

The background of the cover is a complex, layered collage. It features various textures and colors: a prominent blue and white wavy, topographic-like pattern; a large, dark blue, textured shape resembling a bird or a wing; a bright yellow triangular shape; and a dark, almost black, irregular shape. The overall composition is abstract and visually rich.

# NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

**ONLINE**

number 24

**2015**

**NORTH CAROLINA LITERATURE  
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**

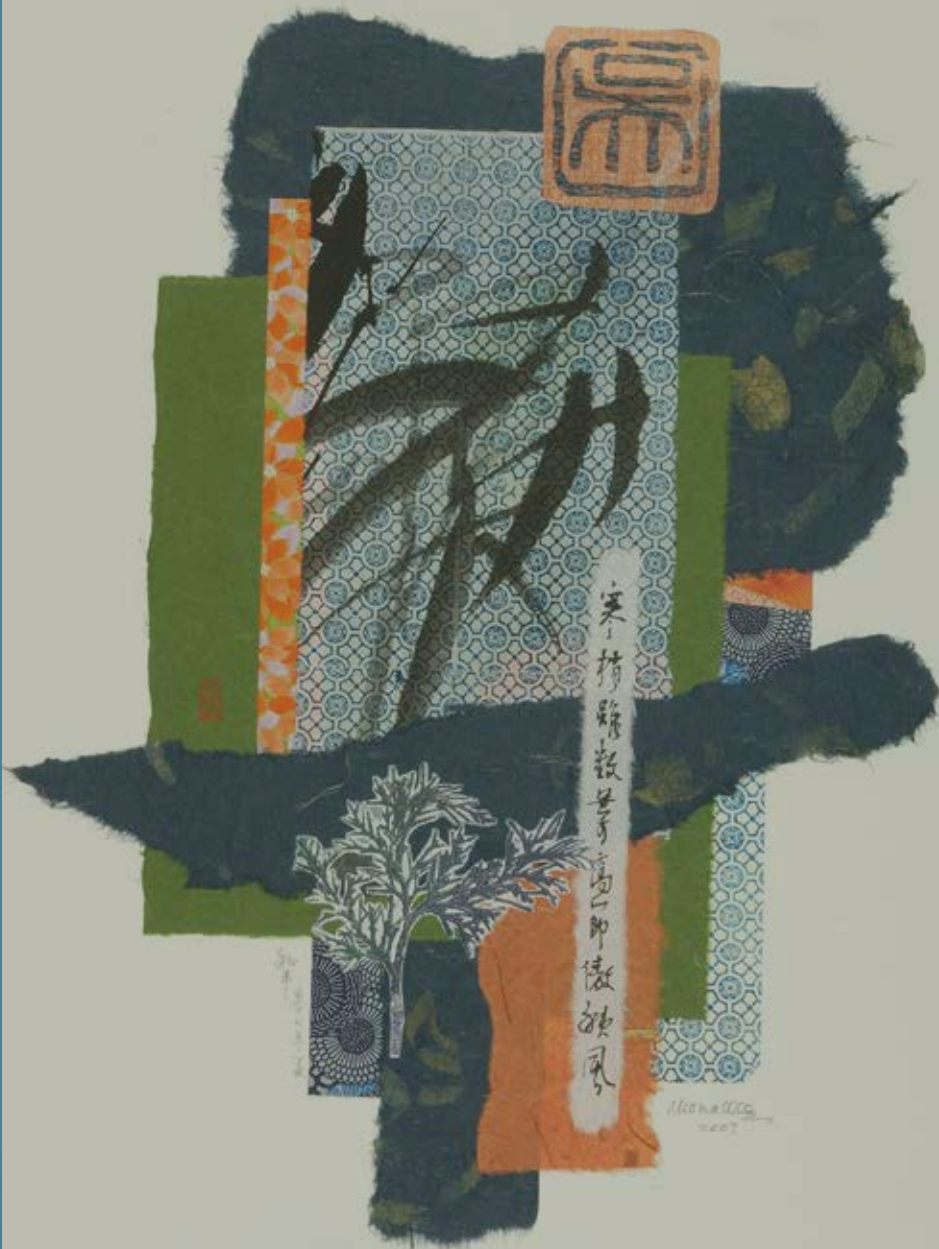
**IN THIS ISSUE** Introduction to Monique Truong ■ Fiction by Michael Parker ■ Poetry by James Applewhite ■  
Doris Betts Fiction Prize Finalists ■ James Applewhite Poetry Prize Finalists ■ Book Reviews ■ Literary News ■  
And more . . .

**COVER ART** by Mona Wu

Read more about the cover artist, **MONA WU**, on page 11, inside this issue, and see the full collage featured on the front cover of this issue and information about that collage on page 15.

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

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**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. In addition to the cover, Dana designed the fiction in this issue.

ABOVE *Meditation on a Bamboo Branch* (collage, 15x19) by Mona Wu

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Eduardo Lapetina  
George Scott  
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J. Stacy Utley  
Susan Weil  
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**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*

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**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.

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**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 #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.

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### North Carolina Literature in a Global Context: Writing Beyond the State's Borders

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

Regular readers of *NCLR* may recall that we introduced the 2015 special feature topic, global North Carolina literature, at the end of our 2014 issue, as part of introducing a short story by Annie Frazier, a writer originally from North Carolina, who lives in Florida, but set her story in Japan. With the goal of inspiring submissions for this special feature section, I proposed a panel on North Carolina literature in a global context for the North Carolina Writers Conference, held in Western North Carolina in July 2014.

I included Annie Frazier among the panelists, asking her to share with the audience the interesting story she told me of how she came to write "Sakura" (and to read just enough of it to inspire anyone in the audience who hadn't yet bought a copy of the 2014 issue to do so). Like Annie, some of the writers included in this section of *NCLR Online 2015* have left their native North Carolina to live elsewhere, and like "Sakura," much of the content of this issue is set beyond the borders of the Old North State, even beyond the US borders.

Thanks to Jeff Davis, who recorded the North Carolina Writers Conference panel, our readers can hear [Annie's anecdote](#), as well as the other panelists, including another writer from a previous issue's special feature section, [Ellyn Bache](#), who was interviewed for our 2012 issue about the film adaptation of her novel *Safe Passages*. When I contacted Ellyn Bache about participating on this panel, she jumped right on it, writing back to me, "as a writer who grew up in DC and came to North Carolina for the first time for college, then went north again and returned to the Carolinas before my first novel was published, I'm still not thought of as a Southern writer, even though some of my books are set in North Carolina and even

though I'm convinced that DC when I was growing up was pretty 'Southern.'" As *NCLR* editor, I have certainly noted a wide variety of backgrounds of the writers in this state alone, and I have witnessed the "valuable perspective" the outsider brings to "Southern" topics – as Ellyn does, for example, in her Chapel Hill–set novel *The Activist's Daughter*. You will find in this special feature section several poems, stories, and numerous reviews of books by writers who, like Ellyn Bache, moved to North Carolina from elsewhere – and some who, again like Ellyn, also moved on to elsewhere after living for a time here.

During an email exchange with me last year, Elaine Neil Orr inspired and defined this special feature topic: "'Global North Carolina' springs to mind as a category that could include writers . . . who have a deep history in North Carolina but write books largely set somewhere else." She continued, "With this category, the doors could swing both ways" to include "those who come into North Carolina from elsewhere and write here about North Carolina." After you've enjoyed the content of our online issue, you can look forward to an interview with Elaine Neil Orr conducted by a writer "from elsewhere" who has made North Carolina home for many years now, Kathryn Stripling Byer (who was the honoree of the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference). This interview is forthcoming in the 2015 print issue. In the meantime, you can [listen to Elaine](#) talk about this subject during our North Carolina Writers Conference panel discussion (and you can read in this online issue Tara Powell's tribute to Kay Byer during the conference banquet).

Also on the panel this past summer was Jaki Shelton Green, who has taught across Europe and



Central and South America. When I invited her to be on the panel, she responded so beautifully, “I believe that as a writer . . . I’m from everywhere I’ve ever been.” She also told me, “I write from a space of genetic déjà vu as I am transported to places I have not been via my ancestral connections.” You can [hear Jaki](#) tell our summer audience more about this angle on the idea of global North Carolina literature in Jeff Davis’s recordings. And read more about Jaki and the other three inductees into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame at the end of this issue.

On your way to that last story of this issue, you will find a broad variety of subjects, and if you are wondering how some of these are “global,” consider how few of the writers in these pages are actually native North Carolinians. Even many of the writers born and raised in North Carolina have lived outside of their home state at some point in time. And the artists whose works appear within these pages are all global, too.

Perhaps it is the variety of life experiences of all of these writers that explains the quality of the literature of the Old North State. One explanation for the flowering of Southern writing during the Southern Renaissance period is the writers’ experience during World War I, which drew them, or at least their attention, away from the South, even the US, for a time. Living outside of the South, or focusing on the world beyond the US, these writers gained the objectivity necessary to write about their beloved home region in less idealizing terms than some of their predecessors had done. As we put this issue together and began to work on the print issue, I realized there might be a similar explanation for the wealth of talent in the state Doris Betts labeled “the writingest state.”

For the first time, we are publishing a whole issue on our special topic. You will not find a Flashbacks or North Carolina Miscellany section this year because, it turned out, for one reason or another, the writer or the content could be viewed in global terms. That includes poets James Applewhite and Fred Chappell, born, raised, and educated in North Carolina, for both are, of course, internationally lauded. Also, Applewhite’s PhD dissertation was on Wordsworth, and it evolved into a critical book on the British Romantics and the modern poets they influenced. Chappell’s numerous awards include the Prix de Meilleur des Livres Étrangers (Best Foreign Book Prize) from the Academie Francaise, and his poetry has been translated into several languages, including Finnish, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, and Farsi.

Another reason for the quality of the writing in my own adopted home state (for I too have moved here from elsewhere) is the sense of community among the writers in this state. Writers (and editors) who move here are welcomed and readily adopted into the huge family of writers, a family that is not territorial, not competitive, not jealous, as evidenced by how many of the state’s literary awards (which you can read about in this issue’s pages) are given to writers who are not North Carolina natives. Note too how long ago many of these writers moved here. They came, and they stayed, because while some state governing bodies might not always support the literary community, the literary community here supports each other.

I say it so often: I love my job. Editing *NCLR* may at times seem all-consuming, but it is so very satisfying, so very rewarding. And the biggest reward of all is being a part of the North Carolina literary family. Thank you all. ■

LEFT **Elaine Neil Orr** on the North Carolina Writers Conference Global North Carolina panel, Fletcher, NC, 26 July 2014

RIGHT **Jaki Shelton Green** (center) with **Joseph Bathanti** and **Kathryn Stripling Byer** at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference



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Autumn (collage, 13x9) by Mona Wu

# BIG JOY

by Jude Whelchel <sup>2014</sup> *Doris Betts Honorable Mention*

Ellen could only see what was right in front of her – the thurifer, censing a haze of frankincense and myrrh, and the priest, massive in his vestments. The organ piped the hymn her mother had loved most, words Ellen could not sing because she could not hold both the hymnal and the child, Georgie, in the lace gown, writhing and discontent on her lap.

**JUDE WHELCHER** is an Episcopal priest and writer in Asheville, NC. She has an MFA from Warren Wilson College. In 2014, in addition to being a finalist in the Betts competition, she was one of two first place winners for the 2014 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, another competition sponsored by the North Carolina Writers' Network. Her Wolfe Prize story is published in the 2015 issue of the *Thomas Wolfe Review*.

Selecting this story for honorable mention, *NCLR* Fiction Editor Liza Wieland observed, "Big Joy Family" weaves past and present, infants and the elderly, Chinese and American culture into a moving and expansive story that poignantly captures our lives today: messy and crowded with birth and dying, sacrifice and love, punctuated by moments of intense sadness and profound illumination."

He whimpered and pulled at the helmet strapped to his head, so Ellen pressed a pacifier into the gape of his mouth. Georgie clinched his jaw, but his lips failed to grasp and he began to fuss. Ellen pressed her finger between the pucker of his lips, running her nail along the ridges at the roof of his mouth as the therapist had instructed. This was to stimulate the sucking reflex, which Georgie was only now developing. Ellen wiped her finger on a nappy then pressed the pacifier through Georgie's lips again. This time his tongue thrust and pushed against the pacifier, so it slipped from his mouth and dropped beneath the pew. Ellen stretched but could not reach it with her free hand.

"I can hold him," Billy whispered.

"I've got him," Ellen said.

Their three girls sat on the other side of Billy, dotting the pew like pigeons. Frank and Harriet, Ellen's father and his wife, were two pews behind. Harriet would not make eye contact with Ellen – she was evidently hurt. Ellen could guess the words Harriet was turning over in her mind. *I can't believe Ellen forgot to save us seats. I can't believe it.*

communion kneelers. There were no female clergy. Also the word sin – Ellen didn't like that word at all for how it called down indignity upon a room of people. She didn't believe people sinned so much as *coped*. She intended, one day, to speak to a priest about these things, especially the *idea* of sin, how the word was even used to describe babies. Babies come into the world fallen? Ellen didn't buy it. Because Eve ate an apple? Ellen didn't think so.

Billy claimed, "Sticks and stones. It's just a word, Ellen. Let it go."

They christened Stella and Kate, not for religion but for Ellen's mother.

"I won't mettle or ask anything else," her mother promised.

They went through the motions, and her mother was true to her word. There was no pressure to attend church. It was later that Ellen grew to love and appreciate St. Luke's – when her mother was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. Her mother went straight to St. Luke's from receiving her diagnosis and stayed the afternoon in the quiet of the nave. In the days that followed, her mother fought



What – the – fuck – ever. She and Billy had been up since five organizing for the brunch; they had gotten four children to church on time. Ellen had not brushed her own hair that morning; her graying locks were pulled back into one of Stella's ponytail holders, which Ellen found on the floorboard of the car on the way to the church.

Ellen was not particularly religious; there were things she found maddening about St. Luke's – the uninviting little signs posted along the lush front lawn: KEEP OFF THE GRASS. The surly, old priest who snapped at the children for stepping on the

admirably for her life. When she wasn't fighting her cells, she was often at St. Luke's, sometimes tending the gardens; mostly she was quiet, tucked into a pew.

St. Luke's became a comfort to Ellen for the comfort and solace it provided her mother. The quarried stone, calm and polished, the buttressed arches softened by leaded windows, the old words tuned like poetry in high song. It was a beautiful place, and in the cool of the church her mother's labored breath would ease; sometimes a blush of color rose in her skin as she nodded recognition to the incantations of the priest. Accompanying her

This issue's cover artist, **MONA WU**, is a native of China who studied Chinese painting and calligraphy in Hong Kong. She came to the US in 1971 and moved to Winston-Salem, NC, in 1974. She received a BA in Art History from Salem College in 1996 and studied under David Faber of Wake Forest University in printmaking for many years. She was the Artist of the Year in 2003 for the Sawtooth Center for Visual

Art in Winston-Salem. She has taught classes in Chinese painting, calligraphy, and simple printmaking at Salem College Community Center, Sawtooth Center, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, among other locations. Her art has been exhibited at Artworks Gallery in Winston-Salem every year since 2004. See more of her work on her [website](#) and at [Artworks Gallery](#).

mother, Ellen could almost sense something in the air, something just beyond them. It felt like a knot of love and longing mixed with grief and also beauty. It would be there, and then it would be gone. Ellen wasn't sure what to make of it; she certainly wouldn't call it God. After awhile she gave up trying to figure it out and just let it come over her when it arrived.

Two weeks before her mother's death, days before she went to hospice, Ellen wheel-chaired her mother through the handicap access for the mid-week service.

"Why do you come here?" Ellen asked her mother. Ellen knew, suddenly, how her mother would answer. She regretted her question.

"I've come for all kinds of reasons. Now I come to learn to die."

For easing her mother's painful and brutal end of life, Ellen would forever appreciate St. Luke's. After her mother's death, Ellen remained at the church, not because she felt the presence of God, but because she felt the presence of her mother.

They requested Father Duncan christen Georgie; he had christened Lily. Father Duncan was youngish and good with children; he had once been a linebacker on his college team. It pleased Ellen that after he christened a baby, he lifted the little one up, high above him, tossing the child ever so gently upwards – exactly what a linebacker-turned-priest might do. Most of the babies smiled and cooed for the pleasure of it. Ellen thought this was the finest moment of the ritual, a baby billowing in a white gown, elevated and aloft, at once some offering to the heavens and some great blessing come down.

There were three babies the day of Georgie's christening. Each family circled the font in turn; each time Father Duncan breathed over the water, spoke the old words, and tipped the chrism oil to make a cross at the baby's forehead. Then the toss – the first baby smiled, the second one squealed in delight and drew a roll of laughter from the congregation. When it was Georgie's turn, Father Duncan nodded to them and they filed out of the pew, Ellen still carrying Georgie, Billy guiding the girls.

"I don't want to hurt him," Father Duncan whispered, taking Georgie into his arms.

"He'll be fine." Billy pointed to Georgie's head. "Think of it as a crash helmet."

Father Duncan smiled and nodded; he did his priestly thing, then signed the cross on the little patch of skin between Georgie's brow and the lip

of his helmet. Ellen felt some reassurance in the moment. It would all be fine.

