complex approach. He contextualizes these concerns by suggesting that Appalachia's land development issues are not exceptional and that the tenuous connections of humans are the true legacy of mountain life. In doing so, Neal creates a contemporary North Carolina text that successfully links the region to the larger nation.

A journalist living in Asheville, NC, Neal previously won the Novello Literary Award for *Cow Across America* (2009). His second novel, *The Half-Life of Home*, centers around Royce Wilder, a land appraiser; his wife Eva, who is losing her job at a non-profit; and their teenage son, Dean, whom they recently enrolled in a private high school. Set in 1992, the book is threaded together with the family's economic woes and Royce's ambivalence about selling family land in nearby Beavertown. This familiar tension is complicated by the possibility that the mountain property is contaminated by naturally occurring radon. The confirmed presence of radon could make the property

uninhabitable for humans but ideal as a toxic waste dump, a proposition that fills Royce with understandable hesitation. This danger arises not from timbering or coal mining, however, making the threat natural rather than manmade. As a result, the novel avoids a simplistic rural-good/development-bad dichotomy and suggests a more complex reality.

The two outside investors also resist easy stereotype. The corpulent white land dealer, while he never becomes a completely trustworthy figure, physically shrinks dramatically through the novel. Significantly, the ethnically Japanese partner is not the much derided foreign investor: "Matsui, a native-born American citizen like you and me, spent his childhood behind barbed wire in the middle of nowhere. His family lost everything. His father even committed suicide" (75–76). Matsui is less a predator than a participant in the food chain. Royce's own father was raised in lumber camps, where the narrator states that mountain men sold "their birthright" (226).

In *The Half-Life of Home*, this connection to the land is often complicated or rivaled by relationship to others, particularly fathers. Whether it is Royce's memories of his taciturn father or his struggles with his somewhat rebellious son, Dean, paternal relationships take center stage repeatedly. Does Royce's loyalty lie with the land his father bequeathed or the son

whose future he is responsible for? Pseudo-fathers, such as Royce's uncle Dallas, and missing fathers, such as homeless Kyle's mysterious Shadow Man, also prove seminal. When Dean suggests that memory of place is what endures, the importance of intergenerational relationships is thematically revealed.

The female characters in *The Half-Life of Home* are as complex as the males, but their lack of female connections is a bit odd. The women are isolated, both from the men around them and from their best selves. As she loses her job, Eva recognizes her mourning as similar to her grief after her miscarriage; the latter crisis included a loss of spiritual faith for her. Royce's mother, trying to maintain her family home in Beaverdam, is somewhat distanced from her son's family, and the mysterious Witch Woman is threatening both mythically and physically. No woman has close female relationships, though their need for maternal figures is as great as the men's need for paternal. In fact, Eva feels a healthy connection to her Episcopalian faith only after meeting a female minister who embodies the feminine in God.

Spirituality and Christian doubt serve as a minor, albeit thoughtfully rendered, theme in the novel.

In addition to Eva's struggles as an Episcopalian, Royce feels alienated from his Baptist family faith (his mother has had perfect attendance in Sunday School for the last forty-four years). The Baptist imagery is used effectively in conjunction with the local church and its graveyard as sources of community and continuity that are ultimately undercut. The Baptists, however, are ultimately not allowed the same kind of redemption that Eva's Episcopalian faith is. Guilt or innocence in land usage remains a moving target in this book, subject to necessity and the human psyche.

A refreshing element of the novel is its acknowledgement of social class. Royce's Baptist family in Beaverdam are farmers, homemakers, and mailmen, while Eva, the daughter of an Episcopal priest, has a more "town" background than her husband. Kyle, a homeless man whom Eva encounters in a soup kitchen, lives a rough life in the margins; his connections to the other characters emerge slowly. Some characters attempt to manipulate their social class status for their own advantage; for example, when Royce tries to recast his land negotiations in terms of slick salesmen versus trusting rural folk, the land dealer tells him to "[c]ut that hillbilly crap" (74). Though



PHOTOGRAPH BY CYNTHIA NEAL

popular culture often regards Appalachia as classless, Neale's book acknowledges the presence of social gradations as well as the characters' consciousness of interclass relationships.

While the story is generally compelling, there are a few structural missteps in the novel. Most plot surprises fold pleasingly into the novel's arch, though some seem a bit coincidental. One could wish for the same complexity in resolving spiritual conflicts that is found for land and familial issues.

Despite these demurrals, *The Half-Life of Home* is a nuanced and intriguing novel that will appeal to a variety of adult audiences. Neale creates a compelling narrative and contemporary characters who reflect North Carolina culture in a complex fashion. The exploration of classic Appalachian themes, such as land usage, family, and spirituality through contemporary realism creates a welcome addition to North Carolina and Appalachian literature. ■

MYERS PARK MISERY

a review by Jim McGavran

Wilton Barnhardt. *Lookaway*,
Lookaway. New York:
St. Martin's Press, 2013.

JIM MCGAVRAN is Professor of English at UNC Charlotte. After spending a year teaching English conversation in Bordeaux, France, he went on to receive an MA in English at Columbia University and later a PhD in English at UNC-Chapel Hill. He is the author of *In the Shadow of the Bear: A Michigan Memoir* (Michigan State UP, 2010) and the editor of three collections of critical essays on Romanticism, children's literature, and childhood studies.

WILTON BARNHARDT, a former reporter for *Sports Illustrated*, is currently a professor of English in the MFA program at NC State University. His previous novels, also published by St. Martin's Press, include *Emma Who Saved My Life* (1989), *Gospel* (1993), and *Show World* (1999).



Winston-Salem native Wilton Barnhardt's new novel, *Lookaway*, *Lookaway*, is set in Charlotte, NC, where I have lived for forty years, so I was truly excited when asked to write this review. And sure enough, Barnhardt has peppered his text with many familiar Metrolina names, places, and landmarks. But alas, it is not the Charlotte novel that I was hoping for.

Early along, the two main characters in this bromance, Duke Johnston and Gaston Jarvis (still Duke University undergraduates and best friends at this point), are discussing the great Southern novel Gaston would eventually write. Arguing that Faulkner had already written masterfully about the post-Reconstruction South, Duke asks, "Why not write a contemporary book?" But Gaston responds, "What's interesting about the New South? Nothing. The New South sinking into the monoculture of the United States, deracinated. No, it needs the grandeur of the earlier era.' . . . Gaston knew it had to be about a Southern family . . . the essential Irish-inherited [think Tara] doomedness of the South" (75).

Since Gaston's magnum opus was to have the same title, *Lookaway*, *Lookaway*, Barnhardt clearly hints in this passage what sort of

novel he intends this one to be – contemporary on the surface, with recognizable Mecklenburg details, yet driven by the antebellum glamor of grand, doomed, corrupt families. Think Scarlett choking on the radish. Think Quentin drowning himself, obsessed with Caddy's muddy drawers.

How I wish that Barnhardt had taken Duke's advice! Instead, *Lookaway*, *Lookaway*, mired to the hilt in white upper class Dixie compost, bogs down in that over-rich, indeed toxic, milieu; the book clobbered me with its sheer verbosity. It begins with the rape of Duke's younger daughter Jerilyn, a first-year sorority pledge, at a drunken fraternity party in Chapel Hill and ends with a fatal duel using ancient Civil War pistols, one of which Jerilyn had used midway through the book to shoot her bad-old-boy husband. True, we are given some memorable if not exactly original character portraits: Gaston, the wittily abusive drunken hack; Duke, the kind, gallant, but ineffectual husband, father, and battle re-enactor; and his wife Jerene, Gaston's sister and the steeliest of magnolias. Then there is the quite original Annie, Duke and Jerene's older daughter – rebelliously liberal, overweight, oversexed, and rich up to her ample breasts in real estate



POSTCARDS COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL LIBRARY.



PHOTOGRAPH BY WADE BRUNTON, UNC CHARLOTTE

commissions. In addition, there are some beautifully realized scenes. One is a tragicomic Christmas dinner where a roasted goose arrives in the dining room too late to save the snapping, honking family gaggle waiting drunkenly at the table. Another comes when Jerene briefly confronts, then runs from, the illegitimate child she bore decades previously. A third is a strongly worded editorial interlude clearly laying out the racial history of Charlotte and telling how, after the “War of Northern Aggression,” rich local oligarchs aggressively pushed aside both freed blacks and poorer whites in order to enact Jim Crow laws and make their obscene fortunes. Barnhardt clearly knows his Southern history.

But Alma, the Johnstons’ maid, is a pathetic shadow who falls short of even the mammy stereotype, and there is only one African American character who rises beyond cliché – the beautiful, brainy young lesbian Dorrie Jourdain, best friend of the Johnstons’ gay son Joshua. The white characters, too, are mostly stereotypes from “Southern Lit” that I can’t

recognize in the Charlotteans I know and interact with. Granted, there may be some rich country club types from Myers Park or Eastover, and a few Tea Party Republicans, too, who still think, talk, and care about family, class, and race the way the Johnstons and Jarvises do.

But contrary to Gaston’s/Barnhardt’s opinion, there’s *everything* interesting about the New South and nothing that suggests Charlotte will fall into American “monoculture” any time soon. The huge northward migrations of Latinos, and the huge southward migrations of Rust Belt professionals leaving places like Buffalo and Detroit – many of whom are African Americans returning to a far more welcoming Dixie than the one their parents or grandparents fled – are changing Charlotte beyond anything Barnhardt seems to know or imagine. Sure, the recession has slowed this down, but as Annie could tell you, real estate is picking up again, and the migrations are, too. Big-city projects like the Lynx light rail, along with the acquisition of professional sports

teams and the 2012 Democratic National Convention, have helped Charlotteans to see their city as a major national player. While all this is going on, everyday folks of all imaginable colors, ethnicities, and traditions are struggling, often in two-salary families, to improve their economic standing and raise and educate their children, unlike the Johnstons and Jarvises, who, excepting Annie, tend to rely on *deus ex machina* help from a rich relative rather than actually going to work.

I long for another Charlotte-based novel as rich as Anna Jean Mayhew’s *The Dry Grass of August* (2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012), a novel as full of real North Carolina people and places as Doris Betts’s *Souls Raised from the Dead* (1994) – or as Phil Morrison’s terrific film *Junebug* (2005), my all-time favorite tale of life in the Tar Heel State. In the meantime, ladies, start sewing your draperies into evening gowns – or tell your maid to do it. Gents, practice snarling “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” while muttering sadly to yourselves about somebody’s dirty underwear. ■

WORDS, WATER, WONDER

a review by Brian Glover

Philip Gerard. *Down the Wild Cape Fear: A River Journey through the Heart of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

—, *The Patron Saint of Dreams and Other Essays*. Spartanburg, SC: Hub City Press, 2012.

NCLR Editorial Board member **BRIAN GLOVER** earned his PhD at the University of Virginia. He teaches English at ECU, where he received the Bertie Fearing Teaching Award in 2013.

PHILIP GERARD teaches in the Creative Writing Department at UNC-Wilmington. He is the author of seven books, including the historical novel *Cape Fear Rising* (John F. Blair, 1994), inspired by the 1898 coup d'état in Wilmington, NC. Read an excerpt from the novel in *NCLR 1994*, which featured "the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot." For a sample of his short fiction, see *NCLR 2005*.

ABOVE Overwash from Hurricane Fran at North Topsail Beach, NC, 1996

RIGHT More results of Hurricane Fran

COURTESY OF USGS



The first essay in Philip Gerard's 2012 collection *The Patron Saint of Dreams* starts from its very first line with the theme that obsesses Gerard throughout the book: "What they don't tell you about hurricanes is the uncertainty" (1). Whether the topic be Ouija board divination, nineteenth-century fraudsters, his mother's death, his own nearly fatal heart attack, or an impressive range of manly outdoor pursuits (sailing, semi-pro baseball, camping with grizzlies), Gerard returns again and again to uncertainty, ambiguity, and mystery.

At their best, his essays show us an endlessly inquisitive mind, hunting for the truth about experience, armed with an admirably precise style. In that first essay, for instance, Gerard sets out to show us not the destructive physical power of a hurricane on the North Carolina coast, but what it feels like to live through one. In those humid hours of dread before all hell breaks loose, familiar objects and landscapes take on an uncanny and threatening cast. Gerard finds just the right words for it: "The longleaf pines that ring our property stand sixty and seventy feet high, two feet

in diameter, precarious upright tons of wet wood, swaying already in the breeze. Their roots are soft in the spongy ground. We've been set up. It feels like there's a bull's-eye painted on the map next to the words 'Cape Fear'" (2). "Precarious upright tons": the quality, the location, and the potentially crushing quantity. The precision is terrifying, and it's that specificity that keeps the bull's-eye simile from feeling hackneyed. What will happen when the storm has its way with us? Gerard skillfully prolongs the suspense to the essay's final line. I won't spoil the surprise, but it's heartbreaking.

Gerard's enthusiastic psychological realism recalls Jack London and Stephen Crane. At times, he follows his boyish nineteenth-century muse so far as to strain belief, as in "The Phantom Chessman," which tells

COURTESY OF USGS



a true story straight out of Poe, complete with inexplicable excavations in a locked basement. Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn (who get a mention here and there), Gerard likes a bit of mystery so much that he occasionally tries to believe in things he really doesn't, such as portentous dream visions or flighty mixed metaphors. "Scars," for instance, is a lovely and affecting story, generous in its sympathy for James Dickey in his brilliant and sad alcoholic decline, but once Gerard starts running with the metaphor of scars to the body as scars to the soul, he doesn't quite know when to stop, leading to doozies like "Disappointment leaves a scar, a little stabbing blade that can ambush you even in memory" (116). But when he sticks to his gut, the prose shines.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK KURTZ

Readers who pick up Gerard's most recent book, the digressive travelogue *Down the Wild Cape Fear*, may feel a bit of trepidation. Through the ages, people have dumped nearly as much purple prose into rivers as they have sewage, and the first few chapters

of Gerard's effort give cause for concern. Not only does he fantasize at length about the legendary mermaids of Mermaid Point, on the upper Cape Fear River, he also asks us to imagine them "porpoising" about. Fortunately, the recondite vocabulary and flat symbolism soon give way as Gerard settles into what he does best: talking to people who live on and around the Cape Fear about what the river means to them.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK KURTZ

Peppering the journals of his down-river paddling trip with digressions into the natural and human history of North Carolina's largest river basin, the inquisitive Gerard learns all he can from biologists and ecologists, canoe outfitters and barbecue chefs, tugboat pilots and police investigators. Readers who stick with him will learn about the river's central role as a transportation route in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Carolina, its fall to relative obscurity in the

age of the interstate, and its current importance as both a place of recreation and a crucial source of drinking water. While, thanks to new dam designs, migratory fish like shad are making a comeback, the watershed still faces significant threats from large-scale phosphate mining and industrial hog farming. Gerard takes us into those controversies and puts them in the context of the Civil War battles and nineteenth-century

commerce that took place on the very same waterways.

Gerard is passionate about his adopted hometown of Wilmington and its river, and by the book's end we get a sense of the innumerable interconnections that make the region a special, singular place. Gerard's call of concern for the Cape Fear should be heeded, and should move us all to investigate, enjoy, and protect the often overlooked rivers of North Carolina. ■

SAVORING THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE OF EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

a review by
Lorraine Hale Robinson

Georgann Eubanks. *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina: A Guidebook*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

From 1998 to 2007, LORRAINE HALE ROBINSON wrote the entries in *NCLR*'s serialized "Dictionary of North Carolina Writers," as well as various articles, sidebars, and reviews, while serving as Senior Associate Editor of *NCLR*. She retired in 2012, but continues to respond readily, enthusiastically, and astutely when called upon for advice. See her reviews of the previous two volumes in this series in *NCLR* 2008 and 2011.

GEORGANN EUBANKS was a founder of the North Carolina Writers Network and a past chair of the North Carolina Humanities Council. She has taught writing in public schools, prisons, and corporate settings. For twenty years, she served as director of the Duke University Writers Workshop, and now she is the director of the Table Rock Writers Workshop at Wildacres Retreat in Little Switzerland, NC.

As an academic writer in many a class, I was continuously advised "Don't complain about the assignment. Don't say it's too hard. Just write." Ignoring this sage advice, I assert that writing this review was really hard. As I write, April's showers and May's flowers have come, and the Ram and the Bull have coursed through Eastern North Carolina's skies. It's time to think about summer vacations – or a fall outing, or a winter excursion, or a jaunt next spring. And a timely arrival to our bookshelves is Georgann Eubanks's *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina: A Guidebook*.

The third in a series, this book completes a trilogy of volumes that invites readers to explore from armchairs, on foot, by car, or by bicycle the rich vastnesses of literary North Carolina. The wealth of literary-related places – from the mountains to the coast – is simply astonishing. For example, right here in New Bern, just a few blocks from where I am typing at my computer, are the sites of James Davis's printing press (the first in the colony) and the home of William Gaston (author of the poem that became our state song). Like Nick Bottom in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (who wants to play *all* the roles in the play within that play), I want to write about *all* of the remarkable places that Georgann Eubanks has included. I also want to pack a tomato sandwich and get in the car and go.

Such works as this trilogy are an important resource for heritage tourism. As the Old North State

increasingly becomes a preferred destination both for leisure travel and for relocation, people learn about and are drawn to locales large and small, participating in the "discovery" of writers and their haunts.

Since Eastern North Carolina is *big*, Eubanks has once again (as in the two previous volumes) created "tours" along "trails." In this volume, tour one begins in Raleigh. There is so much literary and literary-related to see and do in the City of Oaks that it may be hard to leave. Eubanks brings readers' attention to the obvious (museums, historic sites, and educational institutions) and then to fiercely and courageously independent bookstores, to local eateries that have been magnets for writers and subjects in many literary works, to the North Carolina State Archives and the Wake County Public Library. But buckle up – the tours continue to the southeast. On the way to Weymouth Center for the Arts and Humanities (in Southern Pines), stop by the birthplace of Paul Green, author of *The Lost Colony* and "father" of the outdoor drama, an art form now found across the country.

If this were a dinner and not a book, we might commence with an *amuse gueule* – a tidbit that whets the palate for what is to come. On trail one, the reader meets an eighteenth-century Muslim who wrote in Arabic – *in Fayetteville*; learns about the relationship between the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and Tabor City; or discovers a totally legitimate crime festival convened by a public library and

DONNA CAMPBELL, the photographer for the three *Literary Trails* volumes, began her career as the founding publisher of *Lake Norman Magazine*. Since 2000 she has worked with Eubanks as one of the principals of the documentary firm Minnow Media. Campbell's first documentary, *Any Day Now* (1990), received national awards from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Association of Women Broadcasters in Radio and TV.

drawing “scores of mystery and crime writers from afar” (131).

Trail two begins in McGee’s Crossroads, on the farm where poet and musician Shelby Stephenson lives, and moves on to Chinquapin, the setting for much of Randall Kenan’s fiction, in which Kenan explores – among other things – race relations and gender identity in the context of Southern, rural “community” (or not community, depending upon the point of view). Eubanks’s writing not only traces the paths of the literary art but also invites readers to sample local fare such as collards (as celebrated in James Applewhite’s poem of that name).

Our *smørgasbord* of travel teasers concludes with trail three. Here readers take a look – up close and personal – at the manufacturing plant that played a role in the actual story of Crystal Lee Sutton (not the *Norma Rae* movie version) and the first unionization of a Southern textile mill.

The coastal region, of course, figures into this last trail as well. Among other writers, poets-from-afar Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Robert Frost recounted aspects of life at Kitty Hawk or in the secret recesses of the Great Dismal Swamp. Nearby is the locale of a great, and as yet unsolved, national mystery: what happened to an entire colonial community, the first permanent English settlement in North America? Can we ever know?

Journey’s end is where the sky meets the sand and the sea on the Outer Banks. Or, do we turn slowly around, guidebook in hand,



COPYRIGHT © 2013 BY THE NORTH CAROLINA ARTS COUNCIL. COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS (WWW.UNCPRESS.UNC.EDU)

ready to explore the places we may have missed?

The examples in the preceding paragraphs are clear evidence of the deep research done by Georgann Eubanks. She has made a thorough scholar’s job of gathering and organizing her materials. And, like the very best scholars, she has made the results of her research, as presented in this third volume of the literary trails series, transparently and invitingly available to every reader.

A project of the North Carolina Arts Council, the three *Literary Trails* volumes provide a clear justification for public funding of cultural resource activities. They are engagingly written and beautifully illustrated with archival images and contemporary photographs by Donna Campbell, whose camera is as incisive in focusing attention on the infinite variety of the North Carolina literary landscape as is Georgann Eubanks’s writing. Maps are clearly integrated with text, and Richard Hendel’s layout

and appropriate white space make the volume visually attractive and accessible – essential qualities for a true guidebook. Residents of North Carolina, teachers in schools and colleges, local chambers of commerce, and tourism offices will all find this volume (and the entire series) a treasury of information. And people from elsewhere will be drawn to North Carolina’s cultural wealth, sometimes hidden in very unexpected places. All of which makes *Literary Trails* a landmark achievement in educational writing and in tourism marketing.

Readers of this review should buy two copies of *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina: A Guidebook*. The first is for planning purposes as you sit around a table with family and friends, deciding on destinations. The second is to be kept in the car at all times. This volume is for when you drive through Green Swamp or Stantonburg or Seaboard – so that you will know where to stop and savor. ■

ABOVE One of Donna Campbell’s photographs in *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina*. East Carolina College (now University) professor and novelist Ovid Pierce was raised in this house in Weldon. He often traveled on weekends from the campus in Greenville to Halifax County to write and look after his farm south of town.

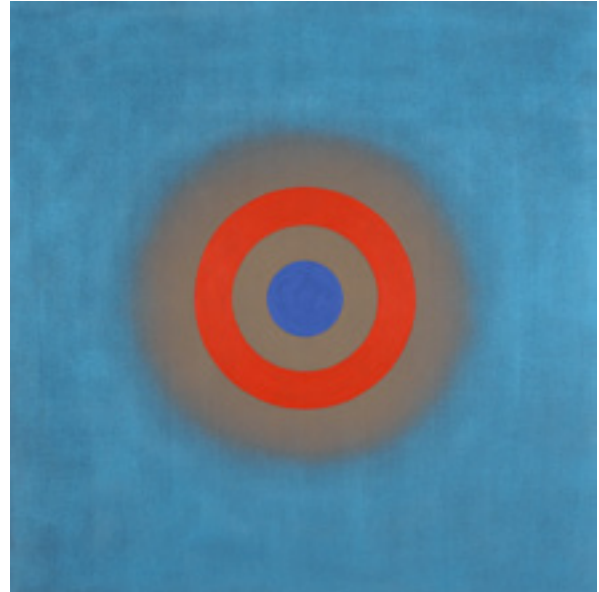
2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST

Available Beauty

BY ROBERT M. WALLACE

This painting by Mark Rothko was a surprise.
 When I first saw it, I was tired, waiting
 In my wife's busy office. I noticed the postcard
 With *Untitled 1957* reproduced on it
 Stuck on a cluttered cork board, almost hidden.
 The painting is so very clean and simple:
 Two green rectangles, one small and one bigger,
 Separated by a thin blue rectangle.
 There is something beautiful in the colors,
 Something so peaceful in the basic shapes
 The longer I studied that stark simplicity,
 The deeper that dappled green seemed to me,
 The slower that blue rectangle became,
 Suggesting an available beauty,
 Splendor even in my tangled life.

The painting overwhelms me, makes me small,
 And then it makes me part of something
 Colossal, beauty and its peacefulness.
 I tried to surf one time, to ride the waves.
 What I recall most is a tired feeling.
 I couldn't pop up on the swaying board;
 My legs weren't strong enough for me to stand.
 But as I lay flat on the rocking water,
 Holding the slick surfboard with all my strength,
 Catching my breath from yet another fall,
 I felt myself rising within the green,
 Even higher within the blue.



COURTESY OF THE GREENVILLE MUSEUM OF ART

Mysteries: West Light (acrylic on canvas, 48x48)
 by Kenneth Noland

ROBERT M. WALLACE is a Professor of English at West Virginia State University. He grew up in Winston-Salem and attended Pfeiffer College in Misenheimer, NC. He graduated from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville with a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. He is a past recipient of a grant from the West Virginia Humanities Council. His poems have appeared in such publications as *Georgetown Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Now & Then: The Appalachian Magazine*. This poem will also appear in his first collection of poetry, *Hawk on a Power Line* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2014).

Asheville, NC, native **KENNETH NOLAND** (1924–2010) is recognized as one of the twentieth century's most influential American artists. After serving in the Army Air Corps as a glider pilot and cryptographer, he returned to North Carolina and attended Black Mountain College on the G.I. Bill, where he studied under Josef Albers and Ilya Bolotowsky. After further study in Paris, he returned to the US and settled in Washington, DC, where he taught at the Catholic University of America and at the Institute of Contemporary Art. With Morris Louis, Noland co-founded the Washington School of Color, an important part of the postwar style of abstraction identified as Color Field painting, a movement that included Mark Rothko. Noland's work has been shown internationally in solo and major group exhibitions. His works are in such collections as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Phillips Collection, located in Washington, DC. He received the North Carolina Award in Fine Arts in 1995, and a Doctor of Fine Arts honorary degree from Davidson College, in 1997.

NORTH CAROLINA MISCELLANY

continued from page 7 . . .

In this issue's North Carolina Miscellany section, we feature material about and by some writers new to NCLR. Read, for example, an interview with poet and NC A&T State University professor Anjail Rashida Ahmad, whom many of us met for the first time at the 2013 Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming in Greenville last September. She has been in North Carolina for some time now, but is new to NCLR's pages and we are very proud to introduce her to others who may not have yet had the pleasure.