"Blessed this day and always," Father Duncan finished. He turned to place Georgie in Ellen's arm.

"You forgot the toss!" she whispered.

"No!" Father Duncan frowned. "I crossed him!"

He shifted and extended Georgie to Billy. Billy shrugged at Ellen and motioned for her to lead the girls back to their pew.

After the service, Ellen's father rested his hand on her shoulder. He said, "You've made a beautiful family."

Harriet cleared her throat, "I can't believe the incense. It was so thick." Harriet stood swatting her hand back and forth in front of her nose. Harriet was Presbyterian and believed she was allergic to incense. She attended the Episcopal Church as a compromise, in the name of family.

"I can't believe the priests would be so insensitive. Incense can't be good for babies!"

"Yes, priests. An insensitive bunch." Billy liked to return Harriet's comments like a tennis shot. One for one.

"How about brunch?" Ellen said.

After her mother's death, Ellen's father came for dinner every Wednesday and Sunday evenings. The girls pulled bar stools to the stovetop to help cook. It was only three months after the death – Ellen would never forget the moment her father said, "I've met someone."

Ellen was supervising Kate who dropped linguine into steaming water and Stella perched on her stool with a long wooden spoon, ready to stir. She did not expect this from her father, certainly not so soon. She took the spoon from Stella.

"Her name is Harriet," he said.

"Why can't I stir?" asked Stella.

"You could get burned," said Ellen.

"But I always stir."

Ellen gave the spoon back to Stella and leaned forward burying her face into her daughter's head of curls.

"I believe you'll like her, Ellen. She's never had children. She'll enjoy being part of things."

"You say that like you've decided to marry her." Ellen looked at her father; his eyes were cast at the floor.

"Are you marrying this woman?"

He nodded.

Ellen pulled Stella and Kate off the stools and turned off the burners.

## ORIGINALLY, ELLEN AND BILLY PLANNED FOR TWO CHILDREN; THEY'D ALL FIT IN A SUBARU WAGON.

"You need to meet her, Ellen."

"I need a few minutes." She looked at the girls. "Don't touch the pot." Her eyes darted back and forth between Stella and Kate. She turned quickly and walked from the kitchen to the hall closet where she closed herself inside. The girls trailed after her.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" asked Stella through the door.

"I just need a minute. Just a minute. Then I'll come out."

Ellen sank to the floor beside the vacuum, beneath their winter coats. She wanted to cry, but nothing came.

One Christmas, when Ellen was a teenager, her father gave her mother a mink coat.

"It's too much, Frank," her mother said.

"You live once, Meredith. Put it on," her father said.

Her mother was stunning in the coat. "Like Grace Kelly," her father said.

Her mother wasn't fussy; she didn't care about things like furs. Ellen would remember her in a black cardigan, smelling like laundry detergent. Her mother's favorite flower was a lily. She loved lemon squares and the taste of bergamot in Earl Grey Tea. Her mother smoked Pall Malls, even after her doctor warned her they would kill her. She appreciated a high church hymn and liturgy, but sang along with Anne Murray on the radio and read Erma Bombeck, laughing out loud, sometimes tears in her eyes. Her mother loved poetry best. She memorized a poem every year, which she recited on New Year's Eve to friends. When she died she had a repertoire of twenty-eight. Her last poem was e.e. cummings' "i carry your heart with me." She knew she was dying when she chose it.

There was a night, not long after the mink-coat Christmas that Ellen came home early from being out with friends. Clearly, her parents did not hear the car in the drive or the front door latch. Her mother was upstairs, singing Anne Murray acapella:

*Easy for you to take me to a star  
Heaven is that moment when I look into your eyes*

Ellen was quiet moving down the dark hall to her room –

*And oh, I just fall in love again . . .*

– past her parents' bedroom, trying not to glance into the shaft of light through their open door, but not being able to stop herself from one quick glance, her father shirtless, lying on the bed, his hands behind his head, a smile, but no smile she recognized, and her mother, singing, her hand a microphone, moving across the room, naked beneath the mink coat.

Originally, Ellen and Billy planned for two children; they'd all fit in a Subaru wagon. Ellen got pregnant easily, twice, and the births went well. Everything flowed; even waking in the night had a sort of sweetness about it, rocking a baby back to sleep, sometimes Billy rocking and singing lullabies in the darkness. Stella and Kate grew into easy enough kids. Stella was bookish, from the start, calm and quiet; when she wasn't sitting in a puddle of books turning pages, she played with Kirsten, an American Girl doll Billy's parents sent for her birthday. Kate had more energy; she talked incessantly. They found ways to keep her occupied. Puzzles were good, and Legos. Kate didn't like dolls; she preferred little plastic animals, making homes for them with blocks and fabric scraps. Kate collected animal facts. *Blue whales are the loudest animals in the world. Lions sleep twenty hours a day.* Life seemed good, very good – until her mother was diagnosed.

Not a month after her mother's death, Ellen's college roommate sent a copy of her first big editing job – a documentary on the plight of orphaned girls in China. Ellen viewed it in the den, while the girls made Playdoh pizzas on the kitchen floor. That night, she watched it again with Billy.

Weeks later Ellen said, "I can't stop thinking about those babies, Billy."

"I know," he said.

For the loss of her mother? As some reaction to Harriet? Some obligation to the world? They attempted some analysis of their motives for adopting a child. Ellen couldn't say she felt called by God, as

people in the adoption brochures claimed, but she did have the same feeling about the adoption as she did sometimes at St. Luke's. There was something close, leaning into her, when she thought of the baby girl. In the end they filled out the papers and fourteen months later packed up Stella and Kate and traveled to Hefei to receive Lily.

If anything about Lily had been difficult they'd never have returned to China for another baby. But Lily was alert and healthy. Someone had taught her English words. She said *mama* and *papa* all in one breath. *Mamapapa*. Eleven months and a tiny little thing, Billy strapped her to his chest in a baby carrier and on the days they weren't sitting in government offices they roamed the city, walking the girls' white Keds gray. Billy bought a dragon kite with a long, bright tail and flew it with Stella and Kate while Lily pointed to the sky and said *mamapapa* over and again like a mantra. They ducked into tea-shops and drank aromatic combinations with names like *Beautiful Orchid*, *Lucky Hibiscus*, *Joy Love*.

After Hefei, they stood at the US Embassy in Guangzhou with a cast of other parents holding babies, raising their right hands in a pledge of parental love. In this way, Lily became their daughter. They boarded a double-decker plane and flew back over the Pacific, overnighing in San Francisco, where they let the girls eat ice cream for dinner at Ghirardelli.

Their friends thought they were nuts to take Stella and Kate to China, but it was good. The girls understood: there are all kinds of ways to make a family. When Kate returned to school, she told her teacher, "I got a new sister from *Vagina!*"

When Lily was four, she got in the car from school and began to cry.

"You're not my mother – Jack Lane said it."

"What does Jack Lane know?" Ellen reached her arm over the seat to Lily. "Pinch me, I'm real."

They talked to Lily about adoption. They told Lily, "Stella and Kate were born from our bodies. You were born from our hearts."

When Lily was five she said, "I am brown, and everyone else in my family is pink."

Two months later, their second round of paperwork arrived.

The adoption forms asked: *Will you consider a boy or a girl?*

Ellen and Billy checked the *either* box.

It asked: *Will you consider a child with special needs?*

Ellen and Billy checked the *no* box.

When they told Ellen's father and Harriet they were adopting again, her father said, "Lucky child."

"I can't see how a mother would give up a baby," said Harriet.

The room stilled. Billy put his hand over Lily's.

"Well. Four children," said Harriet. "I just can't believe – four children!" She waved her hand, the charms on her bracelet jumping about.

"Armadillos birth four babies at the same time," said Kate.

Ellen knew her fathered worried she did not like Harriet; but Ellen did not dislike Harriet. The issue was that Ellen had absolutely nothing in common with Harriet. Upon learning Ellen was an avid reader, Harriet gave Ellen a Danielle Steel novel. Harriet asked if she was enjoying the book each time they saw one another. Ellen finally lied and said she had been too busy to read it.

"Have you gotten to it?" Harriet stayed on Ellen about the book.

Ellen admitted to Harriet, finally, that Danielle Steel was not her sort of writer.

"Well what do you normally read?" Harriet inquired.

"Well, more literary type things."

"Danielle Steel is very literary! She's written nearly a hundred books, I have them all in hard copy."

This was the other thing that tried Ellen – Harriet was a collector. Books, bird figurines from England. A Christmas village, complete with fake snow, which she set up at the holidays taking over what had once been her mother's gracious living room. Harriet had framed hundreds of little silver

THEY TOLD LILY, "STELLA AND KATE WERE BORN FROM OUR BODIES. YOU WERE BORN FROM OUR HEARTS."

spoons. They hung in the entrance hall. Four or six frames worth. And charms. Harriet had an impressive collection of bracelets. A dozen or so, each with an individual theme. A gardening bracelet with a spade charm, and a watering bucket charm, among others. A Christmas bracelet, a tree, an elf, a stocking, and so forth. A heart bracelet, a planet bracelet. Harriet always wore a charm bracelet, and the girls loved this; they checked to see which theme Harriet donned for a given occasion. Harriet started the girls with charm bracelets. Little crown charms. Little bunny charms. They were pleased with their bracelets, twisting their wrists back and forth in display. Harriet asked if Ellen wanted a bracelet. Charms weren't Ellen's thing either, but she felt mean-spirited declining. Harriet started Ellen a mother bracelet. A baby bottle. A rattle. A diaper charm.

"Can you believe I found a diaper charm?" said Harriet.

"No. I can't believe it," said Ellen.

What helped Ellen come to terms with Harriet was the neighbor's dog. Ellen and Billy did not have a dog, because Stella suffered allergies, but they often felt they had a dog because of Zeus, the McClelland's black lab. The McClellands both worked

as physicians and employed a Filipino nanny, who took good care of the children, but ignored the dog. Zeus roamed and came to Ellen and Billy's yard to take shits in their grass. Ellen wanted to not like Zeus for all the shit she had to dig out of the treads of her children's shoes, but she knew it wasn't Zeus's fault. The dog was not shitting in *her* grass, the dog was just shitting in grass.

The priest referred to her mother's ashes as cremains. "We'll transfer your mother's cremains into the urn," he said. It took Ellen a moment to realize his linguistic blur of cremation and remains. *Cremains*.

At the burial, the priest emptied her mother's cremains into the ground and Ellen dropped a handful of earth over them.

"May she live forever in Paradise," the priest said.

Ellen didn't buy Paradise, some otherworldly place. If there's any chance for Paradise, Ellen was convinced it was mixed up with this life – poems and music and fern fronds and the oak that grows from the forgotten acorn of some squirrel. Making love and eating good olives. The warm sun after a grey

*Fragmented* (collage, 8x10) by Mona Wu



winter and the color blue. Her mother smiling up at her as she lay dying, saying, “Don’t waste a minute of your life, Ellen.” If her mother was to live forever in a Paradise it would be somewhere in this broken-up world.

If Ellen had the space the day of the burial, she’d have said to the priest, “I hate the word *remains*.”

The summer before they received their referral for Georgie, Kate wanted to go to summer camp for three weeks with her friend, Alice. Kate had never been to camp before, but she often spent the night away from home.

The camp form asked this question: *Does your child have issues with homesickness?*

Ellen checked the *no* box.

Letters arrived from Kate nearly everyday the first week she was away.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I miss you soooooo much. The days are fun but I am crying 4 you at night. Can you please come get me early?

Love, Kate

Mom and Dad

Please come and get me from this camp. It is a nice camp but also I cannot stand it and I miss U so much it hurts me.

I love U so much and 4ever,

Love, Kate

PS I am cerius.

Ellen called the camp director, who insisted homesickness was a hallmark of the camp experience and a very normal occurrence. She spoke of the benefits of homesickness, teaching coping mechanisms, encouraging new horizons. Kate was reportedly a model camper! Only a few tears at night, five minutes, and then she was asleep. The director encouraged Ellen to write upbeat letters that encouraged the activities and opportunities of camp. Ellen wrote these things, as did Billy and her father.

Harriet also wrote to Kate. “I told her about being at camp when I was a girl. How I was thrown from a horse named Houdini the first time I rode. I despised that horse, but the counselor made me ride him everyday. In the end I loved Houdini and I cried my eyes out when it was time to leave.”

Mom and Dad,

I won a baj for archerie and another one for crafts. Tomorrow we are going on a campout and I am the one that will bild the fire for the somemores. Camp is fun and I love it now. And Harriet wrote me a good letter. Don’t come get me earlie.

Kate

PS Did you know that in Afraka, thers a lily pad that can hold the wait of an Ellepant?

PSS. I REPEAT: Do not come get me earlie.

Georgie’s referral arrived with only one picture in the envelope: a baby stuffed into a yellow snowsuit, his face pinched into a bowl by the hood. The baby sat in a little chair on a cut of AstroTurf in front of a plastic backdrop: a vast lavender sky with thick clouds and a large windmill.

“They must be expecting a Dutch couple,” Billy said.

No. The baby was not sitting up. He was propped, slumped into the chair like a stuffed bear. Ellen studied the picture. No. Not propped.

“Billy!” Ellen gasped, “He’s tied to the chair.” She pointed to a fraying rope at the child’s waist.

“You can’t tell anything from the picture. How do you even know it’s a boy?” asked Stella.

“I can tell by the face,” said Kate.

“No you can’t,” said Stella.

There are conversations that continue in one’s head, different from the one casting about in a room. In the moment Ellen identified the rope, her mind because a stream of words unto itself.

“I didn’t expect there would be boys to adopt in China,” said her father.

Ellen was overcome by understanding this adoption would be nothing like Lily’s; this child would be nothing like their girls. When Lily’s referral picture arrived, Ellen recognized something familiar. Looking at the picture of this baby, this boy, the word that came to mind, to her horror, was *foreign*.

“I can’t believe a woman could abandon a child,” said Harriet.

“I doubt she had a choice,” said Billy.

“I can’t believe someone would tie a child with a rope,” said Harriet.

“I doubt they meant him harm,” said Billy.

“Fourteen months old,” said Ellen. “That baby should be able to sit up on his own.”



FOR DAYS SHE FELT THEY WERE IN A CAR TRAVELING AT HIGH SPEED. . . . IT WAS AS IF THERE WAS TOO MUCH WIND COMING THROUGH THE WINDOWS AND NO ONE COULD HEAR HER AS SHE CALLED OUT, AS SHE ASKED THE DRIVER TO SLOW.

He had come with the name *Longwei Yunnan*. The report named some facts. He had been abandoned in the Bird and Flower Market in Kunming City on July 9, 2006. He had met developmental milestones; his medical report was unremarkable. There was a list of immunizations, a vision and hearing screening, blood and urine analysis.

"Sitting up is a developmental milestone," said Ellen.

"This good boy has big smile enjoying the sun," Billy read from the summary statement. "That's something good."

*Big smile enjoying the sun* was the piece Ellen held to – it got her on the plane to Kunming City.

"Is there a map to where we are going?" asked Lily.

Billy pulled the flight magazine from the seat pocket and opened it to the route maps. He held Lily's index finger in his hand and traced the route from North Carolina across the States, over the wide blue sea and Japan and far into China, then south.

"It's a long way," he said.

Ellen took antidepressants after Stella was born, not because Stella was hard, but because leaving work was hard. Not the job so much, her boss was an ass. She missed wrapping her head around a project, coming up with a creative solution. She missed adult conversations about adult cares, so she took the pills until she didn't miss work anymore.

Her mother said, "I didn't have to take pills with you, and it wasn't because I didn't need something. God! You never slept, you suffered colic. In those days, husbands didn't lift a finger when it came to children. But we had cigarettes. I survived on them. I swear everyone turned to pills when it all came out about cigarettes killing you."

"You said *yes*?" Billy put down his fork.

Harriet wanted to go with them to China; Ellen had kept it from him for two days.

"Dad was standing there, pleading with his eyes," she said. "She's bought travel-sized games; she wants to help with the girls. What was I going to say?"

"Is he coming?"

"You know he doesn't travel."

Billy took a long swallow of his beer. "Two weeks in China with Harriet. I can't believe it."

They were in the elevator, jet-lagged and silent. Harriet had added a Great Wall charm to mark the trip; it dangled between an Eiffel Tower and an airplane. Lily toyed with it. The girls each had a gift for the baby – a plush brown mouse with floppy ears, a wooden rattle, *Goodnight Moon*. Billy was fiddling with the video camera. The elevator rang when they reached the lobby. Harriet said, "I can't believe they don't give you a day to rest before they hand over a baby."

"It's not a package. The language is *receive* a baby," Billy quipped. He switched on the device. "Smile, girls!" He panned their faces. "What's happening today?"

"I agree with Harriet," said Ellen, before the girls could answer. For days she felt they were in a car traveling at high speed, that someone else was driving her car. It was as if there was too much wind coming through the windows and no one could hear her as she called out, as she asked the driver to slow. Ellen thought she could work out everything; that everything would settle into its right place on the shelf of her life, if she could slow it down. Not ten minutes before she suggested to Billy that they go alone to meet the baby. Just in case.

"In case what?" Billy asked.

"In case it's too much."

"We've come this far," said Billy.