This interview with a writer living in but not native to North Carolina reminds me to take this opportunity to announce our 2015 theme, Global North Carolina. Now more than ever, North Carolina is finding its way into literature that stretches beyond the state's borders. We wonder, how has "the writingest state" (as Doris Betts called North Carolina) influenced the writing of those who have moved here from places and cultures around the globe, as well as those who have departed our state bound for destinations worldwide? Is it our rich history, our storied heritage, our diverse culture, our singular environment – both natural and human designed? Is it our people? As Assistant Editor Randall Martoccia suggested as we worked on the topic, perhaps it is the barbecue that most influences those coming and going. As we pause to step back and examine North Carolina's global influence, we invite submissions by and about writers whose work bears the imprint of our beloved Old North State. ■

- 92** *The Water Calls You: An Interview with Anjail Rashida Ahmad*
by Amber Flora Thomas
photography by Dale Foshe
- 102** *Honeysuckle and It Must Be All Right*
two poems by Joan McLean
art by Linda Andrea Fox
- 104** *Soul-Making Short Fiction*
Rebecca Lee, *Bobcat and Other Stories*
Peter Makuck, *Allegiance and Betrayal: Stories*
a review by Kristina L. Knotts
- 107** *Near Matter and the Distant Stars*
Kathy Ackerman, *Coal River Road*
Beth Copeland, *Transcendental Telemarketer*
a review by Susan Laughter Meyers
- 111** *The Milk of Adversity: Three Books of Memory and Loss*
Lee Ann Brown, *Crowns of Charlotte: NC Ode*
Terry L. Kennedy, *New River Breakdown*
Tom Lombardo, *What Bends Us Blue*
a review by Valerie Nieman
- 113** *Another Ending for Aphrodite*
a poem by Hannah Bonner
art by Eduardo Lapetina

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 7** ■ **War in North Carolina Literature**
fiction, nonfiction, book reviews, and literary news
- 45** ■ **Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues**
poetry, nonfiction, book reviews, and literary news

The Water Calls You:

An Interview with Anjail Rashida Ahmad

BY AMBER FLORA THOMAS



COURTESY OF ANJAIL RASHIDA AHMAD

I met Anjail Rashida Ahmad twenty years ago at the Community of Writers Poetry Workshop in Squaw Valley, California. I found myself gravitating toward Anjail during the week-long writing intensive workshop, perhaps because we were two of the few African American poets in attendance, or maybe because I could sense the strength and determination she exuded. I was only beginning to realize how much I needed to borrow some of that strength to get where I would go in the next twenty years. At twenty-two, I knew nothing of the lives of black women in academia.

It was the summer of 1994, and Anjail had just finished her MA in English at New York University. In August, she was headed to the University of Missouri-Columbia to start a PhD in English with an emphasis in creative writing, which she finished in 2003. She was in the thick of it, publishing poetry, attending retreats like the Squaw Valley poetry workshop, and generally making her name and her writing known to a national audience. I have a vivid memory of sitting with Anjail in the warm mountain sun. She still had her sight at the time, and I felt her looking at me hard because I was way too green, not fully grasping the precarious balance a woman, an African American woman especially, needed to execute to make it in a world where so few blacks ventured. Well, somehow we both landed where we set out to be so many years ago.

Anjail has published two books of poetry, *The Color of Memory* (Clear Vision Press, 1997) and *Necessary Kindling* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001), and taught at universities across the United States. She joined the faculty at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro in 2003 and is now an associate professor and the director of the creative writing program. She lost her eyesight in 2000 and has adapted to one of the most extreme changes a person can experience.

When Margaret Bauer asked me to interview Anjail for *NCLR*, I could not believe my luck.* I had wondered about her over the years and here we both were, a few hundred miles apart in North Carolina. If I believed in accidents before, I certainly do not now. I just feel very fortunate to have found her and to see her strength and determination as strong as ever.

* Thomas interviewed Ahmad in her home in Greensboro, NC, in the fall of 2012, with followup questions via email. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by *NCLR* interns, then edited and organized for clarity and flow, while remaining true to the voices and intentions of the speakers.

ABOVE Anjail Rashida Ahmad

Beach photography by Dale Foshe of **Dogwood Photography** throughout this interview is of Holden Beach, NC, which comes up toward the end of the interview

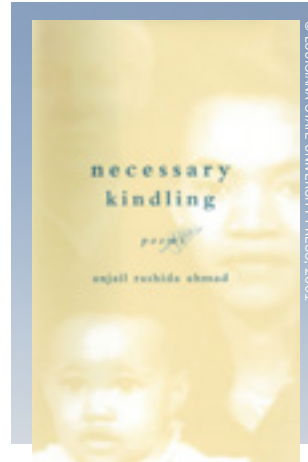
AMBER FLORA THOMAS is an Assistant Professor of poetry at ECU. She received her MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. Thomas is the recipient of several poetry awards, including the Dylan Thomas American Poet Prize. Her poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines and two collections, *Eye of Water* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), which won the Cave Canem Prize, and *The Rabbits Could Sing* (University of Alaska Press, 2012).

AMBER FLORA THOMAS: *Many NCLR readers are new to your poetry so let's start by discussing what has happened with your poetry since Necessary Kindling was released in 2001 with Louisiana State University Press? You won an award for this book, right?*

ANJAIL RASHIDA AHMAD: Well, the book was a finalist in a competition, but didn't actually win the award. During the time that *Necessary Kindling* was preparing to come out I lost my eyesight, and I thought that was the end of my writing career. How can a blind person make it in the literate world? I met the poet Pinkie Gordon Lane after I participated in an open mic reading at a black poetry festival. I'd never heard of her (even though she was a well-known poet), but she asked to see one of the poems I read, "Namesake." Pinkie asked if it would be okay for her to publish the poem in the *African American Review*. I had been trying to get published in there for some time. After the publication, she contacted me to ask if I had a manuscript of poems I could send her. And I did what every good poet does in this position. I lied and said yes I do. I had a manuscript I'd torn up because I'd been sending it out for a while and knew obviously, it wasn't working. I reconfigured the manuscript and sent it off to her. It took some months, but she was the one that got my book published with LSU Press. She broke that open for me.

At the time she asked about the manuscript I was feeling pretty disillusioned about my writing. How was I going to make poems now? I was often inspired to write poetry because I'd see the sun setting in a certain way or a person's body language, and now those things were wiped away. How was I supposed to make poetry? Not only that, I couldn't even see the writing on the page. How was I going to see the writing on my computer? I've learned to use a synthesized voice program on the computer, but it's like listening to sawdust. Sawdust doesn't have much value in and of itself. And I had an inspiration. When I listened to the computer reading the poem, I would say it in my head at the same time. This gave warmth to the language. My writing actually became far more visual than before because I had to try through language to make sure that what I thought and saw in my mind was there for readers in the final poem.

Can we talk a little bit about the influence of visual experiences in your poetry? I certainly enjoyed reading Necessary Kindling. Many of these poems seemed to be inspired by a visual experience, such as color or movement. The light plays a huge part in a lot of the poems. The way the light is coming through a window into a room. I was thinking in particular of the poem "A Room Full of Light," in which the speaker is looking not only at a room full of light but also at a Picasso painting, perhaps his piece The Man with the Blue Guitar? There is a brightness and insistence on colors and light in "Apple Picking," as well. So are you saying that you're now even more invested with visual experiences in your writing? How is this influence affecting your newer work?



© LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001

I know what it's like to
see in the world.

I have been an observer in the world.

Well, you have to remember I have a history of seeing. I know what it's like to see in the world. I have been an observer in the world. There's only so many ways the body can move, and when you say a word the lips can only go a certain way. The teeth, tongue, and palate lend a quality to what the words will sound like.

My education started when I was a teenager. I bought myself a transistor radio and a lot of times I couldn't sleep so I'd be up at the wee hours of the night in my open window, and I'd turn my radio on and listen, trying to find a station. The further away, the more seductive it was. I would listen to the voices of these people and try to imagine what they looked like. I got pretty good at listening to people and describing them. I didn't know I was gaining skills that would be useful to me later in life; sometimes I think "seeing" people in this way is a little intuitive too. Since I have the blindness, people are very curious but often embarrassed or feel that I will be embarrassed if they ask questions, especially since I've moved to North Carolina, to an environment I have never seen.

Although I no longer have the capacity to see as I once did, I see vivid colors in my dreams, and I think in colors. Colors, like everything else in our environment, give off energy. So when I have an idea for a poem, it can still involve color. Any world without color is not any world I would want to be a part of, even the world that appears on the page of a poem.

No one can imagine

life without sight

once they have it.

I read in an article another reviewer wrote and you have spoken about having a premonition at thirteen that you were going to go blind. Is this memory about imagining the way people looked? Was that a part of the premonition, a part of preparing yourself for blindness?

Oh no, no, no. That did happen when I was about thirteen or so. It just flashed. I've had premonitions and foresights and intuitions about things all my life. I've tried to learn to discern the quality of information that's coming through because it's never wrong. And at times it's been lifesaving to heed it. I can say there is no amount of preparation that can adequately prepare you for the loss of a faculty such as sight. What the premonition did for me was get me to hurry up, be about things quickly. And to this day I have to remember to slow down because I'm already blind. Before, I was trying to run ahead of blindness and get things done before the curtain came down so to speak. No one can imagine life without sight once they have it. I know that because I felt that way. I listen to people and that's what they say: they just can't imagine blindness. And it's true, you can't. It's nothing like you imagine at all.

Tell me a little bit about your writing process now. You spoke a moment ago about the role the computer plays, that it actually reads your words back to you. Talk a little bit more about this experience. Where does the poem begin for you? What is your process once you go to the computer?

Often it is some sound that I hear. It's like a kind of dictation that sounds like a voice speaking. It will superimpose itself over whatever else is going on for me. I could be tidying up my desk or making the bed or thinking, and then I notice that superimposed over my thoughts there's another voicing going on and I just need to sharpen my awareness to pick it up. As soon as I'm aware of it, I can find the thread and the poem starts to come more to the fore. At this point, I'm ready to approach the computer to begin the actual writing process. I use adaptive software called screen-reading software that turns text on the screen into speech. So as I type, each keystroke is spoken aloud, and when I'm ready, I can have the computer read aloud the new poem or whatever I'm working on. Even with this technological support, my job is still the same: to clarify the poem on the page. That never changes.

Like I tell my students, many of whom think that poems happen in a space called "Nowhere" where there's no time, there's no place, there's no physicality, there's no local, there's no stuff of the world. The poem basically might read as a monologue, a talking head, and the talking head is usually like a typical novice student poem. It's often the "dreaded love" or the "angry" poem or the "hate" poem. The poems are most often speaking to someone, even if we don't know who it is yet. The poem's situation happened in a place with furniture, be it tresses or cars or literal furniture in a house or dwelling. I tell my students that the best way to learn new subjects is to involve as many sensory experiences as you can: to see it, to hear it, to write it with your hand, to recite it, which makes the learning more lasting. But for me, everything is sound. I have to listen to everything.

So how I make something that is sound come alive is to put the flesh on the bones of it. Place is where it's happening. Place is important for me. I have to know where I am. I mean literally, I have to know where I am. When I moved into this house, people would offer, "We'll come over and help you clean." And I'm like, well no, I'll do it myself. I have to find my way. It took me awhile to realize the dimension of some of the rooms. Through cleaning up and putting my hands on things I began to realize, oh, this room is this way; it's shaped like this. We've got a wall over here, the wall goes this way. And then, after a while, I began to understand what the room was like as far as I could know from not having sight.

And then I could “see” the room because I had felt and experienced how to see a room. In the case with my poems, I have to do a lot of listening to what’s taking shape on the computer screen, and while that is going on, images flood my mind, and this goes on throughout the several revisions until the poem begins to feel complete. Finding my way through a new poem can be likened to the process of acquainting myself with a new physical space in the way I find out what’s there through exploration. With the poem, I have to listen for the places where experience is congregating or where the open spaces are pooling, for instance. The entire process can take up to two years to get a single poem clarified.

So you’re saying that your newer poetry doesn’t draw on memories from when you had sight as much? Are you inspired to write poems about something you saw when you had sight?

Well, I sent you some poems the other day. In one of the last ones, “Remapping,” the speaker’s looking across the San Francisco Bay and reflects on the blue sky. Nobody asks, “How do you know it’s blue?” It’s an assumption I can make. And that’s what poets do when we’re writing: we make the best possible guesses. So often there are things we don’t exactly know; we’re required to fill that in with something reasonable that feels like the truth.

What do you rely on in terms of working with the poem on the page? Has the shape of your poems changed?

Yes. I do some of the same things with spacing. I like a poem to range out and use its space liberally. And I don’t write poems in the way that Sharon Olds’s poems are written. Once you see a poem of hers, they’re pretty much going to look that way each time because she uses the hymnal form. The line length and spacing are characteristically Sharon. I had to play around with shape at first because I couldn’t see the page. I have to imagine the line. This happened while we were working on the manuscript with LSU because the copy editor needed me to make a judgment call about where to break the poems across pages. We went over every comma and every space where I had inadvertently hit the space bar, for example. Then he would ask me about a place, like line ten, which was indented seventeen spaces in, and he asked me if that was what I had intended. How the hell do I know?

As an African American I lived in a racialized world. My experience was always touched by race and gender.

With blindness it’s as though race and gender are wiped away.

And that’s very disorienting because race talks about place, where you belong, where you’re allowed to go and not to go.