The elevator doors parted.

"I wish this were going slower," said Ellen.

Harriet took Ellen's hand. This surprised Ellen, and she held on.



*Meditation on a Bamboo Branch* (collage, 15x19) by Mona Wu

A man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a cigarette hanging from his lips like an appendage, caught them. His hands were raised to prevent them from moving forward.

“Thompson? You Thompson?”

They nodded.

He clapped his hands beside his left ear, like a Spanish dancer. “I am Mr. Zhou and I your personal liaison. Let’s go! Let’s go!” He stepped aside, allowing them to file into the lobby. Mr. Zhou was small and quick about everything, shaking Billy’s hand, nodding at the girls. He spoke like he was in a race to finish his sentences.

“Big family,” he said to Billy. “You lucky man.”

“You mother?” Mr. Zhou asked Ellen.

She nodded.

“And the beautiful grandmother!” said Mr. Zhou to Harriet.

He had slowed over the word beautiful and this made Harriet smiled.

“Now you get strong son! Big joy family!” said Mr. Zhou. He clapped. “Let’s go! Let’s go!”

Mr. Zhou led them out of the hotel into the plaza and the pleasant morning. They zigzagged manicured plots of grass and rows of potted flowers as Zhou maneuvered his route. They followed him like ducklings. Billy had his camera to his eye and occasionally pointed out curiosities to the girls – a cluster of people practicing Tai Chi, a massive fish tank outside a restaurant, a vendor with a bead counter. Ellen was taken for a moment by a water feature, a cool spring running over dark granite. They stepped around hawkers selling crickets and kites, little shoes spread on blankets, candy, and pencils. There was tobacco and rolling paper and stone stamps with red ink in little porcelain dragon pots. A man came toward Ellen. “American?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Caffeine for you!” He pointed her to his cart. Jars of tea leaves.

“No chopping. Later chopping!” Mr. Zhou waved his arms at the man. “Now we get you baby. Let’s go!”

The corner of the plaza was claimed by a group of blind masseuses, crisp in white uniforms, twenty or so in perfect rows, working on customers curved and bent like rag dolls over wooden chairs. Mr. Zhou led them between rows, single file.

“How can they see where to touch?” Stella asked.

“No talk! Let’s go!” clapped Mr. Zhou.

They waited an hour or more inside a cement office. Billy handled fees and paperwork. Ellen put her hand to his shoulder and whispered her worry that he was signing something before they saw the baby. Mr. Zhou came from across room.

“You no worry. You get baby. And you very lucky you get boy!”

The room was small and dim, and while it was a pleasant enough day, the air inside was stiff. In addition to officials, there was a stout woman with a mouth of crooked, yellowed teeth that sat on a chair in the corner staring at Ellen.

“That woman doesn’t like you,” Harriet said.

“Why do you think she is here?” said Ellen.

“I don’t know, but she’s clearly angry,” said Harriet.

Ellen stood, for it occurred to her that no one was holding her hostage in the room, that she could step outside and breathe a different air. Harriet grabbed Ellen’s wrist.

“She could be the baby’s mother!” she said.

Mr. Zhou came to Ellen's side. "Baby here soon." He pointed to his cellular phone. "They call me and say you no worry."

"Who is that woman, Mr. Zhou?" asked Harriet.

He looked over his shoulder. "She nothing. She clean this building, but no clean good."

"She isn't the baby's mother?" said Harriet.

"Nooo. You baby got no mother. That woman there, she no mother, she nothing at all."

Mr. Zhou turned to the woman and barked raw, biting sounds in Chinese. The woman dropped her head. He barked again and shooed her into a back room.

"It's alright," said Ellen. "I'm going outside."

Her mother was in and out of consciousness until the end. Brief moments of clarity, mostly morphine holding her comatose, occasionally wild talk of angels and stars, conversations she claimed with their old dog, Hal, long deceased.

When the priest came offering her mother last rites, he said, "Do you have anything to confess?"

Her mother lifted her head off the pillow; she was lucid, clear as the parish carillon she so dearly loved. "I am not afraid anymore," she said. "But I still don't want to go."

*Confession?* Ellen had a confession – some fury inside her that so gentle and good a person as her mother, good to the core, had been dealt this horrific pain. This miserable end. Cancer eating her bones – which was all that was left of her. Her mother begged for morphine. It was a horror show, and Ellen was as afraid her mother would die as that she wouldn't.

*Confession?* Ellen wanted to say to the priest, "Show me God and I'll give you a confession."

Ellen walked around the side of the building; the woman from inside was sitting on the stoop. She turned to the sound of Ellen's feet in the gravel.

Ellen could see now, in fullness of sunlight, that the woman was quite old. This was not the mother of an infant. Her eyes carried dark wells of some broken life, which Ellen could only just sense but not decipher. It was some grief in the eyes Ellen recognized.

"*Ni hao*," Ellen said the only word of Chinese she knew. She took a step toward the woman; the woman looked away. A gaunt cat darted between them.

"My mother died of breast cancer," Ellen blurted. The woman made no gesture to acknowledge Ellen. After a moment, Ellen returned to the building.

Her mother had requests for her funeral. Lilies, the hymn she loved most, her final poem recited, an Erma Bombeck quote printed on the service bulletin: "*When I see God, at the end of my life, I intend to say, 'I used everything you gave me.'*"

They heard the baby boy before they saw him, his cries rhythmic and high-pitched, echoing in the entryway.

"Well, his lungs work," Billy said.

Lily looked at Ellen with concern.

"He doesn't understand what's happening," Ellen told the girls. "He'll be happy soon."

The baby was carried into the room by a man in an oversized suit.

"He Director," Mr. Zhou said.

Ellen reached for the baby. He was dressed as if ready for a winter tundra in a quilted jacket and pants, little black and yellow sports padded shoes. A matching quilted cap tied at the chin framed his dark face, which was knotted and red for his angst. The director placed him in Ellen's arms. He was weightless, all quilt and batting.

"There's nothing to him." Ellen lifted his head to her lips, *shhhhhhing* through the cap into his ear, swaying, rocking back and forth, the girls around her, reaching for his little hands, touching his cheek.

"*Ni hao*," they sang.

"I am the big sister of you," Lily said.

When they were back to the hotel, Billy ran a shallow pool into the tub. Ellen rested the baby on the bed and peeled back his clothing. Fingers and toes all accounted for. Arms like tinker toys, little twigs for legs. Beneath the cap, the baby's desiccated hair broke and scattered in her hand like capillaries.

"He has funny ears," said Stella.

Ellen sat him up, supporting him with the pillows. Kate was right, one ear sat higher than the other. Ellen turned him and her breath caught. In profile, the back of his head looked like half a head, like a split melon.

"Billy!" Ellen called. "Billy!"

They spent two hours on the computer in the hotel office center. Flat head and lopsided ears and international adoption. They found terms: *failure-to-thrive, deficiencies and parasites*. They found: *Brachycephaly-asymmetrical features with cranial flattening*.

It wasn't a disease or a birth defect.

"He's been left on his back in a crib," said Ellen. "No one's held him."

The girls were playing UNO on the floor by the bed. Billy was off to the lobby to meet Mr. Zhou. The baby was face up on Ellen's thighs; she was peek-a-booming him, wanting a glimpse of the smile the referral mentioned. He gripped her thumbs.

"Strong hands," she said. "That's something good."

"I can't believe they simply forgot to mention his head," said Harriet.

When Mr. Zhou came to the room, he blamed the nannies at the orphanage. "They no smart women. Director say they no good," said Mr. Zhou. He added, "Boy too long in crib, but no matter! He smart boy!"

"He can't sit up," said Billy. "He doesn't crawl."

"He go with you, he eat good nutrition, he grow very strong. You smart, you feed baby, you give baby exercising."

"This baby has been horribly neglected. Look at his ears!" Ellen said.

Mr. Zhou bent and clapped his hands close to the baby's face. The baby blinked.

"See. Baby got good ears, good eyes!" said Mr. Zhou. "Director test baby. He thorough."

"I mean how his ears look. They aren't right," said Ellen.

"You no like your baby?"

"I didn't say that."

"You got boy. You be happy," said Mr. Zhou.

"Why is mommy crying?" asked Lily.

"Because it is sad, what happened to the baby," said Billy.

"Are we going to keep him?"

"Let's play cards," said Billy.

Mr. Zhou brought a little sack of sticks and dried things that smelled of mold for Ellen to brew and give to the baby in his bottle.

Billy put his nose into the bag and inhaled. "I can't believe anyone would drink this." He winked at Ellen.

She threw the tea into the trash. What she wanted was the baby to reach for her – to do something.

She went back to the computer and returned to the hotel room with a napkin of Cheerios from the hotel restaurant. She rested the baby on his belly and put a Cheerio in front of him.

"He is supposed to reach for it," she said. "It's a way to get a baby to crawl."

The baby lifted his head, she thought he started

to reach his arm, but he dropped his head and stuck his fist into his mouth.

Ellen tried again. She crouched and patted the floor. "Come on little guy!"

He kicked his feet, but he went nowhere.

She found this online: *Craniosynostosis*. Premature fusion of the skull bones. Countless cases of orphan babies in crowded institutions with *craniosynostosis*. Images of flat heads and crooked features. Postings about surgeries and cranial helmets to reshape a skull. Some happy endings. Some brain damage. Testimonies and photographs from across the world of babies, four to a crib, wedged in cribs, left in cribs. Lying in one position, not able to move. Bottle tied to crib rails, propped on pillows, to feed babies. Some babies six months and never left a crib.

*Craniosynostosis*. Crib like a cage, Ellen thought.

Why was she crying? For everything they couldn't know about this baby, for this baby.

She found Billy smoking in the lobby.

"There's no map for where we are going," she said.

The baby ate well; that was a bright spot. The girls pushed him through the hotel restaurant in an umbrella stroller. Ellen popped bites of egg and bits of sausage into his mouth as they wheeled him past.

*Clap, clap*. Open hands. Happy mother face. *Clap, clap*. Open hands. Happy mother face. The baby looked up at her from the stroller, no smile, but eyes fixed on her.

*Clap, clap*. Open hands. Happy mother face. Ellen worked it. She clapped again.

*Make happy baby face. Come on. Make it. Happy baby face.*

But the baby made no face. They phoned Mr. Zhou.

When he came, Billy spoke in a hushed voice about their concerns, and Ellen wiped her tears.

"Baby grow hair, then no see baby head. Then you wife happy," Mr. Zhou said.

"I can't believe you're standing," Harriet said to Ellen. Ellen had hardly slept. They had to make a decision. Harriet organized a day for Ellen to recuperate.

"You can't make a decision in the state you're in," Harriet said.

Billy took the girls to the Kunming Zoo where Mr. Zhou promised they could ride elephants and hold monkeys. Harriet would take the baby; she was

## “THERE’S NO MAP FOR WHERE WE ARE GOING,” SHE SAID.

insistent. They would stroll in the plaza; they would have lunch in the hotel.

“Rest,” Harriet said. “Let me do this for you.”

In the quiet, Ellen curled on the bed, had a cry, then slept, rock heavy for hours. In the afternoon, the phone rang. She woke to it in a fog, not sure where she was in the world.

“I come see you. I bring good news.” Mr. Zhou called through the phone. He was in the lobby and wanted to come to the room.

Three minutes later, Mr. Zhou was at her door holding a cardboard box.

“Look, see,” said Mr. Zhou. He stepped past Ellen into the room, rested the box in the chair. “Look see,” he said.

A sky blue towel. Movement. A small cry.

He’s brought a bird, Ellen thought. A little bird. She was still groggy from the sleep.

“This baby got good head!” Mr. Zhou said.

When she didn’t find Harriet and Georgie in the hotel, Ellen ran through the plaza looking for them, people stepping out of her way. She took the old cobbled stones two at a time, past the lollipop topiaries, the hawkers hawking, the kite flyers flying dragons, butterflies, birds. Box kites. A man selling fat puppies from a box. A man selling firecrackers from a box. *Pop. Pop.*

“Make red smoke for you,” he said.

Baby in a box. Baby for you in a box.

“This baby good baby,” said Mr. Zhou. “You like this baby. Got perfect head for you.”

Ellen stepped back and shook her head.

“You want baby with good head. Your mother tell me. She good mother to you. She want you be happy.”

“She didn’t mean this.”

Ellen stopped running when she arrived at the lines of blind masseuses. She wove through the chairs and sat before a woman with puckers for eyes. Ellen didn’t say a word. The woman’s fingers found Ellen’s shoulders, moved into the taunt ropes of her neck. She said something to Ellen. Ellen did not respond.

The woman’s fingers extended around and through Ellen’s hair, across her scalp, over and around, over and around. The sun

was warm on her shoulders. Ellen closed her eyes, and she was there on a pew at St. Luke’s with the something that leaned into her. She didn’t know if it was God-talk or mother-talk or crazy-talk but she could not quiet the voice that rose in her: “Take a bite of the apple and call down wisdom. Talk to snakes and peel back your own skin, because that is what it is going to take. Believe this: we don’t, any of us, live with the same questions in this world; and there is no life inside of Paradise.”

After Georgie’s first surgery, once the wounds healed, there was a cranial helmet for six months. They could only take it off for his bath and when it was time to put it back on, Georgie had a way of tucking his chin and bowing his head toward her, like he was helping, like he had a part in the whole of things. That is when Ellen knew that even if everything would not be all right, it would somehow be good.



Summer Splendor (multiblock woodcut, 10x12) by Mona Wu

Even though Ellen would never know her children's birthmothers, even though there was no address for the envelopes, Ellen wrote them letters anyway. This was the first letter she wrote to Georgie's mother.

*Dear You,*

*This is what I believe: He was born and you could not see any other way. You swaddled your baby and tucked in a note: Tell this baby he was loved from the beginning. You put him in a basket and set the basket in the corner of the market and lit a little firecracker that popped and drew attention so that when you looked back someone was holding your baby and a crowd was gathering. I pray you were comforted by this.*

*This is what I know: Your baby is safe and healthy and happy and beautiful and loved. He's trying to take steps now; he wants to keep up with his sisters and the neighbors' dog. He smiles big enjoying the sun. I hope you feel its warm in the moments you think of him.*

*This is what I will tell him about you: Your life was hard, that you wanted him but couldn't see a way. He will understand that there was desperation, but I will not let you live desperate in his mind forever. I promise to teach him about life's complexity so he will be able to think of you beyond one moment, so he will have space to believe your life full. I will tell him you are using everything in life you have been given. I hope this is true and I hope that it pleases you, wherever you are.*

*Did you know that in Africa there is a lily pad that can bear the weight of an elephant?*

After the christening, Ellen decided to speak to Father Duncan. She was holding Georgie, still in his gown.

"I know he looks small and fragile, but Georgie is really very tough. You have no idea what all he's made of. It wouldn't have hurt him, being tossed like the others," she said.

The priest stared at Ellen for a moment. "I was afraid to toss him," he said.

They stood for a moment in awkward silence. Then Father Duncan said, "How 'bout it Georgie? You want to fly?"

He took Georgie in his arms. Ellen followed them back into the empty nave, up the aisle of pews to the font. Standing over the pool of water, Father Duncan tossed Georgie, first only slightly. When Georgie smiled and squealed delight he tossed him higher, over and again, until they were both winded.

There were twenty adults and a posse of children afterwards for the christening brunch. The children were impatient, nagging Billy because he had promised a game of tag in the front yard.

Harriet had a gift for Ellen. "This is for you, not the baby," she said.

Billy held Ellen's champagne so she could open the box.

It was a charm for Ellen's bracelet. A Chinese character.

"It means Number One Mother," Harriet said. She lifted her index finger. "You can't believe how hard it was to find that charm."

"Number One." Billy finished Ellen's champagne and winked at her. "All rights, kids," he called. "It's me against all of you pipsqueaks. Catch me if you can."

This set off a series of squeals that lingered even as the tribe of children left through the front door. Ellen and the friends and family and Georgie sat quiet for a moment, listening to the herd of children in the distance, screaming, wild, moving across the lawn, trying to catch and hold on to something bigger than themselves. ■

THAT IS WHEN ELLEN KNEW THAT EVEN IF  
EVERYTHING WOULD NOT BE ALL RIGHT,  
IT WOULD SOMEHOW BE GOOD.

# An Appetite for Language: *Introducing Monique Truong*

by Lisa Hinrichsen

This essay is adapted from Lisa Hinrichsen's introduction to the author at the 2014 Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL) Conference. Spoiler alert: If you have not yet read Truong's Boiling Springs, North Carolina-set novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, you might want to do so before you read this introduction to the author. Then enjoy the interview with Truong, conducted by Kirstin Squint at the SSSL conference, and an essay on the novel by Rachael Price, which originated as a paper presented at this same conference, both to appear in the print issue of *NCLR* 2015.