I had to really think about how and why I was making formal choices on the page. He said, “Do you intend for the line to be there under the letter ‘e’?” I realized then that being so idiosyncratic was not working for me; it was making too many complications. So for awhile I tried to go by tabs, because tabs go five spaces, five spaces, every five spaces, so five, ten, fifteen, twenty, like that. I could mathematically calculate how far a line was sitting out on the page. When he told me that a line had started under the letter “e” in a word, I couldn’t see that. So then, after my attempt at using tabbing, I tried to see how a word looks when it trails another word, right off the last letter or one space over, on the next line down. I know what that looks like. That is easier for me to keep up with.

So what are you working on right now? What are some of the subjects infiltrating your newer poems?

One place I had to visit was the blindness. It was such a huge experience to go through. And I find that people are lately curious. It really has changed my life in ways that I couldn’t have imagined. As an African American I lived in a racialized world. My experience was always touched by race and gender. With blindness it’s as though race and gender are wiped away. And that’s very disorienting because race talks about place, where you belong, where you’re allowed to go and not to go.

Do you mean this in regards to being around other blind people or being in the world period?

Being in the sighted world. It's about how sighted people treat me because blind people can't see me. So, I'm just another person to them. Blind people don't generally think about that, I don't believe. We can't see the person, so we don't get caught up in what they look like; there is not much point in that.

I believe many of us think of ourselves first by our race and ethnicity, where we come from, where our people come from, cultural and social realities first. I think gender comes second to identity for many people. But you've been thrust into a existence where you've lost your sight, and blindness trumps everything. Is that kind of what you're saying? Blindness exerts itself over everything else.

It's taken over everything else. There are people who will approach me in certain ways because I'm blind or because I'm a woman. And I know there are people who will stay away from me for those same reasons. How the issue of race and gender play out

for me in blindness usually happens like this. I was aware of how race and gender impacted people's interactions. I have lived that my whole life. With the blindness, I slowly became aware of how people approached me *differently*, as if I had no race or gender at all. In a racialized world, for example, certain racial group members understand it is not okay to interact with members of certain other racial groups. Often when such folks are forced into such situations as these, it's very awkward for them. Once when I was visiting in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, I was treated without regard to my racial identity or gender, and it was wonderful. I can compare my treatment since blindness to this experience somewhat. Sometimes, this difference can manifest as a sense of isolation,

especially when people in my environment are not comfortable being around a person with an observable disability.

So let's talk about teaching in North Carolina at A&T. What kind of student are you encountering? I'm sure you've seen a lot, because you've been teaching here for ten years now?

Well, I started teaching at NYU. It was a unique situation because it's a very urban and metropolitan area. People are very literate. You can engage almost anybody anywhere in a conversation. I'm exaggerating somewhat. There was a lot of diversity in the classroom and students in general, were inclined to be vocal. When I started teaching in Missouri, the first day of class, every student was present. That was ideal, but highly unexpected based on my earlier experiences in New York. Scary! I thought for sure I would have to drag them into class a couple days later, but there they sat like little Stepford students. "Yes, Ms. Teacher." They were very polite and well-mannered, and they felt very generic and that was scary, too. They were so conforming, and it was hard to get people to talk, to branch out from what they knew. As a black faculty member at the university, the thing I experienced out there was a cultural gulf with the majority of these students. I was the first black teacher any of them had ever had. Their experience with black people had come through television and media, primarily. There was always this something in the classroom. It didn't become real clear to me until I came to teach at A&T, which is majority black.

Then I joined the faculty at A&T, which is my first time being at an HBCU [Historically Black College or University]. My entire education was spent at white mainstream universities. But I lived in the Black cultural mecca of Atlanta for thirteen years, and during that time, I learned a lot about code-switching and how to navigate diverse cultural groups. As a person of color, my well-being and livelihood depended on it. By contrast, consider the very first day of class – now mind you, by the time I reach A&T, I can't see anybody. This is a composition class I'm teaching. I'm at the head of the class at the desk and I'm talking to the students, giving them an overview of the course

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALIK MCKINNON



ABOVE Anjail Ahmad with students at the 2013 Angel Cove Writer's Retreat, held at North Carolina A&T State University; (counterclockwise from Ahmad) Ltonia Cromes, Ashley Minor, Oni Crawford, Justin Halyard, Domonique McNeill, Gray Graves

and what we're going to cover, and that voice I mentioned earlier was talking to me while I'm speaking to them. Something's different here. Something's not here. I didn't know what, I just felt something was missing. And what was missing was that cultural gulf. I knew if I, with a certain inflection of my voice, cocked my head a certain way, those students would know exactly what I meant. I didn't have to explain myself. That was a real gift. It's not that I thought we were all exactly the same, but there are experiences that black people can have that bring about unification, a sense of unity, because as black people living in America, there are certain experiences we can be guaranteed we'll all have at some point. Because we're often regarded in the same ways in the media, it can have an equalizing, economizing effect. As an African American, I learned early on how to work in diverse situations. I enjoy meeting people from diverse cultural backgrounds. I have to be able to meet and greet whomever. And people who are not of the dominant circle are required to be able to meet people in the dominant culture, and on and on. At A&T, I felt like I was helping my people. I had an opportunity to make a difference with a group of people who could really appreciate what I was there for, and that was very enriching.

I want to talk more about teaching here in North Carolina, but let's go back to poetry for a moment. I have some questions specifically about Necessary Kindling. There is a lot of continuity and energy regarding familial relationships in these poems. You mentioned the poem, "Namesake" earlier. This particular poem highlights the importance of how names are carried across generations, especially by women. Names seem to carry the identity of the ancestral and the familial relationship. First of all, I'm curious about your own name. Is it a name that your mother gave you? Is it a name that you gave yourself?

Growing up, I didn't feel like I had the right name. It was later in life, as a young adult, that I learned that people had the power to change their names. Children seem to embody the attributes of the name given to them by their parents, whether the parents know consciously what the meaning of the name is or not. So my feeling was, as an African American, looking at our history, that our names were taken, and that I could get out of a name that I didn't feel suited me. Once I changed my name, it was like someone unleashed the shackles off my

Poetry can

hold the power for healing.

sense of self-worth. I felt good about myself. People regarded me differently. I was sighted then. I could see in people's eyes a level of recognition I never experienced in the old slave name. In my new chosen name, I'd go somewhere and they'd have to call my name, and usually they'd be looking for a man because there's no "a" on the end of "Anjail." I would get this recognition in their eyes that I didn't get with my other name. What I got with the other name was not much expectation once they saw my face. Living through the transformation did a lot for me. It did a lot for my own personal stock, how I felt about myself. I felt like I had a place in this world for once, and I could take up some space.

You mentioned Sharon Olds earlier. Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with Sharon Olds's writing? Is she one of your main influences? Who are your literary influences?

Her work has been important to me because of the sheer brute honesty with which she writes. When I came across her book *Satan Says*, I was amazed that someone could have the audacity to tell that story. She wasn't hiding the difficult or scary details. She shows us that we can talk about these things that have harmed us, shaped us, and made us who we are. That quality of story is what I take away from Sharon. I also enjoy following Rita Dove. She's a powerful storyteller, and her language choices are inspiring; she's such a technician. There's also Lucille Clifton, another storyteller and master of the line break. There's also Robert Haas for the quiet power I find in his work. And there are others.

In your own work, how do you speak about experiences that relate to family? Has this honesty and voice impacted your family in any way?

My experiences are all I know, and I don't presume to speak for anybody, but I know these people have shaped me, and part of writing is to gain

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN WAINWRIGHT



understanding. Some of it is exorcism. I can say that some of my truths involved my relationship with my mother, and after my book came out, she was not too pleased about how I referenced her in a few of those poems. Those poems opened the door for some honest conversations and for healing to take place as well. Poetry can hold the power for healing. I love this aspect of poetry. Sometimes it is redemption, redeeming the history that I have, that is valuable. The people in my personal history are valuable, and because they are valuable I am valuable. I hadn't always felt this way about my family. Writing the difficult poems was hard work at the time, but I'm glad I persisted. By the time my book with LSU came out, I could hardly recognize those poems. They had grown up so much in the editing process, and with them all dressed up in a brand new print volume, I was surprised to read them and not feel any former pain or angst. At that point, those poems had taken their rightful places as ordinary American stories. They could have been anybody's stories at that point. No more shame.

When I was at NYU, I had a very difficult time staying in school. I considered dropping out and changing my major, even, to psychology. I had a meeting with Sharon to talk about these feelings. I said, "I don't trust these feelings and I feel confused. I don't know what I should do." We were the working poor in my family background. How come I didn't know we were poor when we were poor? I've heard other people say this, too. Living in poverty, being poor is often spoken of as if being poor is such an awful thing, almost criminal. So I had this crisis at NYU about being

where I was, about where and who I had come from, about staying there, and sticking it out. I'd go to counseling; I'd end up counseling the counselor. When I was in Missouri the struggle expanded. I'd find myself fighting everybody in my classes; everything was confrontation.

I'd landed in the belly of the beast. I'd landed in the organ that makes the story, the American story that names the heroes and the people that belong in the shadows. I was participating in a history in which I was marginalized, but now I was a part of the team. I had landed on the enemy's side. And I'd set up a lot of internal conflicts.

I was determined not to write about dead white poets in my dissertation. I wasn't even going to write about poets that scholars had written about ad infinitum. I was going to find my own tongue, to borrow from Maxine Hong Kingston who says our stories matter. My story matters. My story is my mother's story, my grandmother's story, my auntie's, my cousin's. At NYU, I realized that everything my grandmother had told me, the things my mother tried to tell me, they couldn't help me here. I needed a mentor who could tell me where I was and what was going on. My first workshop was with Toi Derricott. She turned out to be a wonderful workshop leader. I was one of two black writers in the workshop. In the workshop somebody would share a poem and the rest of us would talk about it. Help the writer. I'd be doing all this heavy lifting, and it'd be my turn and you could hear a pin drop on cotton. Toi charged everyone with servicing our fellow workshop poets. She said, you don't have to be personally interested, this may not be where you work from, but you have to try to get there, to where the person is, to help where you can. She changed that whole climate. So, she immediately became a mentor for me.

You've had some incredible mentors in Sharon Olds and Toi Derricott. How has their mentoring affected you as a teacher? Are you confronting situations in your classes at A&T such as what you described at graduate school?

ABOVE Anjail Rashida Ahmad (far right) at the 10th Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, Greenville, NC, 21 Sept. 2013. Here she is participating in a panel discussion, "Tarheel Literature in Black and White," with (left to right) Calvin Alexander Ramsey, Anna Jean Mayhew, and Wiley Cash (Watch the panel discussion from the event's [website](#).) Later that day, Ahmad led a workshop titled "Writing Poetry that Begs to be Read Aloud."

Yes, but not in the same way. What I experienced at NYU had to do with cultural difference, even racial difference. This year, I have a course called “Spoken Word and Performance.” Mostly, my students are all African American. I had a young white guy in my class, and so I had concerns right away about him feeling alienated. I know what it’s like to be the only one. You can feel marginalized even when no one is trying to marginalize you. When I think about my students, I think about authenticity. Trying to help them get there, trying to get them to clarify their own truths, and wanting them to really service the work. With spoken word there can be a lot of carelessness around language, a lot of sloppiness. So I try to instill good work ethic and an appreciation of the power of words and their meanings. Also, the power of taking the floor. You have the stage now, what are you going to do with it? What legacy are you engaging with?

I wasn’t really interested in getting involved with live spoken word. But when I arrived, I was charged with designing the creative writing program. So, I did what Hillary Clinton did. I went on a listening tour. I would go around to campuses and listen to younger poets. They would invite me to readings and events they planned. I found out students were doing their own thing. Training or not, that didn’t stop them. What I learned is that when I talked to them about their work and gave them unsolicited feedback, they would welcome it because they wanted to grow. When you say “poetry reading,” you may as well say “plague.” Many students think it’s something boring and uninteresting, and in a lot of cases they’re right. So I decided to design a course to get them in the door, appealing to where they were in order to give me an opportunity to provide them with the tutoring and the instruction that they really needed.

How do your role as teacher and your role as writer connect? Do they battle for your attention and energy?

Teaching, as my instructors in college told me, is how we reward our poets. That’s a reward that has a propensity to rob you at the same time because of all the life energy you pour into students, preparing, tutoring, and time outside the classroom with service responsibilities. My writing life has had to really struggle to be alive. There are periods when it has really thrived and periods when it has really

PHOTOGRAPH BY DALE FOSHE. COURTESY OF DOGWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY



gone underground. I’ve done some really rewarding things since I’ve been here. Some of them feed my spirit and feed my soul, but they don’t always turn into poetry. I welcome the opportunities, and I’m grateful for the times when I’ve been able to share poetry experiences with my students because I’ve learned they have a lot of regard for what I do. That is a kind of compensation, but it doesn’t get recognized, nor is the same value placed on this experience as publishing a poem or a book of poems. It’s a struggle.

You’ve lived in so many different places. How does the landscape of North Carolina enter into your poetry?