Let me start with a simple fact: it's impossible to read Monique Truong's work without becoming hungry. My copy of *The Book of Salt* is well-thumbed with imprints of bits of snacks I couldn't help consuming, and marked with folded-down pages that tell the story of retreats to stir and pour and bake and eat some inspired concoction before returning to the evocative, erotic kitchens at the center of her sensual story. Her most recent novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, takes us to a world far away from the cosmopolitan haute cuisine explored in *The Book of Salt*, dropping us into the small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Even so, reading it still demanded buttery biscuits washed down with a glass of sweet tea.<sup>1</sup>

Appetite is a complex, highly conditioned drive, and Truong's prose beautifully explores how food can serve as an agent and expression for discipline, fear,

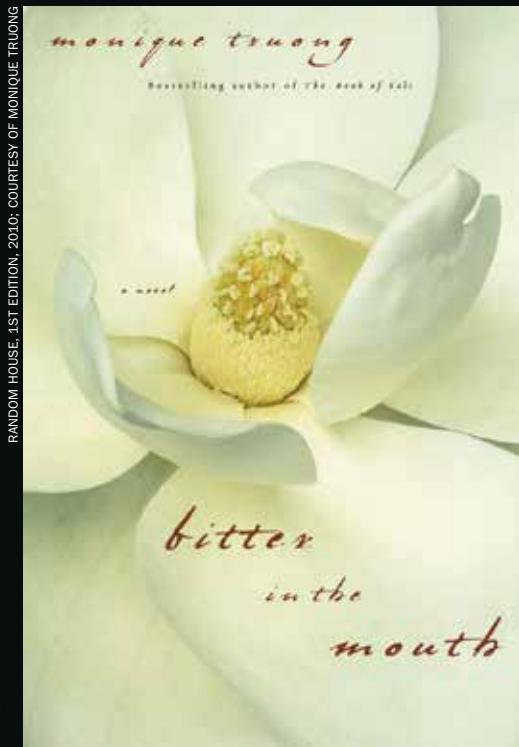


PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELE PANDURI METALLI

hunger, and loss. In tracing both the joyful and the melancholic sides of eating, Truong's novels reveal how taste informs the various ways in which we ingest the world and inhabit social categories, such as nation, gender, race, and region. In her work, Truong draws on the concrete specifics of the worlds that she knows. She was born in Saigon, South Vietnam, and came to the United States in 1975, fleeing the Vietnam War with her family to settle in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, then Centerville, Ohio. But she transforms these worlds with a sly wit, a careful eye, and a historian's sense of detail laced with literary imagination, creating tales that envelop us in acts of consumption, simultaneously quotidian and extraordinary, pleasurable but never innocent.

**LISA HINRICHSEN** earned her PhD from Boston University and is an Assistant Professor at the University of Arkansas. She is the author of *Possessing the Past: Trauma, Imagination, and Memory in Post-Plantation Southern Literature* (Louisiana State University Press, 2015), and she has contributed essays to the *Southern Literary Journal*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, and *African American Review*, among other publications.

<sup>1</sup> Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 2003); *Bitter in the Mouth* (New York: Random House, 2010); quotations from these novels will be cited parenthetically.



A lush novel that draws on Truong's love of all things culinary, *The Book of Salt* was a national bestseller, a *New York Times* Notable Fiction Book, a *Chicago Tribune* Favorite Fiction Book, one of the 25 Favorite Books of the *Village Voice*, and the recipient of the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the Bard Fiction Prize, the Stonewall Book Award, and an Association for Asian American Studies Award, among still more honors. This novel powerfully challenges the conventional portrayal of the lesbian love relationship of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas by reimagining their romance from the perspective of Binh, their live-in Vietnamese cook. Drawing its inspiration from a notation in Toklas's famous cookbook indicating that she and Stein hired a series of Asian men as their chefs in Paris in the late 1920s, Truong presents Stein and Toklas through the eyes of another expatriate homosexual, in the process challenging simplistic fantasies of queer affiliation across cultural, racial, and class lines. From its creative inspiration in Toklas's cookbook, to its intertextual references to

Stein's *Tender Buttons* and its studied rendering of expatriate modernist life, to its imaginative engagement with the complex homophobic, colonialist, and racial histories that shape its French, American, and Vietnamese subjects, *The Book of Salt* invites an intertextual, transnational analysis that is smartly conscious of the contradictions of power. Truong suggests that the tales of queer migrant laborers are not granted the same historical posterity as the story of Stein and Toklas, whose relationship has been integrated into the dominant narrative of the modernist movement. The novel traces Binh's struggle to reapropriate a voice that has been silenced in the currents of global capitalism and diasporic exile – what Truong gorgeously calls “the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast” (19). In resisting the forced erasure of minority subjects within dominant renderings of history, *The Book of Salt* leaves readers at the intersection of complex, and perhaps irresolvable, questions about our narratives of race, nation, history, and sexuality.

Although Binh never steps foot in the United States, *The Book of Salt* unmistakably grapples with concerns of Asian American identity that relate to, among other issues, the continuing struggle of Asian Americans against exclusion, exploitation, and homogenization. Truong explicitly addresses these issues in her second novel *Bitter in the Mouth*, which continues her interest in merging fiction and history to make us see invisible others and obscured histories. Like *The Book of Salt*, *Bitter in the Mouth* was published to instant acclaim: among other honors, it won the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was named to the 25 Best Fiction Books of 2010 by Barnes & Noble. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* that tells the story of Linda Hammerick's upbringing in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, a small town where, as Linda states, “I was the town's pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so” (171). Mirroring the cultural whitewashing of Linda's Asian heritage, *Bitter in the Mouth* only belatedly folds in racial issues, revealing her Vietnamese background and troubled, traumatic history midway through the narrative. In exploring what it was like to grow up looking Asian while identifying otherwise, *Bitter in the Mouth* uses the tension between outsider and insider as a way of examining the claustrophobic parameters of a small town Southern life that often insists upon



sameness rather than embraces difference. “In Boiling Springs,” Linda remarks of her hometown, “I was never Scout. I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in plain sight” (171). In revealing how Linda’s body becomes both hypervisible yet invisible, Truong insistently critiques the politics of contemporary American colorblindness, which is marked by a refusal to see difference and to acknowledge the complexities of race – a move which, she implies, maintains the hegemonic centrality of whiteness to American life.

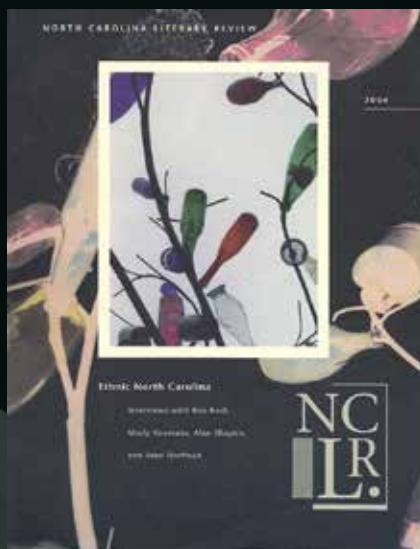
Yet, amidst and against this racial erasure, Truong inventively positions the sensation of taste, presenting a mode of hybridity that is internal rather than, like race, in the realm of the visible. In deferring a direct address of Linda’s ethnicity until the midpoint of the text, Truong instead centers on her everyday yet extraordinary multisensory experience, inviting the reader into the way that she uniquely realizes the world in synesthetic terms. In the small community of Boiling Springs, which here stands in for the South as a whole, the uniformity of taste, race, and historical narrative are challenged and dismantled by Linda’s particular mode of sensing and feeling the world. In contrast to her white Southern household’s aesthetic of sameness, Linda reimagines the world as otherwise, reclaiming what she terms “unrelated” sensations (84), and initiating us into an investigation of how the multicultural imagination powerfully renders whiteness (and its dominant modes of feeling, evaluating, and tasting) uncanny. Probing at racial binaries in the region that leave no room for the recognition of racial diversity, Truong fruitfully draws on her own ambivalence of belonging to the US South. Engaging with Southern archetypes, histories, foodways, and canonical literature in order to suggest revised connections between the local and the national and the local and the international, her work negotiates a need to simultaneously claim and trouble a sense of Southern voice while also speaking in a tongue brilliantly cosmopolitan and viscerally multicultural.

To elaborate more on Truong’s work, which has won her prestigious residences across the world, and made her a PEN/Robert Bingham Fellow, a Princeton University Hodder Fellow, and a Guggenheim Fellow, among other honors – could, quite pleasurably, take several pages, but in introducing her work for the *North Carolina Literary Review*, it seems appropriate

to conclude with a few lines from her first short story, “Kelly,” published in 1991. In this brief tale, Truong sketches questions that have continued to drive and resonate in her work, especially her recent narration of North Carolina life:

How to write about the Southern United States when you are not White or Black? How to write in a voice, an intonation, a rhythm that you have grown up hearing and knowing when everyone else out there expects you to write about mothers and talk-story? How to write about a place that is you but one that you have to go back, call out and claim because no one there will ever claim you as their own?<sup>2</sup>

As this year’s *NCLR* theme demonstrates, scholarship on Southern literature is challenging narratives of Southern exceptionalism and exclusion through work that swerves from a monolithic vision of “the South” and instead draws attention to transnational and hemispheric affiliations between the US South and a more global South and models of internal diversity within the region. In both looking away and looking anew, reading heterogeneity back into a landscape where it has often been simplified or erased, the canon of what we deem “Southern” is expanded and enriched. As Truong puts it in *Bitter in the Mouth*, which beautifully works to reconfigure the narratives of Southern belonging: “We all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay” (282). ■



COVER DESIGN BY MARY HATCH THISEN

ABOVE RIGHT *NCLR* 2004, which includes the essay on Truong’s story “Kelly” (still available for purchase)

<sup>2</sup> Monique Truong, “Kelly,” *Amerasia Journal* 17.2 (1991): 41-48. This story is the subject of an essay by Nahem Yousaf and Sharon Monteith, “‘I Was Pearl and My Last Name Was Harbor’: Monique Thuy-Dung Truong’s ‘Kelly’ and Ethnic Southern Memory,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 13 (2004): 113-22.

## FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE

BY SUSAN LEFLER

*Burning Bush*

summer burned toward autumn the house jammed  
 with what grown children and aging parents left behind

in and under everything until desperate for space  
 we folded red paper and made red envelopes seven each

as pleas for feng shui intervention the master came  
 bearing crystal spheres bamboo flutes mirrors marked

with mercury mirrors soaked in sun and moon  
 we needed flow we needed Tibetan prayers tenuous

on the tongue by the end our house felt open new  
 wind water energy flow like river basins lightning bolts

tree limbs all but my husband's arteries the two main branches  
 nearly dammed I sat with our four children woven like a nest

around me while the surgeons stopped their father's heart to snip  
 and stitch new channels for the blood we came home fragile

drained to the bowl of backyard trees stained red  
 hearts-a-bustin' burning bush leaves berries branches

flame all flame and not  
 consumed



*It's Still a Brilliant World III* (acrylic on canvas, 36x24)  
 by Eduardo Lapetina

**SUSAN LEFLER's** poems have appeared in *Icarus International*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Pinesong*, *Bay Leaves*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Wind*, *Passager*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pembroke Review*, *Pisgah Review*, as well as *Kakalak* (an anthology of North and South Carolina poets, now published by Main Street Rag) and the anthologies *...and love...* and *What Matters*, published by Jacar Press. She is the author of the photographic history books *Brevard* (Arcadia Publishing, 2004) and *Brevard, Then & Now* (Arcadia Publishing, 2012). She was formerly managing editor of *Smoky Mountain Living*. Her first collection of poems *Rendering the Bones* (Wind Publications, 2011) won honorable mention in the 2012 Oscar Arnold Young Contest for the Book sponsored by the Poetry Council of North Carolina. Her poem "The Gravedigger's Wife Ponders" won the North Carolina Poet Laureate Award in 2013 and was published in *Pinesong*. Her poem "Inspector 17" received Honorable Mention in the 2014 Applewhite competition and will be published in the print issue of *NCLR 2015*. [Hear](#) the poet read that poem at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference.

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 art 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](#) and in *NCLR Online 2014*.

## TRAVELING THE PSYCHIC HIGHWAY

a review by  
Kathaleen E. Amende

**Monica Byrne. *The Girl in the Road: A Novel*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2014.**

**KATHALEEN E. AMENDE** has a PhD from Tulane University and is an Associate Professor of English and the Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Alabama State University. Her scholarship includes the book *Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity in White Southern Women's Writing* (Louisiana State UP, 2013) and an *NCLR* 2014 essay on William Forstchen's post-apocalyptic novel *One Second After*, set in Black Mountain, NC.

**MONICA BYRNE** has a BA in Biochemistry and Religion from Wellesley and an MS in Geochemistry from MIT. She has been published in a number of literary journals, including the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Several of her original plays have been performed by such venues as Manbites Dog Theater in Durham, NC, where the author lives, and in New York City at the New York International Fringe Festival.

Monica Byrne's first novel, *The Girl in the Road*, a science fiction and fantasy literary hybrid, has been reviewed positively by award-winning and respected novelists such as Kim Stanley Robinson and Neil Gaiman, and many of the readers quoted on sites such as Goodreads and Amazon have also found the novel worthy of praise. Set in 2068, *The Girl in the Road* consists of the intertwining stories of two young women on two different journeys – Mariama is an Ethiopian girl escaping slavery, and Meena is an Indian woman making her way to Ethiopia to find the woman who killed her parents.

Although their stories parallel one another in interesting and sometimes troubling ways – and eventually collide – the two are connected primarily thematically and literarily. Meena's story provides the framework for the novel, as she attempts to cross the "Trail," a 3300-kilometer path that bobs and rocks as it spans the Indian Ocean between Asia and Africa. Meena's trials – from escaping the terrorist group she believes is hunting her, to learning how to walk on the path, to dealing with the loss of the electronic "scroll" that connects her with the rest of the world – are depicted as steps in a pilgrimage that will ultimately force her to examine her own identity to determine who she is and who she wants to be.

Byrne's writing is compelling, interesting, and lively. Readers are easily drawn into the stories of the two women at the heart of this novel, and there are plenty of opportunities for a range of emotional responses, including fear, amusement, joy, and sadness. But it is Byrne's treatment of issues so relevant to today's society that

make this novel stand out from other science fiction and fantasy novels. In particular, her tackling of sexuality, human weaknesses, and abuse are nuanced and intricately sophisticated in ways that are reminiscent of Dorothy Allison's writing, particularly in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. In a disturbing scene of abuse that has drawn some diverse reactions from readers, Byrne shows that human beings, even ones we like, are flawed. She acknowledges and accepts that people who do horrible things are also the same people we love and care about, and that all people are ultimately the protagonists of their own stories.

Byrne's treatment of sexuality is more complex than we see in many contemporary novels. Meena is a pansexual woman who starts the novel involved with a transgendered woman and who has sexual relations with both men and women throughout the course of the book. What is ultimately most intriguing about Byrne's depiction of sexuality is not whom the characters have sex with, but the fact that Byrne does not do anything to draw our attention to Meena's pansexuality or to any character's sexual preference; if anything, she treats all gender preferences as normal, as choices that do not need explanation. Meena is unafraid to engage in whatever kind of sex interests her, and Mariama, despite being a young girl, has already begun to develop a sexual identity. In a society where we struggle to accept both homosexuality and female sexuality as normal, Byrne accepts that women can have strong, healthy sexual appetites, and more controversially, that female sexuality can exist even in young girls.

Ultimately, what seems most powerful in the text, just as in Allison's *Bastard*, is the power of storytelling – both the stories we tell to others and the ones we tell to ourselves. In Allison's work, a young girl, a survivor of terrible abuse, uses storytelling and fantasy to mentally protect herself and make it through what is happening to her. In Byrne's novel, Meena survives the Trail by telling herself stories and listening to the voices of the people from her life as they tell her stories. Ultimately, the framework of the novel is such that telling and remembering stories (and, by extension, the story of our memories) turn out to be the only ways we have of dealing with our pain. But storytelling, like everything in this novel, is a

multifaceted solution, a double-edged sword. Just as often as it provides a way through trouble, it can also create problems for both the storytellers and the listeners. And it is her ability to look at the multidimensional nature of life that makes this novel so compelling.

The novel does so many things right that it's almost easy to overlook where it feels wrong. For example, given the nuanced subtlety of so much of the book, it's hard to accept the shotgun approach to symbolism that permeates the text. The most obvious example is Byrne's use of snakes in this novel. They appear throughout the text in the stories of both Meena and Mariama. It's true that snakes are often associated, literarily and religiously, with

lies, and every snake we see in this text represents hidden knowledge or outright lies. But snakes are also symbols of medical knowledge and healing, and this more sophisticated symbology is certainly there as well. In the case of Mariama, a snake represents both an unpleasant truth about her mother and the impetus to journey out into a world that offers an alternate existence. It is both a force that consumes her and the power that strengthens her. For Meena, snakebites that she suffers represent a kind of soul-shattering violence and also a truth that, if she gives herself to it, can ultimately set her free. Even the Trail, itself often described as a long snake, has the potential to either devour its inhabitants or

## MONICA BYRNE ON STORYTELLING AND VIOLENCE IN *THE GIRL IN THE ROAD*

**As she was preparing to write her review of *The Girl in the Road*, Kathaleen Amende emailed the novel's author with questions. A few of the questions focused on the role of storytelling and violence within Byrne's novel, which Amende ultimately explores in her review of the book. What follows is an excerpt from their exchange, edited for clarity and style.**

**KATHALEEN AMENDE:** *Meena spends a great deal of her journey talking to people who aren't there, including people whom she hasn't seen in years. In many ways, her stories of these people are stories within stories. For Meena, especially after she loses her scroll, stories become even more important. But, in some ways, she also uses the stories and the conversations to keep the truth at bay, since the truth is painful to her. So I'm curious to know how you see the power of storytelling and stories in general.*

**MONICA BYRNE:** *I think it's a human tendency to "narrativize" all experience, though I may do it more than most, especially when traveling in a new place. When traveling, I'm constantly exposed to new stimuli, and it's both extraordinary and exhausting. Sometimes I'm radically present to what I'm seeing, and sometimes I retreat back into my head. So when Meena's walking on the Trail, I tried to recreate that dual existence of both being in a radically new space and constantly escaping it – and my favorite methods of escape are reading and reliving the stories of my life, trying to wrest new meaning out of them.*

*When the big revelation comes, there's a moment of what I'll call panic for the reader; but for Meena, this is a moment where her first thought is just that she's so tired. Ultimately, do you think her lack of anger or panic and her exhaustion stem from this shared experience of violence?*



heal them. But the text does not allow for the subtlety that makes these twin readings equally compelling. Instead, the symbols seem almost thrown at the reader, as if Byrne is afraid we will miss them, or perhaps afraid that she herself hasn't been clear. She is a strong enough writer that this lack of faith seems misplaced and the repeated mentioning of snakes comes across as heavy-handed.

In Book I of *The Girl in the Road*, Meena tells a lover, "Somebody tried to hurt me" (35). In Book XVII, the last section of the novel, she explains, "I hurt someone" (310). It is the journey from an egotistic feeling of having been hurt to a confession of having caused pain that is the real pilgrimage explored in this work. The novel leads to a fantastical ending that may alienate some readers, due both to its level of coincidence and its apparent fatalism. But still there is an emotional reality in this ending that speaks to our ability to lie to ourselves and to a human truth about the extent to which we are willing to go in order to protect our carefully crafted sense of identity. ■

Yes. I wanted to be true to what the lived experience of this revelation would be. It'd be such a literary cliché to respond with tears, rage, screaming, and so on – so it seemed an interesting choice to me to respond with numbness and quiet. Mariama's story of violence provides an explanation for her own violence. And Meena's reaction is mostly like, "Huh. Makes sense."

*How do you see the role of violence in Meena's and Mariama's lives?*

Violence is embodied in the *kreen*: it's a physical manifestation of trauma that rests in the body, and stirs whenever either woman is scared or sad or feels abandoned.\* So it's like an animal living inside them that they can't get rid of, that acts in extreme ways to protect its carrier.

*Returning to that first question, do you think that storytelling helps keep control of the panic and the violence in these women's lives?*

For sure. It's a coping mechanism. Like any coping mechanism, though, it can be overused or abused.

*Like many "spirit voyages" or pilgrimages, Meena's contains a great deal of hallucinatory experience and meeting with people who wish both to help and hinder her journey. But ultimately, her biggest battle is with herself and the truths of her life. Do you think that, for Meena, truth can be fluid?*

Actually, I think that Meena may tell herself in the beginning that she herself is "of a wavelike nature" (32), but it's just another rationalization. By the end of the book, the probability curves all collapse into one inevitable, shared reality that Meena can't escape. ■

\* *Kreen* is how Mariama describes the sound she hears coming from the snake bite in her chest (46). She then refers to the wound she can still feel as the *kreen*, after that sound (77).

**FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**  
 BY BARBARA CONRAD

*The L Word*

Before the word dared be spoken,  
 the word that means more than making love or love  
 how you make me laugh, the word

that catches in superstition's net – an old lover's  
 cheatin' heart, havoc of shadow and light.

Before that, he brought her odd gifts.  
 A six-ounce jar of Lingonberry jam,  
*mellowed*, it said on the label, *under a midnight sun*,

*sun that never wanders, making the berries promise*  
*to both nip and kiss the tongue.*

Two records – early reggae, some Texas ballads,  
 their ripe lyrics about cowboys and fair lovers  
 wandering among parched olive trees

under luminescence of lavender-gray.  
 Titillating. Tart. If that's not love, she thought.

And a card. Hand-made, about a lonely tree. Blue spruce.  
 So blue, it made her think he must have known  
 her gypsy-past, how in time if cornered,

she'd bite, the tree's needles in cross section stiff and prickly.  
 In sunlight, effervescent as diamonds.

COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM, BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLECTION;  
 PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE 2009 COLLECTORS' CIRCLE



*Leaf Hands* (cyanotype and collage, 78x71) by Susan Weil, 2007

**SUSAN WEIL** was born in New York City. She studied under Josef Albers at Black Mountain College along with artists such as Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg, to whom she was briefly married in the 1950s. She was a member of the New York School and an influential artist of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Her honors and awards include a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Her work has been exhibited widely, including at the Black Mountain College Museum, and is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the [Asheville Art Museum](#).

**FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**

BY BARBARA CONRAD

*Coming in June*

Up through dark burrows, they'll quiver,  
 then strip off dry husks, leaving them  
 clinging to tree bark or window screens.  
 Uncountable brood, red-blazed eyes,  
 throbbing their sexual song.  
 What they'll not do  
 is ponder, pray liturgies, bend  
 bloody-kneed beneath ancient creeds,  
*I believe I believe I believe.*

For seventeen years they've hunkered  
 in deep hush, sucking root juices,  
 making way for a sultry stir  
 low in their bellies.  
 Amorous as muscled gods.  
*Mate. Mate. Mate.*  
 Love as epitaph. And the afterlife?  
 A muted summer porch, an unlatched  
 screen door, sky inflamed  
 with constellations, the earth quiet again.

But truth be told, it's hard for me to go back  
 to a muted porch, screen door choked  
 in honeysuckle, no matter this frenzy  
 to rise out of a bruised ground.  
 Too many lonely summer nights.  
 Therapists have made fortunes over  
 songs like theirs:  
*I only have eyes . . .*  
*I'm nothing if not . . .*  
*I'd give up my life for you.*

One thing on their minds for sure,  
 these giant bugs – a shiver, a swig  
 of holy intoxication. And then they die.  
 Maybe it's best.

**BARBARA CONRAD** is the author of *Wild Plums* (FutureCycle Press, 2013) and a chapbook, *The Gravity of Color* (Main Street Rag, 2007). She is the editor of *Waiting for Soup*, a collection of art and poetry from her weekly workshops with homeless neighbors in Charlotte, NC. Her poems have been published in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Tar River Poetry*, *Sow's Ear*, *Southern Women's Review*, *Icarus*, *Kakalak*, and *Southern Poetry Anthology*. [Listen](#) to this poet read her other finalist poem at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference, and then read that poem in the print issue of *NCLR* [2015](#).



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHOY WAI MUN

# KETUPONG

by Jane Shlensky

**JANE SHLENSKY** taught English for thirty-nine years in high schools, universities, and community colleges in the US and the People's Republic of China, and after retiring, worked as academic director for the North Carolina Teaching Asia Network's teacher seminars. A national board-certified educator, she served as a board member, conference director, and president of the North Carolina English Teachers Association, and has been a recipient of the North Carolina Outstanding English Teacher award. She holds an MFA in creative writing from UNC Greensboro, publishing mostly poetry in recent years. Her work appears in a number of anthologies and magazines, including *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Emerge Literary Magazine*, *Writer's Digest*, *KAKALAK*, *2015 Poet's Market*, and *Southern Poetry Anthology*, volume VII: North Carolina.

Teaching Asian Studies at the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics led to the author's travel throughout Asia on study grants, such as American Fulbright and Japanese Fulbright Memorial seminars. The trip mentioned in this story was a Fulbright-Hayes seminar to Singapore and Malaysia for six weeks in the summer of 1999 with sixteen teachers from high schools and colleges across America.

The Iban living up the Batang Rejang near the southern tip of Borneo have rituals that guide them. Still, they tell us American teachers on a Fulbright-Hayes seminar to Malaysia, that they have changed in vital ways, adapted. Headhunting has been outlawed since the late nineteenth century, prompting the end of using skulls in the opening ceremony for new longhouses (dwellings for multiple families beneath one roof). Their blow-dart guns, cock fights, amulets, and wine-inspired dances are directed toward hunting tourists now, from whom they get much-needed revenue.

COURTESY OF JANE SHLENSKY



Once hunters, they have become farmers. Those too old for hard labor care for longhouse children who are too young for schooling in the residential schools located far from tribal pepper fields and pineapple plantations. The old people have only a few short years to teach these children who they are before the government schools orphan these tribal children from villages and offer them the world instead of home. We have already seen one such boarding school, barebones housing and uninspired teaching. We ask if we may see the homes from which the children come and are immediately invited to the Iban longhouse, an honor for us. We joke that teachers are headhunters, too, after a fashion, interested in developing the life of the mind within our students.

ABOVE LEFT A chief in native costume with Jane Shlensky

ABOVE RIGHT Jane Shlensky with members of the longhouse posing in native costume after performing the *Ngajat*, a sword dance, for visitors



Many young parents are already distanced from tribal life, having moved away for nonagricultural jobs in cities, at schools and colleges – to flush toilets, tap water, electricity, and other conveniences. In his rooms within the longhouse, the chief has installed a flush toilet and shower that pulls water from the river and returns raw sewage downstream. “Modern!” he cries, proudly displaying his plumbing and a smattering of English. A generator produces electricity for TVs, a community refrigerator, and a light at night. The chief tells us confidentially that he and his people have a Land Cruiser down river that they can use on trips today and that he and his sons are licensed drivers. No more hard climbs and long hikes. They are prosperous, he tells us.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE SHLENSKY

The longhouses along the Batang Rejang seem in perpetual disrepair, the tin roofs rusted in streaks, the unpainted ironwood weathered, steps and doors off-kilter, looking for all the world like abandoned storm-battered chicken houses in Eastern North Carolina. Inside, however, dusty skulls hang in nets above the entrance, the doorway short to make each person bow to the honored headless. We stare at the dusty skulls as if they are Halloween props, wondering who or what is most honored in this coming indoors: the harvester of the head who put himself in danger for his home or the enemy who lies within the Iban’s daily thoughts and rituals, the self that’s born of violent encounter or the self at the heart of tradition?

Old women feed the chickens, weave and make crafts to sell to tourists, cook, and clean. They harvest rice from their paddies and spread grains on the longhouse decks to dry in the blinding sun. The chickens that will become dinner are separated and bound; two women at a chop block are ready to behead the birds. One of the women beckons to me, laughing. Come and join us, they seem to say, perhaps thinking foreigners must be horrified by killing chickens. I smile my farm-girl smile and join them, taking the hatchet. “No, no,” they cry, laughing and patting me, concerned that I will get blood on my clothing. They wear long, soiled aprons over their sarongs. I am reprieved from decapitating chickens. “This is their job to do,” our translator tells me.

Younger men and women work the fields, picking the peppercorns, tending crops, looking like the culture of youth the world over – ball caps, jeans or khakis, oversized t-shirts, battered tennis shoes or sandals. I watch them, remembering how I once labored across tobacco fields in the summer sun, vowing never to smoke. Their song to set a rhythm reminds me of singing such songs as “Faraway Places” with my siblings as a means of preserving our good humor as we worked and daydreamed of escaping farm labor forever. I wonder if they imagine adventuring in the world or if they are grounded in their fields.

The old men too ill or weary to work the fields wear loin cloths or shorts, the old women, sarongs and beads, tending young children. The old men tell stories of the many tattoos commemorating each trip they’ve taken away from the tribe during their lives. The chief is tattooed down his arms and across his back, his teeth gold-capped, his ear lobes pierced and stretched by weighty earrings until the lobes hang in a fleshy loop to his shoulders or are twisted above his ear like a rubber band. He points to each tattoo and names for us trips outside the fold – a hunting quest as a young man, a journey to Singapore, to Khota Baru and Thailand, a hike to the Kelabit Highlands, Melaka, and short jaunts to coastal cities of Sarawak to sell goods – but most, he admits, are from trips to Kuala Lumpur to visit his children. Are they tattooed as well on leaving home? “No,” he says, smiling. “Most do not choose.”

ABOVE LEFT **An Iban longhouse and boardwalk: Most longhouses are built off the ground for protection from enemies, floods, and animals. Tin roofs and siding make the interior of the homes quite hot during summer months; thatch helps to circumvent this problem.**

ABOVE RIGHT **A chief in his traditional garb teaching how to shoot a blow dart: The chief’s body art represents his trips away from the tribe, each journey being celebrated with a tattoo that he will tell his tribe about on his return.**

THE LONGHOUSES ALONG THE BATANG REJANG SEEM IN PERPETUAL DISREPAIR, THE TIN ROOFS RUSTED IN STREAKS, THE UNPAINTED IRONWOOD WEATHERED, STEPS AND DOORS OFF-KILTER, LOOKING FOR ALL THE WORLD LIKE ABANDONED STORM-BATTERED CHICKEN HOUSES IN EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA.

Young people go away to school, then to jobs that help them send money back to their families, back to toddlers cared for by grandparents. But mostly they call other places home, living in apartments or contiguous buildings near other Ibans, creating a makeshift longhouse of an urban neighborhood. “Even visiting takes so long; once children go away for school, we do not see them for months and rarely visit them. So far for us, for them.” We nod, remembering our getting here.

From Kuala Lumpur to Kuching, we had a short flight, then we traveled hours by bus into increasingly rural landscapes, down roads rutted and gouged from logging trucks, at last dropped off near the great river, where we paddled black water through jungles, against the current, the long boats fitted with motors and oars like punts. We passed pepper plantations, hardy hill rice paddies near the river, stretches of old-growth trees, ironwood and palms, bamboo, nibong, and mangrove in rain forests that stand like giant umbrellas, creating a canopy above lush greenness below. Along a river rich with wild life – numerous birds, monkeys, macaques – we noticed scarred stretches where logging has denuded the jungles and changed the course of the river, the green and black of the water now muddy and shallow from topsoil run-off. We were told this is quite all right, since the area is rich in both forests to fell and poor people. When no one laughed at this sad joke, our translator told us the trip back would be easier, with the current, faster.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE SHLENSKY



The chief speaks in his dialect to our translator, pointing to an old man who nestles his granddaughter, sitting on the spotless longhouse floor by a doorway to the deck. Outside, his ancient wife talks to her hens and shoos the feisty roosters away from a tarp on which wild rice dries, the husks popping away. This rice cooks purplish and sticky, almost sweet. What does she say to the birds, her voice sing-songy and chatty, kindly and gentle? Perhaps, “No, no, my feathered beauties. Only corn for you, no rice. Get along there, bossy one, or you’ll be dinner. Shoo, shoo, my precious, my dears. Oh, so naughty!” The old man watches, his face sagging into contentment, his granddaughter sipping juice and lounging in his arms. Her traditional Iban clothing includes leggings and an anklet, like a living cultural doll. Does she dress for us, or is this part of her cultural education?

The translator goes to the grandfather and asks if he will tell us stories. The translator tells the old man that the chief wants us to hear him speak, that we don’t wish to disturb him but would like to meet the founder of the longhouse. The old man eyes us calmly, as if we sprang up from smoke. He has learned to ignore visitors. He beckons with his hand, and we sit with him on the floor, our bare feet tucked away. He is the oldest man in the tribe now, no longer chief or warrior, though he looks younger than his long lobes, jagged scars, and full body art suggest. He is brown as weathered bamboo, and smooth, his hair only slightly graying at his temples, his long limbs thin but muscled.

ABOVE LEFT **Side view of the longhouse: Traditionally, the Iban relied on hunting, which gave way to raising staple crops. The modern longhouses host tourists and teach them their traditional life ways.**

ABOVE RIGHT **Dusty human skulls hanging among baskets of grain above the entranceway to the longhouse**

His eyes are almost gray, filmy. Cataracts? Or *tuak*, the traditional rice wine? His body tells the stories of his life, each tattoo a symbol of a lesson learned. He has traveled much and lived into the art that inches onto his hands and feet, up his neck, and across his back. There is little room for more journeys to be inked on him. The old woman calls to another to bring us tea and *tuak*, knowing the stories will be long.

The chief leans in and urges us, “Ask him about the heads,” he says, this old one being the only man living who has taken a head, one from a Japanese soldier during World War II, which they call the Japanese War. He used the head to open this longhouse after the Japanese had defiled the old home. The chief points to the net at the door. “He is there,” he says of this Japanese soldier whose country invaded Borneo and enslaved Malaysia, including the Iban, Baram, Skrang, Orang Ulu, and other tribes.

The old man looks with patience at the chief, but nods, turning to us. “I honor him daily,” he says slowly, showing us how he must bow to enter the longhouse, paying homage to the skulls hanging above. “He is there” – he indicates the net of skulls – “and he is here,” he says pointing to a puckered scar near his ribs, “and here,” indicating a crude tattoo above the scar of a disembodied head above a sword. “Not my sword,” he says, “his. His own sword took his head.” He laughs softly, ironically. He accepts tea and a small glass of *tuak* from a pregnant woman, as a younger woman serves us. He smiles and warns us that the rice wine is more powerful than it seems, then toasts us, drinks, and clears his throat, preparing to tell us one story in his long life, a tale of death and life.