Well, I don’t think it has really entered into my poetry that I’m aware of yet, because North Carolina doesn’t exist for me visually. I didn’t live here as a sighted person, so I don’t have memory connected to the landscape. I know that as a sighted person, the environment is very crucial in shaping who we are and how we think. The things of the environment, buildings we pass every day, can be reminders of an experience – of something we did somewhere, some accomplishment or some failure. That’s one of the values of traveling, moving to new cities. When you go there, there’s not one thing to remind you of your past. So at some level, your past doesn’t really exist for you there.

So you end up being very present?

Yes.

So what is that landscape? What is the place you think of as the most essential, natural place that enters your poems and defines you?

COURTESY OF MCCAIN LIBRARY, DIGITAL COLLECTIONS, AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE



ANJAIL R. AHMAD
DECATUR, GEORGIA

That would be, the sound of the place, the smell of the place otherwise known as the here and now. In terms of a landscape, I put big stock in being present as much as possible. The place I am at any given moment matters most to me as a writer.

The fabric of the here and now forms an interesting landscape in terms of the sound, feel,

and smell of a place. In discussing landscape, we often focus on what we can see about it while discounting other ways of apprehending the landscape. Nowadays, all the other sensory ways are how I experience a landscape. Beyond that, it would be, either the mountains or the seashore. In North Carolina, in late fall and winter, it's that wonderful smell of fireplaces blazing in the night air. When I go outside and smell that, I feel connected to the people dotting the landscape all around. I know then that I am not alone. In spring and summer, it's the arrival of the insects and the birds, especially the frogs and woodpeckers with all their noise, that connects me to a sense of the landscape. In late summer where would I be without the wall of noisy energy day and night with the cicadas and their boiling sound? Living in such an alive world inclines me to bring that quality into the poems I write. That I am blind can be no excuse at all. Even without sight, it remains a beautiful world.

With regard to physical landscape, I can recall my visit to the sea shore. Last summer, some friends and I rented a beach house at Holden Beach. One afternoon we walked down to the water and I waded in. It was five o'clock and the tide was coming in strong and the water was choppy. A big wave caught me and I go in face first. I told myself just don't fight it. Just go with the flow, see where it takes you. Following an impulse for a poem is like this level of

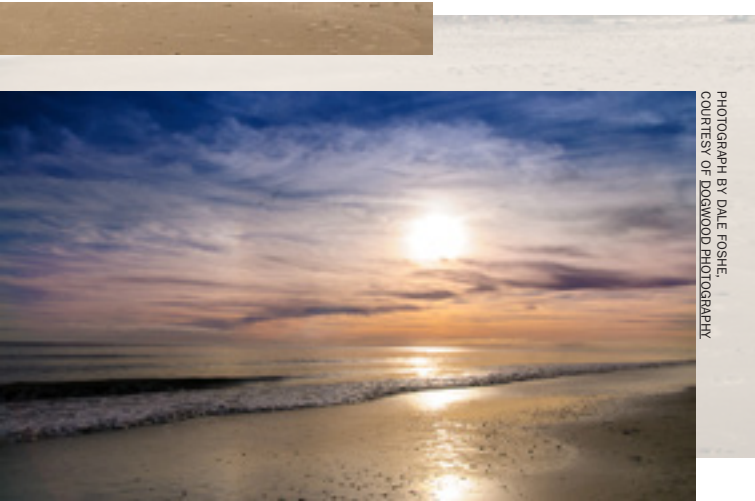
invitation, and I find it's best to just follow wherever it leads. When everyone tired of being in the water and decided to sit in the sand and talk, I was standing there feeling a little agitated. I didn't want to sit and talk. So the little voice in my head perks up. Why don't you walk on the beach? So I went out to where the sand was wet, and I walked until I couldn't hear them. Then I turned around and walked back the other way, keeping the shoreline and surf on my right side, as a point of orientation. I walked down until I couldn't hear them, then I'd turn and go back and past them so I knew where I was. After a while, I went out farther and I started to turn. And I thought, Why turn? They're not going to leave you. If they're tired, they will make sure to collect you. So I spent an hour walking the length of the beach. I folded up my cane and I stuck it in the back of my pants and a couple of people laughed and said, "Look at that Anjail!" and "Why is she just walking out there?" Only one person understood. She said, "I get it. Think about it. When does she get a chance to be free?" It was like walking in the world again. Like I was walking down the block, going somewhere on my own, not worried about what's in front of me or do I know where I am or counting my steps or anything like that. So, you know, it made me feel like my old self. A very present self to be able to do that. As a sighted poet in the world, I wrote poems from this place of freedom. It really felt good to simulate that place once more.

What a powerful story of solitude and independence in nature.

Yes, and the water calls you. The water has a voice. It speaks with a rhythm.

Did you hear that voice before you lost your sight?

Yes. When I learned to swim as an adult, I used to swim real hard because I realized I was still afraid. I was afraid if I slowed down I'd go down. This was my first year at Agnes Scott College, and I took a swimming class; I wanted to get over my fear of deep water. What I had to understand about the water is that the water wants to hold us up. It also has the capacity to dissolve things. There's something important about breaking our contact with the earth sometime. We are so earthbound and so landlocked in our thinking.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DALE POSHE,
COURTESY OF DOGWOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

But, when you leave the earth and enter water, everything can be transformed. Even in the air, that little moment of leaping off the side, those few minutes that you're no longer on the earth and you've not yet entered the water, it's a little moment of freedom, free space. That's why I love the water so much, because of those experiences. I can hear the water.

Are you writing about blindness now? Are you writing those poems?

Yes, I have, in the last couple of years or so. When I was first losing my eyesight, it felt like too much to have the experience and try to write about it, too. It often came out as white, hot anger – or short bursts, more reactionary than anything. I figured it would be important someday to just walk into that room and just be with it.

Who was it that said he could spend the rest of his life in a cell and still have all of the experiences he would ever need to write for the rest of his life? Are you finding that this is true?

That's what Rilke says, in *Letters to a Young Poet*. He says, you've lived all these years and every year there's been how many days and how many experiences in a given day? You could spend the rest of your life in a jail cell and you would never leave childhood if you had only that to write about.

With blindness, I am less distracted with the world; I can find the time to sit and be with it or to listen to the ideas percolating in my creative mind, for instance. Because I am not distracted by sight, there is much more that I can notice, I find.

But you still want to write about where you are now? What you're in, now?

When I was an undergraduate at Agnes Scott College, I took a fiction writing class, a narrative writing course. Poetry was my thing, but I wanted to diversify my writing. One day I had a meeting with the instructor. His office was located in the basement of a building. This was the first time I had ever gone to his office. I got down into the bowels of the building and exited the elevator. I found myself walking and dragging my shoes on purpose. And I'm liking it. I never walk like that. I have a quickstep, you know heel-toe, up, I'm outta there. But I was dragging my feet, and the more I did it, the more I liked it. When I finally stepped in the door, he said, "Oh it's you. I was wondering who that was walking like that." I said, "That was me. I normally don't walk like that, but I was just in the mood for it. So I thought, why not?" So he said, "You're a writer who likes to write about the real." I was always trying to understand the reality of what I was in. If you don't understand where you are when you're there, there's ample opportunity when you're no longer there to look back with a different set of eyes and try to understand what it meant and what it means now.

Well thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. It has been twenty years since I met you at the Community of Writers poetry workshop in Squaw Valley, California. You had your sight then and I was barely twenty years old and thought I had it all figured out. Of course, now I know I know nothing, which is such a relief because there is still a lot to discover.

That's a great place to be. I just want to say thank you for coming to talk with me; it's been a wonderful re-acquaintance. And you didn't appear to me as someone who thought they knew it all. I think you had a sense of yourself, which is a good thing for any artist. I remember you as a delightful person.

I never could have imagined that twenty years later I would be sitting in your living room in North Carolina, where I also live. And that we would be having a discussion about poetry. I just find it amazing. Life is very surprising.

These are moments that make for poetry. ■

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST*Honeysuckle*

BY JOAN MCLEAN

A grey tomcat stiff-legs
across the gravel lane,
roused finally
by the evening cool.
Old Marvin Perry's
12-pack of empties
lies in the wheel track,
their aluminum glow
conversing with the moon.
The tom drops down
into the ditch
and the weeds take him
and fold him into the night.

I wanted to walk home
from my neighbors' house
even though
it's well past midnight
and I'm dead tired.
The honeysuckle had opened
in the afternoon heat
and its scent
makes holes open up
in the top of my head.
I like how it feels
when the night and moonlight
go in and out through the holes.

I want to tell someone
about the holes
and I consider calling
out for old Marvin. Maybe
one of his empties is full.
Then I hear him
or someone
coming along the lane.
Just a shape, dark in the dark.
Marvin's been dead eleven years,
but he still drinks here
every Wednesday night.
Still leaves his empties in the dirt.
He stops a few yards away,
points at me, just over my head.
Says "Honeysuckle"
then steps down
into the ditch.

JOAN MCLEAN is a self-employed ecologist living in Silk Hope, NC. She has published two chapbooks, *Up From Dust* (2009) and *Place* (2011), both from Finishing Line Press. Her poems have received several awards, including a McDill Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society, a Poetry Council of North Carolina Award, and two first prizes in the Fields of Earth poetry competition. She was also a finalist for the Gribble Press Chapbook Prize.

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST*It Must Be All Right***BY JOAN MCLEAN**

Something dark and quick
 just surfaced on the pond,
 There's the wind – a sigh in the pines,
 and the crickets
 saying zip-zip, zip-zip
 down low in the bleached winter grass.
 So it must be all right.

If the Indian grass
 is dabbing the air
 with its fronds of seed,
 if the marsh hawk
 is laying down her benediction
 along the slough, surely
 what we've done is not so bad.

The auburn haze of the redtwig hedge –
 would it speak so boldly
 against the grey tree line
 if it were not all right?

And the juncos. Would they have arrived
 in such numbers
 on the same day in November
 as last year
 if it were not, after all, okay –
 what we've done?

I've heard the great horned owl
 again this year, faint
 and farther to the north
 now that the woods to the south
 have been clear cut.
 But I hear her
 if it's sharp cold
 in the dead of night.
 So it must be all right.



The Return (archival inkjet print, 17x23) by Linda Andrea Fox

California native **LINDA ANDREA FOX** served for eight years as the biomedical photographer for Duke University Hospital and the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. She received her MFA and BFA in Photography from the ECU School of Art and Design and now works at the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

SOUL-MAKING SHORT FICTION

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

Rebecca Lee. *Bobcat and Other Stories*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2013.

Peter Makuck. *Allegiance and Betrayal: Stories*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013.

KRISTINA L. KNOTTS has a PhD from the University of Tennessee. She works at Westfield State University in the Learning Disabilities Program and teaches English part-time. She is a regular reviewer for *NCLR*.

REBECCA LEE, a native of Saskatchewan, Canada, received her MFA from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and is currently an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Department at UNC-Wilmington. In 2013, she won the Danuta Gleed Literary Award for *Bobcat and Other Stories*.

PETER MAKUCK is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of ECU's Harriot College of Arts and Sciences and the founding editor of *Tar River Poetry*. The author of seven poetry collections, he was interviewed in *NCLR* 2007, and his poetry has appeared in that issue and the 1995 and 1996 issues. *Allegiance and Betrayal* is his third short story collection.

The short story remains a highly regarded art form in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the 2013 Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded to Alice Munro, author of over a dozen collections of short fiction, as well as Lydia Davis's receipt of the 2013 Man Booker International Prize for Fiction. Two recent short story collections by writers living in North Carolina offer impressive contributions to the genre. Rebecca Lee's *Bobcat and Other Stories* and Peter Makuck's *Allegiance and Betrayal* provide engrossing stories that live up to what Mark Edmundson describes in his essay "The Ideal English Major" as the "soul-making . . . dimension" of literature that enriches readers' lives. He goes on to say that the English major "knows that any worthwhile event in life requires commentary and analysis in giant proportion," and this idea certainly translates to readers at large.¹ In particular, Lee and Makuck's two collections offer readers the opportunity to explore interesting, intelligent characters who seek to understand the sometimes baffling events of their lives and the mysteries of their own behavior and motivations.

Rebecca Lee has written an intelligent, hard-to-put-down collection of short stories, *Bobcat and Other Stories*. As in her first book, a novel titled *The City Is a Rising Tide* (2006), her short fiction features a range of diverse settings from Hong Kong to a Southern college campus, and in each story Lee creates a powerful sense of voice – sometimes sardonic or self-deprecating, but always poetic and wise.

Many of Lee's characters are remarkably sensitive and generous to others around them – sometimes to a fault. We see this large-heartedness especially in her narrators' reactions to those with some sort of disability. In *Bobcat*, several characters have pronounced facial tics, and one has a hand with three fused fingers – distinctions another writer might have rendered grotesque. Lee's characters are notable in their expansive desire to accept others, often viewing these traits as symbols of human fragility and beauty. In "The Banks of the Vistula," the main character describes her boyfriend's three-fingered hand as having "the nimbus of an idea about it, as if the gene that had sprung this hand had a different world in mind, a better world, where hands had more torque when they grasped each other" (48). In "World Party," the narrator recalls a Lutheran pastor from her childhood whose facial tics add a dramatic emphasis to his sermons. She describes his face during such a moment as "that grave, magnificent revelation of fragility . . . a beautiful old man's face, God and time and mortality working its way over it" (149). Lee's characters tend to view others through this generous lens, and including these elements lends her writing an authenticity that humanizes her characters.

"The Banks of the Vistula" is one of the most engaging and surprising stories in *Bobcat*, at times poetic and funny, despite coming from the voice of a student plagiarist. The narrator, Margaret, a first-year college student, enthuses

¹ Mark Edmundson, "The Ideal English Major," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 29 July 2013: [web](#).

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON HESS OF WHQR



about her college experience: the professors, she says, “thrilled me. Most had come from the East Coast and seemed fragile and miserable in the Midwest. Occasionally during class you could see hope for us rising in them, and then they would look like great birds flying over an uncertain landscape, asking mysterious questions, trying to lead us somewhere we could not yet go” (34). This empathy for her professors, as well as her desire to live up to their expectations, leads her to submit a plagiarized paper to her linguistics professor, Dr. Stasselova. Unfortunately, the Soviet propaganda she submits as her own work without understanding its intent rings eerily familiar to her professor, a Polish émigré who served in the Soviet Army during the Cold War and oppressed his fellow Poles. He certainly knows a thing or two about Soviet propaganda. In one scene, he justifies his actions to the class saying, “Many considered it anti-Polish to join the Russian army, but I believed, as did my comrades,

that more could be done through the system, within the support of the system, than without” (41). When Dr. Stasselova confronts Margaret in his office about her dishonesty, their interchange is memorable and staggering: “‘You seem fully immersed in a study of oppression. Any reason for this?’” She replies, “‘Well, I do live in the world’” (35).

The story takes off from there, bringing challenges Margaret hadn’t expected, but it’s to Lee’s credit as a writer and a storyteller that the reader finds Margaret’s voice entertaining and her contradictory attitudes comic and genuine for a young person just making sense of her own identity as a student and writer. Lee shows Margaret to be more than just a first-year student who is justifying her dishonesty while oblivious to her professor’s troubling past. Her relationship with her professor, who wishes to teach her a “lesson” (65), actually takes on a more symbolic role and leads to her growth as she begins to think about her own possibilities as a writer. In this story, as in others in the collection, Lee’s narrators often regard the wider landscape and their own position in the world.

In several scenes in “Banks of the Vistula,” when she is listening in Dr. Stasselova’s class or talking with him, Margaret often looks beyond him to the outside scene. When she first talks to him in his office, she sees that the college’s “blond architecture . . . looked like a rendition of thought itself, rising out of the head in intricate, heart-breaking cornices that became more abstract and complicated

as they rose” (33–34). In the story’s final scene, when she must deliver the plagiarized paper at a campus symposium, she looks past her professor, reflecting on what she learned from him. As she comes to realize, her complicated experience with Dr. Stasselova was about learning to become a writer in her own right, to find language reflecting her own ideas. Ultimately, she recognizes the power of learning to write. The lesson she derives from her time with Stasselova is “about the sentence: the importance of, the sweetness of. And I did long for it, to say one true sentence of my own, to leap into the subject, that sturdy vessel traveling upstream through the axonal predicate into what is possible; into the object, which is all possibility; into what little we know of the future, of eternity” (65–66). In nearly every story, Lee’s characters look and see a landscape transformed; that transformation sparks their own ability to look inward.

In “World Party,” a single mother is concerned about a young son who is socially isolated from his peers, but she remains hopeful about the world around her. As she walks across the college campus where she works, she sees the campus in bloom: “white clover flowers had sprung up everywhere, ten thousand of them. It was my favorite sight – the field suddenly white instead of green” (143). Later as the narrator walks across the same field with her son, she considers her vulnerable son’s future and she realizes that “[t]he one sermon I’d never heard and needed now, needed every day of Teddy’s life,

was regarding Abraham and Issac. But who can bear it? . . . But the Bible is clear; children will have a destiny, and they will have a mountain, and all you can do is accompany them with the terrible knowledge of all the difficulties they will encounter” (153–54). This passage illustrates the strengths of this collection – intellectual and companionable narrators who care deeply about the people in their lives and who draw strength from nature, the Bible, literature, and people to make their way in the world. Readers will care for these characters and will find themselves identifying with their strengths as well as their flaws. Lee’s female characters in particular call to mind original voices such as Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett or Marilynne Robinson’s Ruth Foster.

Peter Makuck’s third short story collection, *Allegiance and Betrayal*, includes some of his most impressive writing to date. A poet and a short story writer, Connecticut native Makuck has lived most of his adult life in North Carolina, and his oeuvre bears the imprint of the Eastern North Carolina coast and landscape as well as small-town New England. Like Lee’s *Bobcat*, Makuck’s collection shows his characters at transitional points in their lives.

Allegiance and Betrayal is perfectly titled, as the characters here find themselves in a state of flux. Staying “true” to established or expected behaviors constitutes “real” character; to stray from the comfortable would be a betrayal.

However, many of Makuck’s narrators find themselves in the ironic position of coming to the realization that their allegiance or steadfastness was ill-placed. The growth they experience stems from their acceptance of their own need to change and their dawning acceptance of their own limitations. These might be the men Emerson spoke to in “Self-Reliance” whom he chastened for “a foolish consistency.”

In particular, some of the conflicts Makuck explores in this collection are the characters’ own images of what masculinity constitutes. Very often, his male characters try to live up to memories of their fathers and uncles who seemed to project a buoyant and even-tempered image, never moody or uncertain as the sons/nephews very often find themselves feeling. In “A Perfect Time,” one man struggles with his own fear of failing to live up to family expectations. Hank, the story’s protagonist, finds himself in a role he’s not quite comfortable with: the man who fills the part of the capable outdoorsman who takes the family boating and fishing. Looking at an old photograph, he sees the confidence he feels other men in his family wore so easily: “Arms around each other, always a beer bottle in hand, squinting, laughing, they seemed to be having a perfect time” (118). After an embarrassing boat-launching mishap, he is reluctant to take his nephew fishing, but duty gets the best of him, and after a successful day of fishing with the boy, “Hank felt alive all over” (132).

Makuck’s characters are active: they fix cars, tinker with plumbing, dive shipwrecks and deep-sea fish. Wendell in “Diving the Wreck” is like other Makuck characters from *Allegiance and Betrayal*,



PHOTOGRAPH BY ED DOMBROFSKI; COURTESY OF PETER MAKUCK

dissatisfied with where he is in his life. Defensive about the choices he’s made earlier in life and overqualified for his house-cleaning job, Wendell resents a visit from old friends Kevin and Yvonne, whose lives have followed the more usual trajectory of family life and stable employment. Taking his friends on a borrowed boat to dive around a wreck promises a chance to show that his life has substance. But after an unpredictable episode in the water, Wendell begins to rethink whether he’s been too cautious in his recent choices – a defense mechanism, perhaps, to counteract careless behavior when he was younger, which these friends witnessed years ago. In tight prose, Makuck

hints at the feelings Wendell wants to avoid confronting: “He needed to say something to Kevin and Yvonne. He told himself to stop thinking. He watched his hands on the wheel” (168). Despite the characters’ struggles, Makuck’s stories here are very often hopeful as the characters move away from rigidity and shift more toward realization of their own shortcomings and a desire to change.

In his poem, “A Guide to Arrival,” Makuck provides an epigram from St. Catherine of Siena: “All the way to heaven is heaven.”² This line reappears in *Allegiance and Betrayal* in the story “Family.” The idea that the process of living – even the difficulties along the way – is a blessing could describe Makuck’s characters throughout the collection as they navigate the most transitional parts of life.

In an interview with *Oxford American*, Rebecca Lee’s explanation of epiphany could well describe what her characters and Makuck’s do: show characters who press on in their lives, sometimes with self-knowledge and sometimes not. Lee explains that “the story benefits from the struggle” of a character working through difficulties to arrive at a clearer knowledge of their own situation.³ Her characters’ poetic exploration of the world around them and Makuck’s characters’ hard-won truths highlight Edmundson’s idea of literature as a “soul-making” endeavor for readers. The short story genre continues to be revitalized by these two collections. ■

NEAR MATTER AND THE DISTANT STARS

a review by
Susan Laughter Meyers

**Kathy Ackerman. *Coal River Road*.
Livingston, AL: Livingston Press,
2013.**

**Beth Copeland. *Transcendental
Telemarketer*. Buffalo: BlazeVOX,
2012.**

In their latest books, the poets Kathy Ackerman and Beth Copeland take entirely different approaches to getting from page one to the end of the collection. Their distinctly separate methods resemble those of two scientists: one using a microscope, the other a telescope, each to see what she needs to see. One sees the tiniest cells of near matter; the other, a huge landscape of distant stars. Whereas Ackerman keeps a tight hold on memories of her ancestral homeland in the not-too-distant West Virginia mountains, Copeland opens her dreamlike memories and visions to cultures around the world. The two separate visions result in differences in form and style – and, for the reader, a different set of pleasures.

Kathy Ackerman is a poet enamored with place, family, and stories from the past. ***Coal River Road***, her first full collection of poems (which includes numerous poems from her three chapbooks), is bent on preserving a heritage whose remnants are barely still present. The reader is drawn in by what seem to be autobiographical details and characters. Thus, it’s hard not to equate the “I” of the poems with the poet. Divided into three sections, the book turns initially to the poet’s childhood in the first section and part of the second, then to the present in the latter part of the second section, and finally to aging parents and family deaths. It’s not an exaggeration to say that the whole book is death-haunted. Ackerman documents one death after another as a way of holding on – to family, to what has come before, to a sense of continuity. To document is to remember, is to make the past more real.

² Peter Makuck, *Long Lens: New and Selected Poems* (Rochester, NY: BOA, 2010) 177.

³ Liz Newborn, “Author Interview: Rebecca Lee,” *Oxford American* 1 July 2013; [web](#).

Read more about reviewer **SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS** with her poems and a review of her recent poetry collection in the [Flashbacks](#) section of this issue.

COURTESY OF EON ALDEN, CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE



Section I, aptly called “Terra Incognita,” is nostalgic for a simpler life and all the old artifacts that go along with it, many of them now obsolete. Yet that same past, no longer retrievable, is just as much *terra incognita* as the land and the coal mines a Cherokee storyteller once warned her son about, as she recalls in the first poem, “Coal”: “It is folly to go down / where the spirits haven’t gone.” The son, having spent a lifetime digging in the mines, now has “lungs turned to slag.” The mountain itself is all about loss through the decades, we’re told in “Endangered List”: loss of the buffalo, elk, grey wolf, humans (who have migrated north), and finally the mountain top itself (one would guess from fracking). Ackerman documents a time full of danger and poverty, yes, but also a time when things were done “the ancient way,” birth and burial as two examples in “Chipped into Stone.” The poet remembers doilies, quilts, grandfather clocks, and outhouses.

Just when it feels as if the memories are beginning to conjure up a few too many of the stereotypical mountain tropes that one naturally thinks of, Ackerman gives us “Rabbit Jars,” with its peculiar image of whole rabbits canned in jars – a method of food preservation used to save time in the winter months. Likewise, “Funeral Pillows” offers another odd image, this time of homemade pillows made of ribbons taken from funeral wreaths and later given – these “gifts to grief” – as small memorials to the bereaved.

These are just two of several unusual images that play a large role in providing insight to a past richer than that of the stereotypes we typically associate with old-time mountain culture. These haunting images are startling and refreshing.

How else does Ackerman give the reader a sense of a particular time and place? By focusing on the people of her past, especially key family members. If *Coal River Road* has a main character, it’s the speaker’s mother. We see her in the role of homemaker, keeping a spotless house. We see her hands at work, “small / grasping hearts / shiny red from scouring.” In “Blizzard,” she has stockpiled cans of soup in case of a winter storm. Almost inevitably, the blizzard comes, and the poet’s childhood home becomes a safe haven for twenty-two stranded strangers, who were guided there by the father on his way home from work. The stockpiled soup becomes their meal, warmed by the mother on the father’s small army stove. This poem, like numerous others, shows a close-knit family living its simple, hard-scrabble life – the sort of family life that elicits strong memories.

Even the poems of the present in the book’s second section, called “Cul de Sac,” have a wistfulness about them. For example, “Naming the Horse that Doesn’t Belong to Me” – about a horse on the adjoining property, a horse that could also be the poet’s muse – evokes a yearning, on the part of the poet and the horse, to break out of the small circle of cul-de-sac living:

but I am tired of winter sleep, as he is,
wishing for a sweat, wishing he could leap
the lumber of ownership between us,
explore the ridge beyond us,
and the ridge beyond that.

The book’s last section, “Exactly Like Us,” documents the mother’s declining health and death, along with the deaths of other family members. The title comes from something the poet’s mother says at one of the funerals when looking at a painting of Jesus, oddly depicted as a short man with plump feet – the physique of her own family:

KATHY ACKERMAN was born in West Virginia, but has lived in the Carolinas since 1984, currently in Tryon, NC. She received her PhD in American literature from the University of South Carolina and is currently Writer-in-Residence and the Dean of Arts and Sciences at Isothermal Community College in Spindale, NC.