“The government forbids harvesting heads, so we change. Once, no new longhouse could be built without a skull for protection. We had no new homes for many years, building onto existing homes or using skulls from long ago, like these. Now, our young people return for festivals or to bury their dead. They live in apartments where no honor makes them bow down.” This seems to be a sore subject for him.

“So you were a soldier during the war?” we ask.

“Yes. No,” he says. “Always a hunter protects his home. Not just in war.”

“Not like you think,” the translator adds, “not with guns and boots and packs.” He is Iban himself, working for a tour company who brings visitors like us to the longhouses. The old man speaks to him sharply and closes his eyes. We wait, and he begins again.

“Please understand: the Japanese made slaves of us, used us to death, starved us, beat us to death, like pack animals, took our women, called us dogs. We dared not look into their faces, never into their eyes. We dared not walk a path they walked, for it became their path through our land, their river, their shelter. They would have killed us all, but gods visited them, and they died screaming.” The translator shifts uncomfortably and speaks with the old one.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMIE SHLENSKY

IF OUR STORIES WERE  
INKED INTO OUR FLESH,  
WOULD WE BE MORE  
MINDFUL OF THE JOURNEYS  
WE EMBARK UPON, THE  
CHOICES WE MAKE, THE  
HEADS WE HARVEST, THE  
ENEMIES WE HONOR?

“He says the gods – some Iban still believe in traditional deities, spirits of birds, a sort of divine intervention. He says he heard a *Ketupong* calling in the night. It is a rufous piculet, a warrior bird, one of seven honored in such superstitions.” The old man stares at him. “Fever,” mutters the translator, “malaria, dysentery, dengue, this is what killed them.”

A teacher asks, “Is the skull in the net from a sick soldier?” The translator and the old man look amazed but patient, not angry or offended, as if we are students, children, who must learn. The questioner is embarrassed, seeing their expressions of patience and dismay. We teachers are conversant with what a question reveals of its asker. We titter uncomfortably.

I AM AN AMERICAN, A NORTH CAROLINIAN,  
ON ANOTHER ADVENTURE FAR FROM  
HOME, HERE TO LEARN AND TEACH, OFTEN  
LOSING MY WAY AND FINDING IT AGAIN.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANE SHLENSKY



The old man continues, “No, he did not die of sickness, though he was very sick.” He taps his head. “The Iban never interfere with gods’ works. This man was a leader among them, always barking his orders and taking the best for himself. He treated his own soldiers little better than us. This man had my brother beaten to death for not bowing before him, groveling like the dogs he said we were. My brother was a powerful man, strong and proud. He believed he could defeat this man in a fair fight. He looked into this man’s face and stood erect – only for a moment. Then soldiers surrounded him with clubs, machetes, and rifle butts, and soon my brother was no more.”

He pauses and sips his tea. “Perhaps you find my brother foolish. Many among us thought so. He thought that if this man would fight him like a warrior, he would see his worth. But this was not our war, and theirs were not our ways. I watched and did nothing. Nothing. My weakness and grief made me sick and ashamed, but fueled me with desire to die trying to live with honor. I watched Japanese soldiers die in a sickness tent, only two medics caring for them. I was sorry yet glad. One by one,

the healthy ones deserted into the jungle, as they saw that, if the plague did not kill them, this mad man would. Who knows how many longhouses now honor such men.

“One day, this man came to me and ordered me to kill the sick ones so that he could move on unfettered, but I did not respond, as if I did not understand. He shouted and hit me with his coiled whip, then drew his sword. I saw my brother die because he believed all men would fight with honor. This man had great power, but no honor. I had neither. My people let me fight him even when he wounded me.” He rubs at his scar. “And I prevailed.” His voice is quiet. He looks from face to face to read our reactions. What does he see?

“He looked surprised in death, as I held his head up by his hair. Surprised to see his body crumple to the ground. Even his skull now looks amazed to have joined our tribe.” We turn as one and look at the dusty skull that does, indeed, look wide-eyed with alarm.

“I thought the others would strike me down, as they did my brother, but they turned away, relieved. A medic packed my wound and stitched me up. The soldiers who remained prepared to move on, carrying their sick. Their sergeant, now their leader, asked if we would guide them away from us toward the coast, and some of our men did this. But he, their great leader, remains with us, our honored guest, protecting us in death from those like him in life. We bow to him each time we enter our low doors. And he is one of us now, in his death, as all are brothers, surely, in spirit.” His hands sweep outward as if he enfolds us all to his chest.

“His was the last head harvested among us, and his was the first and only head I have harvested, the only law I have broken. His death returned to us our land, our hope, a new longhouse, and much of our way of life, damaged but redeemed. Other changes came with time and Malaysia’s government, but that is another story.” He wags his old head and smiles wanly.

“You’ve told this tale before, haven’t you, Father?” asks the translator. The grandfather smooths his granddaughter’s damp brow. He smiles his wrinkled smile and laughs.

“Many times, young friend, many times, to every child born, to every journeyer beyond these fields, lest they forget the cost of being Iban. I tell my stories and my grandfather’s stories, as he told them to me, of European invaders, of wars not our own that became our own stories of greed and

shame. So I tell this story many times, so it will live again. We only live as long as we are remembered, I believe. And so I tell of who we were and are and of this man who lives among us against his will, his skull enslaved as he once enslaved us. I tell of my weakness and strength, of traditions and honor and survival, hoping the story becomes the future and we live forever.”

He sits on the bare floor, his granddaughter held within his crossed legs, corralling her loosely, but she sits quietly, hearing his voice, moving her beaded anklet with her fingers. She is perhaps three years old, pre-school. In another couple of years, she will go to the native boarding school a half-day away by car. The enemies to culture that she will encounter will not be so clear or so easy to combat. Will she remember and repeat these stories, honoring her grandfather when she herself is old?

I think of this old warrior of his people, of his coming home to himself in an act of vengeance and honor. He said his people let him fight, neither interrupting nor helping him. This was his battle, and they let him fight it, for to help would be to harvest his honor for themselves. How often we inflict our help on others even before they have asked for it, how often we steal their possibilities by grabbing at honor for ourselves, always insistent we’re “doing the right thing”? If our stories were inked into our flesh, would we be more mindful of the journeys we embark upon, the choices we make, the heads we harvest, the enemies we honor?

I wonder if the young sent away to school and to work have realized that going back home takes far longer than leaving it. Will the young grow to feel they are survivors of longhouse poverty, that these often-repeated stories are to be endured rather than celebrated? Will they feel lucky to be distant from their origins, selective of what they carry into the future? Story conjoins enemies for all time, both as word and as a bluish tattoo near this old man’s heart.

I try to imagine myself with every journey of my life emblazoned on my flesh as a reminder that I dared to leave home, returning with stories of what lies beyond, dared to balance change with honoring the past, dared to be forever physically

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHOY WAI MUN



confronted with choices I have made, for good or ill, marked with each survival. “We are alive as long as we are remembered.” Because I believe this, too, I commit to memory this story from the last head-hunting Iban of one longhouse, who shared with foreign teachers one ink of his life, trusting us to help him and his enemy live forever.

His story, the jungle, the white pepper and *tuak*, the fighting cocks that crow throughout the night, the roasting pigs, the gentle laughter of dancing people, the afternoon of stringing palm seeds and nuts for necklaces with old women who pat our hands and show us a better way – these things stick with me. I am an American, a North Carolinian, on another adventure far from home, here to learn and teach, often losing my way and finding it again, but never losing my own people, although I take strangers into my family. My stories of travel are woven into my family story, warp and weft. What tales will I have to share with students when I return? What image represents even this short stay among the Iban? The feathers of story flutter; the wings unfurl and stretch across continents to other nests that serve as homes in migration. Somewhere on my memory is emblazoned a *Ketupong* in flight, an omen bird, calling me to stand up, to teach and live with integrity, to believe in people and in myself, to embrace forever, to make of my symbols stories worthy of the telling. ■

ABOVE LEFT An assortment of relics – an ironwood mask, a blow dart shooter with a horn for carrying poison (to tip arrows), and a planting stick for hand-planting crops: Fertility symbols decorate artifacts – fish, vines, etc. The ornate planting stick has a sliding disk inside to scare away birds during planting time.

ABOVE The rufous piculet, the earthly manifestation of a *Ketupong*: See and read more on the [blog](#) of this bird photographer, Choy Wai Mun.

## BIRD WATCHING

a review by Brian Glover

**Megan Mayhew Bergman, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise: Stories*. New York: Scribner, 2012.**

**Lee Zacharias, *The Only Sounds We Make: Essays*. Spartanburg, SC: Hub City Press, 2013.**

**BRIAN GLOVER** received his PhD at the University of Virginia. He teaches English at ECU, where he received the Bertie Fearing Teaching Award in 2013. He is a member of the NCLR editorial board, and he was awarded a BB&T Active Learning and Leadership Development Incentive Grant for a project related to his use of NCLR in his short story classes.

**MEGAN MAYHEW BERGMAN** grew up in Rocky Mount, NC, studied anthropology at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC, and completed an MA at Duke University in Durham, NC. She also earned an MFA from Bennington College. Scribner will release her next story collection, *Almost Famous Women*, in 2015. Her short fiction has also been published in such venues as *Ecotone*, *Greensboro Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Oxford American*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southern Review*. Her nonfiction publications include "Redneck Ballerina, A Case for the Rest of Us" in *NCLR* 2010.

**LEE ZACHARIAS** is Professor Emeritus of creative writing at UNC Greensboro, where she directed the MFA program and served as *Greensboro Review* editor. Her books include a short story collection, *Helping Muriel Make It Through the Night* (Louisiana State University Press, 1975) and two novels, *Lessons* (Houghton Mifflin 1981), which received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award, and *At Random* (Fugitive Poets Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014). Her nonfiction publications include essays in *NCLR* 2004 and 2008.

What is it about birds and death? Two recent North Carolina writers pick up where Poe's raven left off.

"Housewifely Arts," the first story in **Megan Mayhew Bergman's** superb debut collection, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, rolls forth from a devilishly clever conceit: what if, after your mother's death, her voice lived on in her thoroughly disagreeable pet parrot? The protagonist (a single mother and, like all of Bergman's narrators, a youngish woman with a lot on her mind) finds herself driving with her seven-year-old son from New England to the Carolina coast to retrieve the bird, wondering all the while what its imitations mean – about identity, about human uniqueness in the biological world, and about her own complex relationships with her parents and her child. Here she recalls her first experience with the bird, which her mother acquired after her father's death:

[D]uring breakfast, the bird moved from his perch to my shoulder without permission.

Mom, I said. Get this damn bird off of me.

Language! She warned. He's a sponge. She brought her arm to my shoulder and Carnie stepped onto it. She scratched his neck lovingly.

I was still grieving Dad, and it was strange to watch Mom find so much joy in this ebony-beaked wiseass.

What are you selling? The bird said. I already have car insurance. Carnie spoke with perfect inflection, but he addressed his words to the air – a song, not conversation.

You can't take anything personally, Mom warned.

The man of the house is not here, Carnie said. He's dead.

You really take it easy on those telemarketers, I said, looking at Mom.

Dead, dead, dead, Carnie said. (6–7)

In dramatic context, the ironic juxtapositions bring out the best quality of Bergman's writing: this is fiction of ideas that doesn't feel like scaffolding for an argument. The parrot, a "sponge" for language, parallels the narrator's young son, who repeats everything he reads and hears and also competes for affection without really possessing the ability to return it. And yet, can she – or any of us – do better? Through the mirror of the bird, the narrator sees her mother expressing emotions to strangers on the phone as she never would to her own daughter. "You can't take anything personally, Mom warned," but what, exactly, does "personally" signify? The compounding layers of meaning make the exchange funny, outrageous, and mortifying at the same time; her stories are first and foremost a great pleasure to read, cleverly constructed and emotionally generous, philosophical underpinnings entirely aside.

Yet those philosophical inquiries are prominent and important as well. Every one of the thirteen stories in *Birds of a Lesser Paradise* concerns animals, engaging in a venerable set of discussions that stretches from Descartes's automata (and Robinson Crusoe's parrot) to the more recent Animal Studies movement that has arisen largely in the aftermath of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975). Bergman takes a particular interest in the question of just to what extent we humans may understand the lives and desires of other living things, especially in the emotional connections of reproduction and family. In "The Cow that Milked Herself," a young woman married to a veterinarian (as is Bergman herself) finds in her pregnancy that



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILY LUCKEY

she may not differ too much from her husband's patients (and that could be a good thing). In "Phoenix," a rootless, disconnected young farmworker finds her human companions no more sympathetic than her favorite goat, "because you can, I think, love someone who is not your own kind."\* In one of the best stories in the collection, "Another Story She Won't Believe," the protagonist castigates herself for her failures as a mother to her human daughter, while surreptitiously adopting an endangered lemur as a surrogate child, all during an ominous, climate-change-fueled extreme weather event. This is both funnier and more moving than it sounds.

That Bergman is aware of and pondering recent discourses of environmental literature and thought is most apparent in the one story set in the future, "The Artificial Heart," in which a woman confronts her father's mortality amidst the biological death of the world's oceans, circa 2050,

and in the collection's most pointedly political tale, "Yesterday's Whales." Here, the pregnant heroine must choose between her own desire for a child and her environmental-activist boyfriend's strict opposition to human reproduction. His organization's name? "Enough with Us, or EWU – an earnest throwback to Wordsworth's poem 'The World Is Too Much with Us'" (78). Edward Abbey, Rachel Carson, and Robert Freitas are mentioned; more extreme advocates of human population control, such as David Foreman of Earth First!, are clearly implied. All through the book, Bergman brings us back to the pathetic fallacy Wordsworth's sonnet dramatizes – are we in some real sense connected to the world outside our minds, and if so, how?

To her credit, Bergman helps us to grapple with these questions through energetic and imaginative storytelling, with believable characters and an elegant, unobtrusive style. Readers with an

interest in North Carolina will find much to enjoy here as well. While a few stories are set in Bergman's adopted New England, most of them investigate life in the cities, farms, and forests of her native state. In the title story, a woman's erotic and family relationships are mixed up with a futile quest to prove the continued presence of the ivory-billed woodpecker in the Great Dismal Swamp, while in "The Urban Coop" a bohemian couple looks for meaning between an urban farm project in the Triangle and the weekend hedonism of boat-party culture in the East. Human and otherwise, Bergman's characters inhabit a North Carolina remarkably free of cliché and stereotype, Southern without particular self-consciousness. She is a writer to watch.

Though her settings are largely outside North Carolina, UNC Greensboro professor emerita **Lee Zacharias** also takes great interest in animals, family, and family animals in her new collection of essays, *The Only Sounds We Make*. She is a writer of considerable technical skill, with a knack for accurate description. In "Buzzards," she alternates between discursive passages on the natural and cultural history of vultures and personal reflections on her deceased father; here, at the essay's end, she pulls the two together, describing an encounter with the birds in Florida, shortly after his death:

When I got back to my car, four turkey vultures blocked the narrow road. They were huge, rough feathered, dark . . . the sun shone off the red heads and

\* "Phoenix" is a bonus story, added to the paperback edition (and is not paginated).



COURTESY OF LEE ZACHARIAS

Zacharias's essays do tend to build in this manner from judicious details to a didactic moral, and when she's writing about experience in the world outside the mind, it works. But when she writes about writing (or her other art, photography), the essays too often seem pointless and forced, filled up with what seem to be randomly Googled facts. "Geography for Writers," for instance, regales us with the daily writing habits of a seemingly endless list of famous American littérateurs, without shedding much light on either them or Zacharias herself. Writing about the "Morning Light" she loves to photograph on Ocracoke, she can turn a bit precious: "At the ocean, breakers will be spilling their thunderous white spume, but here at the harbor the water is glass, a bottomless sheen the color of jet" (138). She's on much firmer ground when she turns to family, particularly her difficult and distant father, whose suicide she mulls in "A House in Florida." Like the protagonist in Bergman's "Housewifely Arts," Zacharias recounts her pilgrimage to clean out and sell a dead parent's house – a scenario so common these days that it deserves a generic designation of its own. Coming to terms with her father's troubled life and violent end, her style achieves an unadorned strength:

ivory hooks of their beaks. Though I confess to superstition, they did not strike me as an omen. Despite the recentness of grief they did not remind me of death or its tedious business. They were simply there, as I was, in a kind of matter-of-factness so profound we can know it only in nature. It may have been a minute or ten that we regarded one another. Then they waddled to the side and let me pass. That evening, driving the back road, I came upon a vulture tree. It was dusk, and the hunkering vultures and bare black bones of the branches were silhouetted against the faded dust-blue sky in a way that seemed incredibly beautiful to me. It is in such confrontations with the eternal shape of death that we know most fully we're alive. (212)

Donna didn't want an obituary for fear of being robbed, and though he would have liked one to appear in the Texaco bulletin, she was so adamant I allowed her to overrule me. And so there was no death notice, no service. I cleaned out his closet. The crematorium lost his ashes, and in the five years that passed before I sold his house, I misplaced my cache of death certificates only to be told that the Hernando County Office of Records had no record of his death. Still, I win. My father did not disappear. This is his record. (66)

Zacharias gives the impression of a tremendously talented writer who needs a big subject to draw out her best. I hope we'll see more of it. ■



**FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**

BY RICHARD BETZ

*Perfect Pitch*

There may be nothing perfect after all  
 But my father's pitch pipe, The Master Key,  
 Nestled in its blood-red velvet-lined box,  
 That I inherited with his yellowed sheet music:

Its single brilliant clarion note – A440 –  
 That called so many *a cappella* choirs to order,  
 Snapping a dozen dozing ears to attention,  
 Pitched in the cavernous chancel silences.