Ackerman is the author of three poetry chapbooks, as well as *The Heart of Revolution* (University of Tennessee Press, 2004), a critical biography of Olive Tilford Dargan (pen name Fielding Burke), whose novel *Call Home the Heart* (1932) was inspired by the Gastonia, NC, mill strikes of 1929.

I point to him, for my mother to see.
 "Well, those painters never saw him," she says.
 "He could be small like us.
 He could be exactly like us."

Some of the best writing in *Coal River Road* is direct, plain speech. A good example occurs in the poem "Goliath," about the poet's father. Here Ackerman is particularly adept at sound play achieved with the simple diction of monosyllabic words: "you were the dad / they wished they had," she says to her father as she describes the envy of the "flocks of neighbor kids" coming over to see the go-kart track the father had built or the sunfish he had helped the poet catch. The fishing advice from her father is just as well put: "Slack, you said, give him slack. / When he comes back, reel it in." In "Hunting Silence" the father teaches his daughter "silence / and hunting," acting as the perfect muse for a future poet: "My father made me quiet / so long so many unsaid words / ached inside my head."

Whereas Ackerman's style is to focus in a concentrated way on one place and one subject, reclaiming home and family, in *Transcendental Telemarketer*, **Beth Copeland** takes a broader tack. The word "transcendental" in the title is an obvious clue. This book, the reader suspects from the get-go, will in some way be about experience beyond the ordinary. Like Ackerman, Copeland ventures back to the past, yet in a much dreamier, less documentary way. To her, past means not so much a time and place as it does a behavior and a self.

Who is this strong character taking center stage in the poems, this construct who may or may not resemble the poet, and at which moments in her life do we see her? It doesn't matter whether the poems are autobiographically based. What matters is whether this "I" make a good poem. And, indeed, she does. Initially what we see of her is her sexual awakening as a young person. There is a quirky, witty tone to many of Copeland's poems, as in "Misconception," the book's second poem, which takes the word "conception" literally, referring to fertilization. Thus, the misconception is the speaker's naively wrong ideas



PHOTOGRAPH BY LIANA DUBESTER

at nine years old about where babies come from, as expressed in the opening of the poem:

It was like catching a cold.
 If he coughed without covering his mouth,
 if he sneezed, you could have his baby,
 or so I believed

A host of the speaker's selves are chronicled, again with much humor and matter-of-fact openness, in "My Life as a Slut," which skips around from one age of the speaker to another:

Age 21: My mother calls me a "harlot," "Jezebel," and "strumpet" after I stay out all night with my boyfriend. I roll my eyes and say, "If we're going to have this conversation, at least update your vocabulary. The word is 'slut!'"

Later in the poem:

Age 32: A man at my college reunion tells me a lot of other girls in our class were sluttier than I was. I feel like a failure.

Copeland's boldness, her bluntness, is at the heart of the wit. Yet the tone can turn dark and poignant. In "Belts," for example, in one scenario, the stubborn, defiant self runs from her mother chasing her with a belt, but in the next scenario, on a miserable first date, an unwilling but obedient self submits to a sexual encounter, as her date unbuckles his belt. In both cases, a voice tells the speaker that she deserves what she gets. In this poem and others, Copeland takes the sort of bold leap that Robert Bly so

adamantly wished for years ago in contemporary American poetry. There is nothing timid about these poems.

Like Ackerman's book, *Transcendental Telemarketer* is divided into three sections. Yet even from the epigraphs of the sections, one can immediately spot the dreamier sensibility of this book. Whereas Ackerman's vision is singularly and intensely focused on a desire for home, Copeland's book adds up to a yearning that is more expansive. You can feel that yearning in the gist of the epigraphs for the three sections: starting anew, life as a foreign country, and water's attempt to return to its source. Her vision is not only large, but filled with wanderlust, curiosity, and conscience. The whole second section contains poems about other cultures, especially that of Japan. "The Origins of Silk" is notable – a long, sad, syllabic poem that tells the plight of children who work in deplorable conditions so that rich people on the other side of the globe can wear silk.

Copeland, as might be expected, likes to experiment with sound play and form. Among others, the pantoum, sestina, canzone, mirror poem, and rhymed couplets all make an appearance. The liberties the poet sometimes takes with form give the poems a more contemporary feeling. "And One More Thing . . .," the book's last poem, a pantoum, offers a variation on the repeated lines instead of repeating them verbatim, as one can see in these first three stanzas of the poem:

My mind races as I leave the house. What
if I forgot to lock the door? What if
I forgot to alphabetize the baby's blocks?
I should go back, just to be sure.

If I forgot to knock three times before locking the door,
I'll have bad luck. Did I wash my hands?
I should, just to be sure
I don't catch a flesh-eating strep infection.

I'll have bad luck if I don't wash my hands.
Better spray some Lysol on the phone, so
I don't catch bubonic plague or get a bad connection.
Did I forget to count the hairs in my brush?

Quite a few other poems, especially in the book's final section, are in form. The poems that follow

Japanese tradition take on a more meditative tone, a move that Copeland is particularly good at. The tanka "Mikimoto Pearls" has the spareness that one would expect, with the leaps and a certain amount of randomness from one part to the next. Yet each five-line part holds together like a small poem:

White nights of worry.
Craters of ice on the moon.
A cup of warm milk.

Obsession's a rosary
of fear and anxiety.

The longer poems of the collection often spill – sometimes even sprawl – onto the page, depending heavily on voice. These poems gain energy when the lines unspool, as they do in "Self-Portrait as a House," where the speaker tells of all the houses in which she has lived – aptly including her body. The poem ends with a line about the poet's first name: "In this house that rhymes with death." The reader is given the opportunity to participate in the poem by supplying the name *Beth*, as if it's the answer to a riddle. By the end of these longer poems, that same reader feels an intimate connection with the speaker that is hard to achieve in a shorter poem.

In the end, the pleasures of reading Ackerman's *Coal River Road* and Copeland's *Transcendental Telemarketer* go back to the microscope and the telescope. Ackerman lays out a smaller territory for the reader to know by heart, particulars and peculiarities included: house fire, lint roller, rabbit jar, funeral pillow, apple-sauce cake. Copeland, on the other hand, takes the reader from home to Japan to paradise, giving us angels, pearls, a third eye, and a persistent telemarketer along the way; it's a broader sweep. One poet takes her familiar Appalachian mountain life and makes it somewhat strange; the other takes the exotic, the strange, and makes it somewhat familiar. Each is inspired by a different muse. For Ackerman, there is a yearning for story and a feeling of urgency to hold onto what is becoming lost. For Copeland, the pull is toward boldness and beauty, as well as naming what makes up the past to let it go, defining truths and what's unfair in the world. ■



THE MILK OF ADVERSITY: THREE BOOKS OF MEMORY AND LOSS

a review by Valerie Nieman

Lee Ann Brown. *Crowns of Charlotte: NC Ode*. Durham, NC: Carolina Wren Press, 2013.

Terry L. Kennedy. *New River Breakdown*. Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 2013.

Tom Lombardo. *What Bends Us Blue*. Cincinnati, OH: Word Tech Editions, 2013.

VALERIE NIEMAN is a poet and novelist from Greensboro, NC. Her poetry has appeared in *NCLR* 2011 and 2012, and *NCLR Online* 2012. Her collection *Wake, Wake, Wake* (Press 53, 2006) was reviewed in *NCLR* 2007. Her most recent novel is *Blood Clay* (Press 53, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012). Her first novel, *Neena Gathering* (Pageant Books, 1988), was reissued in 2013 by Permuted Press as a classic science fiction title. She is an Associate Professor of English at NC A&T State University and poetry editor for *Prime Number* magazine.

TERRY L. KENNEDY serves as associate director of the graduate program in creative writing at UNC-Greensboro and editor of the online journal *storySouth*. He is the author of the limited edition chapbook *Until the Clouds Shatter the Light that Plates Our Lives* (Jeanne Duvall Editions, 2011), and his poems have appeared in *Cave Wall* and *Southern Review*, among other venues. He has had a Randall Jarrell Fellowship, as well as fellowships to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

How often we talk of family and community in terms of bonds – the ties that bind, the love knot, the silken cord. Yet fraying, cutting, and loosening can occur – love unwinds, lives twist apart, families unmesh, communities pull asunder. Each of these collections records a journey of remembrance and sometimes grievous loss. Two of them are elegies in nature if not in name, while the third claims the ode in its title.

Terry Kennedy's *New River Breakdown* recollects a love affair, from springtime promise through partings to a wintry acceptance. Images rise and rise again, like the tides: the blue birdbath, the edge of water, maps, music, sailboats at rest and at race, trees and dogs and lilies that bloom and fade. Such images echo the structure of the elegy, if refusing the sharp divisions of the classic form. The book also physically embodies reiteration, offering four different covers designed by Greensboro-area artists. Leaves and water and stone reflect the movement of the natural world within these pages. As desire and regret mingle across the lines, so, too do the seasons – winter in June, fresh cut grass in October. The poet writes in “Waiting” that he will spend “what’s left

of summer’s daylight measuring the distance from memory to happiness; and when I find the answer, I’ll dress unseasonably in knit & corduroy, so you’ll know that it’s me.”

The opening poem launches this finely woven work, half festal garment and half shroud, with “Morning, Minnesott.” As the poet and his love walk this North Carolina beach, “I say *together* but she is far ahead of me – slender and fleet – a spring doe skimming the sand. The game we play is an ancient one – you know the name, you made the rules.” Later he will admit she’s so far ahead “that I plan for tomorrow.” Those tomorrows will lead through love and loss and acceptance – the three stages of the traditional elegy, a lament and then praise for the dead and finally consolation, though in these poems they are intermingled like salt water and fresh, water and wine.

Kennedy has wedded himself to the prose poem, ranging from three lines to half a page. The prose poem is a problematic beast: Chimera-like, it can be argued as verse or as prose. In Kennedy’s hands, it offers both glittering surface and dark depths. Campbell McGrath’s “The Prose Poem” describes the form as a

PHOTOGRAPH BY JIM WHITESIDE



landscape:
 “On the map
 it is precise
 and rectilinear
 as a chess-
 board, though
 driving past you
 would hardly
 notice it, this
 boundary line
 or ragged mar-
 gin, a shallow
 swale that cups
 a simple trickle

of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken.”¹ Kennedy delights in these boundaries, marking out his quadrangles with thin wire that demands our attention while allowing air and light and sound to move unhindered.

Music winds through the book, in references and in titles. Depending on who you ask, a breakdown, as in the title poem, is an instrumental tune named for its quick dance speed or for the “breaks” in which different instruments are featured.

New River Breakdown closes with a densely packed “elegy of hair, of fingernails, of dust.” In the poem “Servant of the Map,” we are caught at the cusp of an old winter, new spring. Kennedy writes, “because the dogs have removed the woodpile, log by rotting log, lost it to the current of the river. Because they have pulled your dirty socks from the wicker hamper, made a bed to cry themselves to sleep. Because I have come to call you forsythia, I have tattooed the blossoms of early spring across my naked heart.” But as he laments, he also faces into the morning and wind and fog: “What else is left to do? I’ll start walking.” And that movement is the only solace we will get.

Tom Lombardo’s elegiac turn, *What Bends Us Blue* is centered on the horrific moment in the poem “When” that documents the poet’s experience at the hospital following the death of his first wife in a car accident. The poem’s broken lines and scattered attention are faithful to the experience:

*i’m nurse fellini the one who called you here
 some privacy she leads you
 down a hallway clean tiled walls
 a couple cracked to pieces
 white linoleum blue
 arrows pointing
 in three directions when she guides you
 into the kind of room
 you’ve never seen
 in a hospital before*

Yet even as Lombardo faces this unimaginable moment, he notices the doctor’s Grateful Dead tie, the Kazhak rug, the “comfy chair” – a cozy living room from which he must go to see his wife’s body, which will verify her death as “a single red bubble / trickles from the edge of her left eye.”

We are transfixed in that moment, yet Lombardo cautions in a *Writer’s Digest* interview, “Poetry must never be literal. If it were, it would be nonfiction. Though I do love nonfiction and read a lot of it, when I read poetry, I want to read something that may start with the literal truth but when run through the poet’s diction, syntax, language comes out as poetry that reveals a truth.”² As an essayist as well as a poet, Lombardo is keenly aware of the exigencies of truth-telling, and in *What Bends Us Blue* he moves around that “truth” like a shadowboxer.

As with Kennedy’s book, this one is arranged into three sections, but it’s looser in focus and construction, including several poems that serve as self-revelatory asides. The structure of lament, praise, and solace is replaced by a shocking juxtaposition

¹ Campbell McGrath, “The Prose Poem” originally appeared in *The Paris Review* in 1996 and is included in McGrath’s collection *Road Atlas: Prose & Other Poems* (New York: Ecco, 1999).

² Robert Lee Brewer, “Tom Lombardo: Poet Interview,” *Writer’s Digest* 9 Sept. 2013: [web](#).

TOM LOMBARDO, a Pittsburgh native and Atlanta resident, has strong ties to North Carolina as an MFA graduate of Queens University of Charlotte and poetry editor for Press 53 in Winston-Salem. He is editor, too, of an anthology of poems on grief called *After Shocks: The Poetry of Recovery for Life-Shattering Events* (Sante Lucia Books, 2008) and keeps a *Poetry of Recovery* blog. His poetry has appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, and *Atlanta Review*.

ABOVE LEFT **Terry Kennedy** reading at **The Green Bean** in Greensboro, NC, 20 Sept. 2013

RIGHT **Tom Lombardo** reading during his publication party at the **Ansley Terrace Salon**, Atlanta, GA, 12 Sept. 2013

of sexual admiration with brutal loss, followed by the solace of a second marriage and children, and a turn at the end to a pair of meditative poems in the English tradition (if not so somber).

Blues in water, blues in air, blues in music – all color this collection. Even Lombardo's first encounter with his first wife is immersed in imagined blue. This short poem incorporates his characteristic sensuality and comic touch:

The Minute I Met Lana

**I met her in Cincinnati,
sitting poolside.
Her bikini,
lime. Hair, flame red.**

**I dove, came up between her legs,
Have those freckles
all over your
bod? She slid her**

**shades down her nose, green eyes glared, blinked.
Her accent, Ah
assure you, Ah
do! And she did.**

Lombardo's humor threads through this book of death and aftermath; brightness and darkness mingle. In addition to his wife's death, he also addresses his own "little heart attack" and his grandmother's passing and his second wife's brush with death. Two poems situate his losses deeply in family. In "*Sanguine Noce*," he recollects Italian Christmas traditions in a mill town as his grandfather kills a chicken and drains its blood:

**I cradle the cup upstairs
to my grandmother, standing over the stove,
simmering the chocolate sauce,
watch her pour the fresh blood into the pot,
add a handful of *pinolas*, stir**

And in "Split Second to Blink," which takes us again into the moment of his first wife's death, he wonders if her thoughts went back to her rural Kentucky home: "did you think about the beehive that thrived for years / in the abandoned end of the farmhouse and how we

swept / decades of dead bees from our wedding bed." Life inevitably ends in death, and Lombardo does not avert his gaze – but he also shares how death can sometimes be the setting for something new.

Charlotte native **Lee Ann Brown** turns the ode on its head in a collection of poems addressed to family and community – and the conflicts that sometimes divide them. ***Crowns of Charlotte: NC Ode*** opens with "Transformation Hymn," one of several anti-war poems, this one set to "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." It's a good choice to set us on a journey through this volume, as Brown's poems twist and turn, break apart and merge in a dance reminiscent of the helices that shape us all. In "Hair Wreath" she writes:

**Of the family no DNA
In hair – only at the root
Most hair wreaths
Were in a horseshoe shape
But this our family's wreath is a Circle
Gently shedding in the frame
Even a grey poodle hair beloved
In the fame of names herein is trained**

The bulk of Brown's book is divided into two sections. The first and longest is the answer to every woebegone poet's efforts to corral disparate poems into a whole. "Museum of the Alphabet" gathers her work into a neatly turned book-length abecedarian from "Acoustic Winter" to (as z does not appear) "Yellow Canary Café." The book comes to a close with the sonnet sequence "Double Crown for Charlotte."

Brown, as one might imagine from a poet whose first book was called *Polyverse* (2000), stretches the verse form throughout, from a reimagined murder ballad, to collages employing newspaper articles and performance notes and car conversations, to four poems sparked by the work of Charlotte's great collage artist, Romare Bearden.³ In "333-2451 Susie Asado Breakdown," Gertrude Stein's poem "Susie Asado" is quite literally taken apart, the text broken down through the mathematical application of Brown's parents' phone number. This is another breakdown – not in the energy of a dance, but as the entropy of dissolution.

Despite the experimentation, most of these poems are grounded in familiar icons of the state – persimmons, barbecue, Ric Flair, face jugs, grits – or specifically of Charlotte, with neighborhoods cited as well



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY LAZEGA

³ For samples of the work of artist Romare Bearden (1911–1988), see *NCLR* 2010, 2011, and 2013.

as landmark stores. Her experience in family, in this place, is central, and the simplest poems are often the most affecting. In “An Early Arts Education,” the child narrator is happily painting a yellow lion until the teacher intervenes:

I watch in horror as she paints
a black iron manacle
around the forepaw of my lion
then
despite my protestations
row upon row
of interlocking X's
over the entire painting

That's the fence
She says

This volume, so focused on the Tar Heel State, is appropriately a local production, No. 15 in the Carolina Wren Press Poetry Series.

The closing section is not merely a sonnet corona, but a heroic crown: fifteen sonnets, each linked by repeating the final line of the preceding sonnet as the first line of the next. The final sonnet binds up the whole by using all of the first lines of the others, in order. Brown draws on letters, films, portraits, books, and other resources to address Queen Charlotte's life – beginning with a traditional sonnet in rhyme and meter, then spinning that out into free verse and forward to the present day.

The opening sonnet of “Double Crown for Charlotte” is a précis, in fact, of much of Brown's book, the ideas of unity and division, race and family, truth and fiction, collage and completion:

1.
**The town I grew up in is feminine
a radiating spiral divided in two
named for Charlotte of Mecklenburg, a Queen
who had mixed bloodlines all of them blue:**

**African, Portuguese and a Vandal or two.
so this double crown I set out to hone –
half on, half off, made-up and true.
Fifteen sonnets linked and sewn**

**in all manner of newfangled rhyme;
only locals know which avenue
wends over to trace a parallel line,
Crowns for Charlotte, Laurels for you –**

**Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg now come forth
to crown us all with a laurel wreath –**

The spirit has been invoked and we must wend our way, like Brown, through the spirals of memory and the movements of our lives, parallel or diverging, within our chosen home place.

“And so in the end, it comes to this: this is the center of my heart: empty and dark with the cold of space forever expanding between me and you,” writes Kennedy in “Breaking the Glass.” The universe by its nature pulls apart, but it also seethes with an unexplained presence. “It turns out that roughly 68% of the Universe is dark energy. Dark matter makes up about 27%. The rest – everything on Earth, everything ever observed with all of our instruments, all normal matter – adds up to less than 5% of the Universe,” reports NASA. “Come to think of it, maybe it shouldn't be called ‘normal’ matter at all, since it is such a small fraction of the Universe.”⁴

The “normal matter” of the human heart might be similar – much of it dark, sometime most of it. In these collections, the dark matter of love and loss burns with a strange energy. And that five percent, emerging as light? That portion of the universe we see and know? Ah, that five percent is joy. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE A. WILEY



LEE ANN BROWN's earlier books include *The Sleep That Changed Everything* (Wesleyan, 2003), and *In the Laurels, Caught* (Fence Books, 2013). She holds an MFA from Brown University, is the founder of Tender Buttons Press, and divides her time between Marshall, NC, and her work as an associate professor of English at St. John's University in New York City.

⁴ “Dark Energy, Dark Matter,” NASA: [web](#).

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT Lee Ann Brown at Park Road Books in Charlotte, NC, 10 July 2013

2013 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST*Another Ending for Aphrodite*

BY HANNAH BONNER

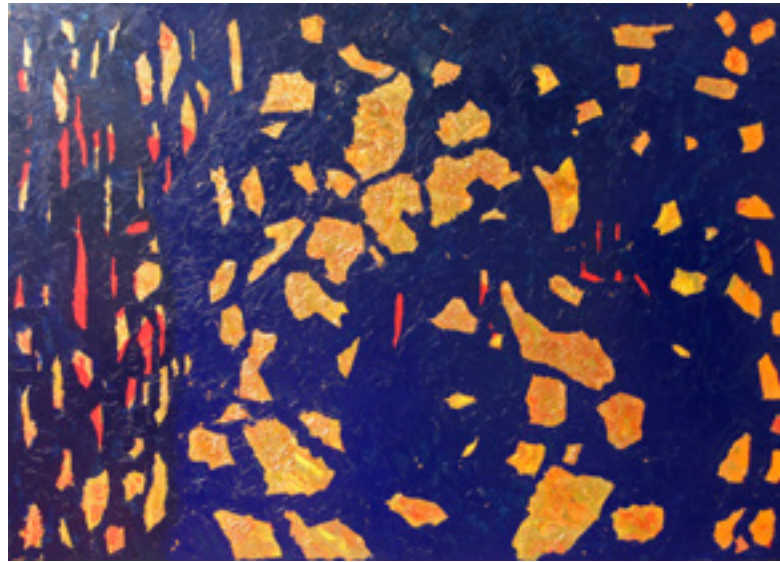
And when she promised she would
never give herself to another,
Hephaestus embraced her,
relieved, like a flame encircling the wick,

shuddering with air, and she rose
to meet his teeth, tongue,
and thigh. *Better to be alone*, she thought
afterwards, *than beholden to another*.

It is almost August now as she collects
olive branches in the dusk. No jewelry
in the hair, nothing but sun
on the nape. And each nail muddied

as an eel eye. Hephaestus is swimming
in the sea alone and does not call her to him.
It'll be better this way, she thinks, *no more
expectations*. She rearranges

the branches, drenched in the dust of the day.
Brushes insects off her arms. Whistles
with the thicket of murmurings
the whole length of the white road.



Traces (acrylic on canvas, 60x84) by Eduardo Lapetina

HANNAH BONNER's poetry has been published in the *Cellar Door*, *Oyster Boy Review*, and *The Asheville Poetry Review*. She teaches Ancient Studies English at Asheville School in Asheville, NC. Her poem "Fox" was selected for honorable mention by final judge Fred Chappell; it and another of her finalist poems will be published in the **2014** print issue of *NCLR*.

Chapel Hill resident **EDUARDO LAPETINA** is a native of Argentina. He moved to North Carolina in 1976 to do cardiovascular research in thrombosis and arteriosclerosis for Burroughs Wellcome. Upon his retirement in 2002, on a whim, he took a class with artist Jane Filer at Carrboro ArtsCenter, discovered a new passion, and has been painting ever since. In recent years, he has been part of more than fifty solo and group exhibitions, attended national and international artist's colonies, and completed a residency at the Vermont Studio Center. His paintings have received several awards and are in various corporate and private collections throughout the US, Europe, Israel, and Australia. See more of his work on his [website](#).

NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

ONLINE number 23

Click [here](#) to learn how to become a Friend of the *North Carolina Literary Review* with your tax-deductible gift.

NCLR FRIENDS

Greg Abashian
Anne Albright
Donald and Elizabeth Albright
Robert C. Anthony, Jr.
Alexander and Arianna Blakeslee
Lisa Raymond Blakeslee
James W. Clark, Jr.
Coastal Plains Writing Project
David Cecelski
Fred Chappell
Greg Cox
Jack P. and Tina Griffin Deason
Dowdy Student Stores, ECU
David and Alison Hay Edgerton
DeWitt Hamilton
C. Brian and Tammy Helm
Joseph and Grace Horne
Rachel Stroud Hunsinger
George and Blair Jackson
Fritz Janschka
Penelope D. Love
Jeffrey and Melissa Makala
McIntyre's Fine Books
Patricia D. McDermott
Janice Moore
Andrew Turner Morehead, Jr.
Katharine Osborne
National Association for
Developmental Education,
in honor of Margaret D. Bauer

Springmoor Library Fund
in honor of James W. Clark, Jr.
Johnie and Lorraine Robinson
David Terry
Wake Forest University
Lorrin Willis
Emily Herring Wilson

In Memoriam

Michael Abu-Hatoum
James A. and
Ruth Buckner Albright
Stephen Michael Allen
Mary Belle Campbell
J. Wilbert and
Marianna Dow Edgerton
Bertie Edwards Fearing
Linda Flowers
Dorothy Z. Mills Hicks
Irvin C. Lawrence, Jr.
Jack Lindy Moore
Ovid Williams Pierce, Jr.
Marjorie Ragan
Sam Ragan
Elizabeth Daniels Squire
Manly Wade Wellman

NCLR is available at the following locations:*

Asheville: [Malaprop's Bookstore](#), [Black Mountain College Museum & Arts Center](#), [Thomas Wolfe Memorial](#)
Black Mountain: [Black Mountain Books](#)
Brevard: [Highland Books](#)
Bryson City: [Elizabeth Ellison Watercolors](#)
Buxton: [Buxton Village Books](#)
Chapel Hill: [Bull's Head Bookshop at UNC-CH](#), [Fyleaf Books](#)
Charlotte: [Park Road Books](#)
Durham: [Regulator Bookshop](#)
Fountain: [R.A. Fountain General Store and Internet Café](#)
Greenville: [ECU Dowdy Student Stores](#), [City Art Gallery](#), [Emerge Gallery](#), [U.B.E.](#)
Hendersonville: [Fountainhead Bookstore](#)
New Bern: [Tryon Palace](#)
Ocracoke: [Books to Be Red](#), [Java Books](#)
Raleigh: [Quail Ridge Books & Music](#),
[North Carolina Museum of History Museum Shop](#)
Sylva: [City Lights Bookstore](#)

* If you would like your store included here, please write, call, or email. See more information on NCLR's [website](#).

PRODUCTION NOTES

Design

Adobe Indesign CS6 on Macintosh computers

Type Families

ITC Franklin Gothic, ITC New Baskerville, ITC Avant Garde Gothic