It was the single slimmest arc of rising  
 Sun on the breathless ocean at dawn,  
 The first bright stitch, the audacious knot,  
 Prelude to the prelude in a puzzle of music.

He knew how rare true absolute pitch could be,  
 “One in a thousand,” he would tell me,  
 To hit that note pure and unreferenced,  
 Archer's arrow shot true from tautness,

Poem un-baffled, without forethought or revision.  
 To see the world like that! – the sighing wind  
 Lifting the hemlock boughs with a gentle baton  
 As the great good choir begins to sing.



COURTESY OF TYNDALL GALLERIES

*Sonatina in A* (tapestry, linen and wool, 43x41) by Silvia Heyden

Hear **RICHARD BETZ** read “Perfect Pitch” at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference. Betz grew up in New England but has lived in North Carolina for almost fifty years, first in Asheville and for the past thirty years in Highlands. An outdoorsman and an avid runner, he has run nineteen marathons, including the 2011 Boston Marathon. He is married and has one daughter. His poetry has been published in college literary magazines, including those of Rollins College (where he graduated cum laude with a degree in English Literature) and Vanderbilt University, as well as regional publications in Asheville and Macon County. Betz's poem “Picking Blackberries on Yellow Mountain Road,” a finalist in the 2012 Applewhite competition, was published in *NCLR Online* 2013. See his other 2014 finalist poem in the 2015 print issue.

Durham resident **SILVIA HEYDEN** was born and educated in Switzerland. She studied in the Bauhaus tradition at the School of Arts in Zurich and as a young artist won the Achievement Award of the City of Zurich. She moved to the US in 1953, and to Durham, NC, in 1966, when her husband, Dr. Siegfried Heyden, was named professor of medicine at Duke University Medical Center. Soon after, she gained an international reputation for her tapestries. Her work has been exhibited at the Duke University Museum of Art, the Mint Museum, and the North Carolina Museum of Art, as well as in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. Her tapestries are in many major private and corporate collections in the US and Europe. See more of her work in [Tyndall Galleries](#).

## DRINK YOUR JUICE, SHELBY

a review by Gary Richards

**Tim Anderson. *Sweet Tooth: A Memoir*. Seattle: Lake Union Publishing, 2014.**

**GARY RICHARDS**, 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. In addition to other reviews for *NCLR*, see his article on Allan Gurganus's *Plays Well with Others* in *NCLR* 2008 and his interview with and article on Jim Grimsley in *NCLR* 2009.

**TIM ANDERSON** is the author of *Tune in Tokyo: The Gajjin Diaries* (Wayward Mammal, 2010; Lake Union, 2011) and two young adult historical novels published under the name T. Neill Anderson. A graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, he is an editor in Brooklyn, NY, where he lives with his husband.

ABOVE RIGHT Tim Anderson's 1989 11<sup>th</sup> grade photograph, from Sanderson High School in Raleigh

Few narratives follow so rigidly set a script as coming out stories, the accounts – whether fictionalized in novels and short stories or recorded in memoirs – of persons who struggle to accept sexual desires or gendered identities that deviate from social norms. In these stories, closely akin to the *Bildungsroman*, or the coming of age novel, a young person, most often a teenager, acknowledges his or her difference, struggles with acting upon the transgressive desires, and anxiously negotiates guilt, fear, and rejection before reaching some degree of acceptance at the personal, familial, or social level. Writers have, of course, personalized and varied these accounts, shifting the ages, races, and regional identities of the central figures, but the results have not always been successful. Kevin Sessum's *Mississippi Sissy* (2008), for instance, specifically focused on a Southern man's experiences with coming out in the 1970s, but the book's self-importance grated on some readers.

At first glance, Tim Anderson's *Sweet Tooth* seems of a piece with *Mississippi Sissy*, since his memoir chronicles his coming out as gay during his high school and college years in central North Carolina in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, within the first paragraph, Anderson smartly breaks the mold of the coming out narrative, immediately shifting the focus from sexual desire to quite a different sort: "To a boy whose ideal snack was Little Debbie Zebra Cakes, the existence of a disease like diabetes seemed like the dark work of a mean God" (1). As this paragraph and his title emphasize, *Sweet Tooth* is primarily Anderson's struggle with type 1 diabetes and its ongoing impact on his life. This is not to say that his sexuality is not important within the book, but, by braiding together reflections of

his teenage health and sexuality, Anderson reminds us that sexuality is rarely the only or even the most important type of difference confronting a gay or lesbian person.

Anderson productively structures the memoir to reinforce this emphasis on his diabetes. Told with wry detachment, candid self-assessment, and prolific sarcasm that often leads to laugh-out-loud moments, the ten central chapters are first-person accounts that move chronologically from his dramatic diagnosis in a Baltimore hospital while on an ill-fated trip with "Jesus-loving high school students" (26), through his comic attempts to date girls, to his college years at Guilford College, UNC Chapel Hill, and the University of Manchester. After each chapter, Anderson offers a brief third-person italicized account, each titled "He's Lost Control," that records a critical moment when his blood sugar dipped and control of his body slipped away from him. Although each instance is different, the repetition suggests just how fragile the progress of accepting and successfully handling this disease is. Indeed, even though each episode subtly tracks Anderson's growing ability to understand and respond at these moments, and the final chapter integrates an italicized moment of crisis midway rather than appends it, Anderson nevertheless concludes the memoir with an italicized "Epilogue: Still Ill." His point is thus beautifully made with tempered optimism that readers can appreciate: he has largely mastered control of his body, but the disease remains an ever-present consideration.

One of Anderson's most delightful chapters, however, has little to do with either his disease or his sexuality. Rather, Chapter 6, "Meet Me at the Coterie, Where We Will Enjoy Avocados, the *Village*



COURTESY OF TIM ANDERSON AND AMAZON PUBLISHING

Voice, and Beer over Ice,” humorously charts the anxiety that he, the child of a stolid religiously and politically conservative middle-class family, felt when he began work at a North Raleigh bakery, “the most highfalutin establishment I’d ever stepped into” (142):

NPR’s *Weekend Edition* program played on the speakers, and books lined the walls of the place, hardcovers and paperbacks great and small. On a shelf by the front windows sat copies of the *New York Times*, *Barron’s*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Village Voice*. I’d heard of all of these but had never seen them face-to-face, much less cracked the pages of any of them. Mine was a *Saturday Evening Post* kind of family. The most explosively liberal publication we consumed was the *News and Observer*, Raleigh’s daily newspaper that we got every morning in spite of the fact that

it had, in my mother’s opinion, a terrible liberal bent, as evidenced by the endless stream of unflattering photos of Jesse Helms it was always running. (142)

Anderson’s account of his “first day at the Elitist Sandwich Making Institute” (155) is both drolly funny and smartly insightful, an even-handed anatomy of the mixed emotions often felt by provincial Southerners who crave, resent, and fear participation in national and international cultures.

If Anderson’s memoir has any liability, it is its tendency to catalogue elements of 1980s popular culture, ranging from breakfast cereals and candies to television programs and music groups. For those of us who lived through that era, there are frequent smiles of recognition during these catalogues. (I, a five-year-old eater of Lucky Charms, confess that Anderson had me at his list of cereals, just as I beamed when he reminded me of *Life in Hell* comics and sympathetically shook my head about watching *Maurice* and *The Golden Girls* too many times.) However, if one did not live through that era or was not invested in the particular subculture that Anderson lovingly but extensively rehearses, the catalogues become tedious. Sometimes they are even wrong,

and one hopes that his mention of “Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oliver!*” (256) is a deliberate commentary on his naïve education in musical theater during college.

This aside, *Sweet Tooth* ultimately proves itself a smart, open-eyed meditation on disease, sexuality, religion, and community that never loses sight of its comic ends. Moreover, the memoir nicely records the nexus of these elements, as when gay camp emerges as a crucial means for coping with disease generally and diabetes specifically. At the end of Chapter 7, Anderson’s high school friends, trained in coping with his periodic drops in blood sugar level, gamely quote the beloved saccharine chick flick *Steel Magnolias* while ministering to him. Speaking of his friend Dani, Anderson writes, “All she ever needed to know about dealing with a grumpy diabetic she learned from Sally Field” (184). This, of course, casts Anderson in the role played by Julia Roberts, but he gets the better story in the end. In *Steel Magnolias*, Roberts’s Shelby famously dies in a wallow of melodrama; Anderson instead lives, thrives on humor, sarcasm, and a more carefully regulated diet, and, with *Sweet Tooth*, offers a winning memoir that breaks new ground for the gay coming out narrative. ■

## AAUW JUVENILE LITERATURE AWARD

The acclaimed and prolific children’s author Joan Holub received the 2014 North Carolina AAUW Award for Juvenile Literature for her picture book *Little Red Writing* (Chronicle Books, 2013) with illustrations by Melissa Sweet. *Little Red Writing* is the tale of a courageous red pencil on the exciting but sometimes dangerous journey of writing a story. After graduating from a Texas university and doing freelance design, Joan Holub moved to New York City to pursue a career in children’s literature, and eventually found her way to her current home in Raleigh. ■

ABOVE RIGHT *Pencils on the way to school*, by Caldecott honoree and *New York Times* bestselling illustrator Melissa Sweet for Joan Holub’s *Little Red Writing*



COURTESY OF CHRONICLE BOOKS

## INSOMNIA WELL SPENT

*a review by Donna A. Gessell*

**Kat Meads. *2:12 a.m.: Essays*.  
Nacogdoches, TX: Stephen  
F. Austin State University  
Press, 2013.**

**DONNA A. GESSELL** is a Professor of English at the University of North Georgia, where she teaches literature and composition.

An award-winning writer of fiction, drama, nonfiction, and poetry, **KAT MEADS** is a native of Eastern North Carolina who lives in California and teaches for Oklahoma City University's low-residency Red Earth MFA program. She holds a BA from UNC Chapel Hill and an MFA from UNC Greensboro. *2:12 a.m.* received a Gold Medal in the essay/creative nonfiction category of the Independent Publishers Book Awards. In 2014, Meads's most recent one-act play, *Matched*, based on the Highland Hospital nurse who confessed to starting the fire that killed Zelda Fitzgerald, was performed at the Silver Spring Stage One-Act Festival in Maryland, where it was awarded for direction and production. Another of her plays was published in *NCLR 2009*, which also includes an interview with the author. And her novel, *The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan* (Chiasmus, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR 2008*) is the subject of a chapter of *NCLR* Editor Margaret Bauer's new book, *A Study of Scarletts*.



COURTESY OF TITUS BOUCHER AND  
DONNA KAIN, ECU DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

There's good news for insomniacs: sleep researchers report that wakefulness is a natural part of the sleep cycle, an ideal time to accomplish valued activities. In her new collection of essays, *2:12 a.m.*, self-reported insomniac Kat Meads does just that, as she escapes the tyranny of her insomnia by mapping places, people, and events that she has known. These details in turn captivate her readers with Meads's relentless drive and curiosity as she revisits her thoughts and elusive dreams. Her essays produce an energy that can keep readers awake at night. The book is at once a product of insomnia and a compendium of insights produced by the insomnia of Meads and of others.

In the preface, "Night and Its Houndings," Meads explores the causes of her insomnia, asking "to get to dream(s) interrupted, where else to start?" The stranger she describes and her attempts "to make the uninvited disappear" prepare readers for "rough and rougher nights ahead" and "no solution to the plight of wakefulness and what wakefulness exaggerated." She warns readers, "A revolt of the body and the mind is insomnia," and "The first, faint

ringing of the mortality bell is insomnia" (9). With revolt in our own bodies and minds, mortality faintly ringing, we are off on her "red-eye tour of the world at large and the world within" that insomnia brings (10).

And what a tour it is. In the seventeen essays she constructs a personal topography with imagery so vivid that it becomes accessible to everyone. In the first section of essays, Meads's North Carolina childhood in Currituck County with its "skirted" yards is plotted out and then updated with tales of development as "farmers, unable to sustain a family of four on profits from corn and soybeans, started selling off parcels to developers with intentions to further subdivide" (35). Counting herself "as the last of the Currituck provincials," Meads frames the growth and subsequent economic and social change of Eastern North Carolina in tales rendered as familiar as family gossip. The scenery is at once familiar yet changed, inviting yet repulsive. We are left, like the subject of the essay "The Rise and Fall of Sheriff Glenn Brinkley," regretting mistakes, just as "he gnaws that bone day and night and night and day" (44).

The essays go beyond the intrigues of Meads's life in Eastern North Carolina. As an adult, she did leave the South, as the second section's title "In the West" suggests. Psychologically, though, she has never left the South, especially in her after-midnight reconnoitering. As she realizes in the essay "On Reading and Rereading *The Mind of the South* in No Place Southern," she fulfills W.J. Cash's observation that "the Southerner 'is free to brood as well as to dream – to exaggerate his fears as well as his hopes'" in her brooding (47). Her prose expresses "that loss, the distance between here and there, the gulf between now and then, the separation of me from mine" (50).

Meads explores distances of all sorts. Perhaps the most telling distance she attempts to bridge is through revisiting the Patty Hearst abduction in 1974 and its aftermath. In fourteen succinctly written pages, Meads brings order to the chaos of the historical events and their recounting in various narratives: films, interviews, and bestsellers. When Meads concludes her exploration of Patty Hearst's motives after spending a total of fifty-seven days in two small closets, we are as haunted by the essay's conclusion as she is: "Patricia Hearst Shaw sleeps in a house with closets. . . . Stunning, isn't it?" (64).

A similar essay reconstructing and ordering the events around the life of Lee Harvey Oswald's widow, Marina, leaves the reader just as open-eyed, with the uncertainties of unresolvable ambiguities that are part of our collective

histories. With little hope of solace, this is not a book of casual reading to pick up in the middle of a wakeful night in the hopes of reading oneself back to sleep.

Other essays recount Meads's days spent visiting places that inspire bad dreams: from the Nevada Test Site in the essay "Craters in the Sand (Why No One Should Sleep Easy)" to the Tsar's Faberge egg collection on display in a Las Vegas casino, where night and day lose meaning, to the Salton Sea with its otherworldliness, remnants invoking former dreams of prestige, now encrusted in the dregs of the unsustainable. These "dreamscapes" turned nightmares externalize the interior terrors that Meads investigates throughout the text.

Meads gives other insomniacs a say in her book: "That night is a maze and a vortex, a concentric pressure, a fluidity, a harpy, *Insomnia Drawings* [by Louise Bourgeois] again and again assert and remind" (95). Meads also rereads traditional bedtime stories in the essay "Counterproductive Bedtime Stories," in which she argues the power of the character of the "villain" to haunt daytime as well as nighttime. Her rereading reveals the insomniacs that populate them, as in *Rumpelstiltskin*: "Now the queen lay awake all night, thinking, I read further" (102).

The farthest ranging essay is "Four Days & Four White Nights," set in St. Petersburg:

"Our itinerary, even for hyper, short attention-span Americans, is absurd. . . . Over the next four days, on occasion, we will also close our eyes, but not to sleep, not to sleep" (113). St. Petersburg's history, landmarks, and nightmares are overwhelming "in a city where so many have gone sleepless, waiting for children, parents, husbands, wives, lovers, comrades, assassins, tsars, conspirators and profligate priests to return, not all of those granted safe passage" (119).

Where is the readers' return, our safe passage after we explore insomnia and sleepwalking, every bed Meads has ever occupied, and various historic figures inflicted with sleeplessness? We end where it all ends, with Meads and her career as an obituary writer: "For 15 years I've been a death reporter, a death summarizer, an editor of death. Part time, freelance contract. No medical benefits" (157). In this final essay, "Obits, Life Bits" we return to North Carolina to family funerals, with their promise of a final sleep.

Because it is so compelling, do read 2:12 a.m. However, refrain from reading it at bedtime. That is, unless you want to explore the potential of wakefulness in your own sleep cycle. Unlike other authors who lull readers to sleep, Meads keeps the reader turning pages with engaging essays spawned by her relentless curiosity. ■



COURTESY OF TITUS  
BOUCHER AND DONNA KAIN,  
ECU DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

## FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE

BY MARYLIN HERVIEUX

*Distance*

is an abstract lightly brushed  
 across an involution.  
 Imagine the utter plenty  
 packed in, observables observed  
 before they're discernible.  
 Distance is an open-windowed draft  
 with no known beginning; an evanescence  
 of hardness and definition, whether of heart  
 or tree; dream-dust and fog and cashmere rain;  
 the descending shades  
 of longing. It's a street band long *after*  
 the parade, trumpet and drum-speak  
 in some obscure adjournment.  
 Distance is an echo, sometimes  
 blue, sometimes the color  
 of elderly. You can't put your mind  
 in it nor pull it away.  
 It's like a lake's snug mist  
 where stepping through  
 could swallow you.

COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM, BLACK MOUNTAIN  
 COLLECTION; GIFT OF THE FALCON CHARITABLE FOUNDATION



*Blue* (Oil on linen, 34x40) by Joseph Fiore, 1952

**JOSEPH FIORE (1925–2008)** was born in Cleveland, OH. He moved to North Carolina in 1946 to study at Black Mountain College with Josef Albers and Ilya Bolotowsky, and in 1949 was asked to join the art faculty, where he remained until the college closed in 1957. He returned to New York City and became a member of the 10<sup>th</sup> Street Art Scene, prominent in the 1950s and '60s. His art has been exhibited widely and is in the permanent collections of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the National Academy in New York, the Black Mountain College Museum, and the Asheville Art Museum. His numerous awards include the Andrew Carnegie Prize at the National Academy of Design in New York in 2001. See more of his work in the [Asheville Art Museum](#).

**FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**

BY MARYLIN HERVIEUX

*Deadweight*

Sun polishes the road at the bend  
 where the oak, scarred and wart-barked,  
 stands like an old stunt man.  
 It's fall, but grass still claims the trials of summer,  
 valor in its length, a length that nearly hides her – the deer  
 whose legs, narrow as a child's wrists, gave  
 when she fell.

She's not yet stiff  
 but ants, with brooding occupation,  
 file toward her mouth – a tavern of blood.  
 How sleek she was in her wellborn coat,  
 the underside of her tail, snap-white; her thin-  
 bone fineness having coaxed the forest  
 into submission.

She's a version of sadness  
 on this phantom trestle  
 where life passes to somewhere else.  
 She nearly made it to the roadside woods  
 where falling leaves litigate for position,  
 and a squat branch cracks  
 of its own redundancy;

where three does and a fawn stood  
 for the longest time,  
 like figurines with large, dark eyes painted to stare  
 here, where she lies.  
 They *had* to stop, it seems, before stepping again  
 into their maundering, an unglved chill  
 sworn to their shadows.

**MARYLIN HERVIEUX** is originally from Upstate New York but has lived in North Carolina for many years, currently in rural Orange County, south of Hillsborough. A recipient of an Artist Project Grant from the Orange County Arts Council, she taught poetry workshops to various special needs groups in the community. Her work has been published in *Kakalak*, *Kalliope*, *Tar River Poetry*, and the North Carolina Art's Council's Poet-of-the-Week Series. Listen to the poet read "Going Again," which received honorable mention in the 2014 Applewhite competition, and then read that poem in the print issue of *NCLR* [2015](#).

## HOPE WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS

a review by Leigh G. Dillard

**Kim Church. *Byrd: A Novel*. Ann Arbor, MI: Dzanc Books, 2014.**

In her debut novel, *Byrd*, Kim Church offers an exploration of character rich in detail yet economic in style. Her protagonist, Addie Lockwood, resonates as one of those people we might know, either as an acquaintance or as some part of ourselves. Church has proven with her shorter works to be a student of humanity, delving into the nuances of human interaction to reveal inescapable shortcomings and familiar dysfunction. In *Byrd*, Church develops this pursuit and succeeds not only in her first effort at longer fiction but more broadly in her study of the forces that motivate and sustain us.

Resisting Southern stereotypes but showing traces of a Southern upbringing, Church's characters espouse the universal impulses of small-town denizens, those who seek to skip town the first chance they get to catch their big break and others whose escape takes them only as far as the next town over. Addie is the eldest in a middle-class family from Carswell, NC. Her well-intentioned mother sells "expensive girls' dresses to mothers who don't have to work" (9). Her alcoholic father works for Reliable Loan Company and, to Addie's embarrassment, is known as the Dollar Man by her friends

because of a billboard that superimposes his face on a dollar bill in place of George Washington's.

*Byrd* is a coming-of-age story, tracing Addie's life from the middle schooler drinking Tang with her best friend to navigating the complex map of adulthood. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore development in a story that, even in its brevity, spans more than forty years. It could also be labeled a love story of sorts. Youthful flirtation culminates in the first half of *Byrd*, but this is far from the classic tale of attraction, as Church employs twists of fate to complicate the traditional paradigms.

Addie meets Roland Rhodes in the fourth grade. Something is different about Roland and not just because he's the new kid in school or because word has spread that he had hit his head on the swimming pool the summer before his move from Alabama. No, there was an aura about him, and a mutual appreciation of being slightly different from their peers – Addie bookish and outspoken, Roland impulsive and musical – develops through their middle and high school years to an affection less childlike. In high school, Roland remains different from the others, particularly in his love for music and in the

**LEIGH G. DILLARD** is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of North Georgia where she teaches composition, technical communications, and British literature. Her research and scholarly work focus on illustration and the novel of the eighteenth century.

**KIM CHURCH** has received writing fellowships from the North Carolina Arts Council and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her stories have appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Prime Number Magazine*, and other journals and in the anthologies *Flash Fiction Forward* (W.W. Norton, 2006) and *Racing Home* (The Paper Journey Press, 2001). Originally from Lexington, NC, she currently lives in Raleigh, NC. For a sample of her short fiction, see [NCLR 2001](#).



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY ULINSKI





PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY JUMSKI

way he dresses; at his mother's insistence, he has short hair and wears corduroys and collared shirts rather than the typical jeans, t-shirts, and long-hair of the 1970s. But when he talks about music, people forget his quirks and just listen. Like her friends, Addie is drawn to Roland: "She thinks his name sounds like a place. Roland Rhodes. A faraway place. One that would take a long time to get to, and once you did, you would never want to come back" (9). Addie's advantage over Roland's other female admirers is that he trusts her. Their affections, predictably, turn physical, but the results again resist the expected. Church exercises restraint in describing this crucial moment in the relationship between Addie and Roland: "If sex changes everything, not-sex changes everything even more" (25). This awkward concept of "not-sex" – an attempt that falls short – parallels the near misses that are to mark Addie's life, for better or worse. Nonetheless, the reader, like Addie, hopes for (but does not expect) another chance for these two.

After years of silence between them, Addie calls Roland in December 1988. Like their earlier interactions, she's rehearsed her potential responses to his questions, as many of us do when we're trying to make a positive impression. She's wearing nice clothes, even though he can't see her, because she wants to feel pretty. Although they're now in their early thirties, she easily falls prey to his charms, just like years ago: the conversation is comfortable, his laugh, familiar, and he exudes his magnetism even from across the country. He's living in California and impulsively invites Addie to spend New Year's with him; she just as impulsively accepts, and thus begins the second chapter of their acquaintance. Predictably, the sex works this time, as described in Church's sparse detail: "He doesn't hurry. He takes a long time this time. She doesn't think he'll ever finish" (57). Yet something in Church's description – or missing from it – speaks to the potential impossibility of this union. There is no emotional rapture or outpouring of satisfaction. Expectations have

been tempered through the years to deliver a moderated response to this long-awaited act.

This second chance for Addie and Roland marks one of the few predictable moments of the novel, leading to Addie's pregnancy, and to some extent, this is where the novel truly begins. It is here that the reader is able to piece together the disjointed narrative delivered through a mix of short chapters and letters. The opening statement of the novel – "Dear Byrd, This is how I told your father" – reverberates now that the reader is able to appreciate a bit more about the relationship behind it. Byrd, the pseudo-intended recipient of the letters interspersed throughout the narrative, is Addie's son whom she gives up for adoption.

Naturally, the decision to relinquish a child is fraught with difficulty, even for the otherwise stoic Addie who claims she's unprepared for motherhood. Church develops this initial detachment through a description of the ultrasound image, revealing Addie's perception that the spot on the television screen was "gray and

smaller than a baby bird . . . something that doesn't belong in her, a mistake, all blind and gray and no feathers" (80). Slowly, she becomes more attached to her unborn child and begins writing letters to him – letters that will never be read – to help reconcile her current state, a pattern that continues even after the birth. When Addie was in high school, she used to write poetry with Roland, feeling as though "the rest of the world disappear[ed]" when she attempted to channel her inner Joni Mitchell or Edna Millay (15). As an adult, she turns to the epistolary form for solace, and the letters to Byrd remain a constant in Addie's life, leading, we hope, to some sort of peace.

In the summer of 1989, Addie writes, "You will not read this letter, which is the only reason I'm brave enough to write it. You will not know what you went through to get here. Already you are braver than I ever will be" (89). Thus, the power of anonymity and the relief in the act of writing become stabilizing forces for Addie and do as much to show the growth of her character as those moments told by the omniscient narrator. These letters are refreshingly freeform and expressive, unbound by rules of content or tone. Perhaps it is

also Addie's belief in books that allows her to find this similar relief in writing. As a teenager, she felt that books were "more interesting than real life and easier to understand. Sometimes you can guess the ending. Things usually work out, and if they don't, you can always tell yourself it was only a book" (7). Although Church offers this early description of Addie's mindset, the same mantra can be applied to the novel. We think we can guess the ending, but arguably the resolution is not quite what we expect. And that's a good thing.

Although the primary focus rests on Addie, Church provides insight into the life of Byrd's father, Roland. The parallel narratives – again delivered through short vignettes – encourage the reader to question Addie's choices with a knowledge that even Addie herself lacks. Has Addie underestimated him? Would they have been better off together? The quick switch between the lives of Addie and Roland, miles apart and seemingly unaware of what the other is going through, propels the reader through an already well-paced novel.

*Byrd* defies expectation, in much the same way that life does. This is not the story of a high school fling, even if it finds its

origins in a childhood attraction. Knowing that, we might expect to read the travails of a teenage mother who, after experiencing her first sexual encounter with the aloof and misunderstood guitar player, grapples with the decision between abortion, adoption, and raising the child on her own. Likewise, we might expect a reunion between Addie and Roland after years apart, realizing that they were destined for each other. But neither is the case. Instead, Church alters these expectations through clever plot twists that leave the reader, like Addie, full of "hopes but no expectations" (239). Refreshingly, Church offers an alternative to the pattern of motherhood; although it is not without its regrets, Addie proves that only when she sheds the expectations that have driven her is she able to find relief. Our expectations, by novel's end, are for Addie's happiness, and perhaps for that long-anticipated reunion that she desires. In her final missive to Byrd, fashioned as his coming-of-age letter, Addie admits that this one will make it to the mailbox. It serves as his invitation to find her if he wants to. Does Byrd appear on Addie's doorstep after all these years? We have "hopes but no expectations." ■

## LEE SMITH RECEIVES THIRD SIR WALTER RALEIGH AWARD

Lee Smith received her third Sir Walter Raleigh Award in 2014 for *Guests on Earth* (Algonquin, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* [2014](#)), joining two other three-time winners of the award, Doris Betts and Frances Gray Patton (John Ehle and Reynolds Price have both won five times). Smith's other two Raleigh Award novels are *Oral History* (Putnam's, 1983; the subject of essays in *NCLR* [1998](#) and [2008](#)) and *Fair and Tender Ladies* (Putnam's, 1988). She won the Southern Book Critics Circle award in 2002 for her novel *The Last Girls* (Algonquin, 2002), which is the subject of an essay in *NCLR* [2014](#).

She is the author of twelve novels, including *On Agate Hill* (Algonquin, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* [2007](#)) and four collections of short stories, including *News of the Spirit* (Putnam's, 1997; reviewed in *NCLR* [1998](#)). Smith has been awarded the Lifetime Literary Achievement Award from her native state of Virginia, and in her adopted state of North Carolina, where she taught at NC State University for almost twenty years, she received the North Carolina Award for Literature in 1984 and was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2009. Read a short story by Smith, "Blazing Star," in *NCLR* [1998](#). ■

**FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**

BY GRACE C. OCASIO

*After Perusing Grandma's Scrapbook*

Why didn't you leave me your yellowest dress?  
 Your blackest comb?  
 Your knottiest wool scarf?

These musty Christmas cards  
 are all that's left of you.

I want you to sit  
 at my dinner table,  
 lean over and whisper my name.

Please speak in prayer.  
 Please rustle these drapes in my living room.

Did you curl up in wicker settees in sunrooms  
 or settle into armchairs in parlors?

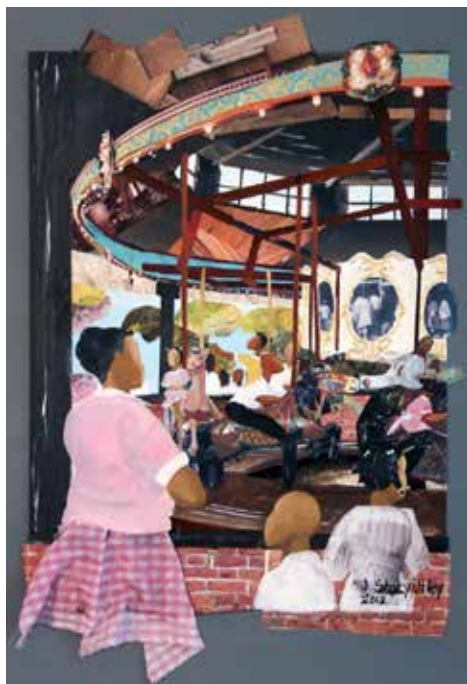
If you could return to flesh and bones,  
 where would you go?

Tell me the names of Raleigh streets you wandered in 1934.  
 Show me how to roller-skate on dirt roads.

I can't decipher these bits of handwriting that stop and restart.  
 How do I resurrect you?

What I know is your hair bloomed glossy black.  
 I want to grasp like dandelions those waves in your hair,  
 sow them in my apron pockets.

I wish you would take my hands.  
 Tell me if my hands are skimming oceans or orchids.  
 Show me how to play my hands like an overture to a ballet.



*Chavis Park Merry Go Round* (mixed media collage on canvas board, 24x18) by J. Stacy Utley

**J. STACY UTLEY** was born in Mildenhall, Suffolk, United Kingdom. He earned his undergraduate degrees in architecture (2001) and environmental design (2006) at NC State University and began his career as an architect soon after. In 2014, he received his MFA in Visual Arts at Lesley University College of Art and Design in Boston. He is a frequent lecturer in such venues as the Harvey B. Gantt Center for Cultural Art in Charlotte, NC. His art has been exhibited widely throughout North Carolina, including at the Witherspoon African American Cultural Center at NC State University and the Block Gallery in Raleigh and the Hodges Taylor Gallery in Charlotte, and his work is in numerous private and permanent collections such as Johnson C. Smith University and NC State University. He currently lives and works in Charlotte, where he maintains his studio. See more of his work on his [website](#).

Twice a finalist for the Rash Award in Poetry (in 2010 and 2013), **GRACE C. OCASIO** is a recipient of the 2014 North Carolina Arts Council-funded Regional Artist Project Grant. She won honorable mention in the 2012 James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition for her poem "Little Girlfriend" (published in *NCLR* 2013) and the 2011 Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka Poetry Prize. She was a scholarship recipient to the 2011 Napa Valley Writers' Conference, and she has been selected for inclusion in the North Carolina volume (VII) of *The Southern Poetry Anthology*. Her first full-length collection, *The Speed of Our Lives*, was published by BlazeVOX Books in 2014. Read another of her Applewhite competition finalist poems in *NCLR* 2015, and [listen](#) to a reading of this poem at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference.



“It’s hard to imagine picking it up and going.”  
—Godfrey Cheshire



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more intriguing for the viewer is the way in which the Silver/Cheshire family integrates Robert Hinton into Midway’s move, thereby merging storylines. At various points, they publicly celebrate his ancestors’ roles in maintaining the vitality of a place that the white Silvers still call home, and they welcome him to Midway with great Southern hospitality, sharing with him details of the family history and taking him to the overgrown but legally preserved slave burial ground nearby. At the same time, most of the family members simultaneously cling to romanticized notions of Midway reminiscent of plantation mythology. A handful of family members state on camera that they understand that it is accepted historical fact that slave owners at times mistreated slaves. But they go on to say that given how kind the present-day Silvers are, they imagine that their Hinton ancestors would have been benevolent and generous toward their slaves, a story no doubt often told and believed by many descendants of Southern slave owners and a story at the center of this family’s collective memory.

Racialized gender constructions are also central to that memory – and within plantation mythology more broadly. The family’s narrative privileges the figures of the elite Southern white woman and the loyal male slave. The Silver/Cheshire collective memory derives from the stories once told by the late family matriarch, Miss Mary, whose ghost



[Click here to watch](#) Midway Plantation begin the move from its original lot as Robert Hinton and Charlie Silver discuss the significance of the home.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN CRELL;  
COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE;  
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ABOVE The former site of Midway Plantation

RIGHT Midway Plantation on the move,  
traversing Wake Stone’s Quarry



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resides within Midway, and much of their belief in their ancestors' benevolence stems from a story about the fidelity of a male slave named Mingo, who is rumored to have saved one of the family's paintings during the Civil War and whose name is attached to a development near present-day Midway.

These stories live on via figures such as Godfrey's mother, a woman who in accent, style, and affect appears to be a stereotypical elite Southern white woman of an older generation. The Southern white gentleman archetype figures less prominently in the family's collective memory, perhaps because Charles Lewis Hinton's involvement with Selanie diminishes the construct, though Charlie Silver does seem to play a revamped Southern gentleman role at times; he is clearly the "master" of the house's fate and its representation. Godfrey Cheshire and Robert Hinton, however, fall less easily into molds of mythic Southern characters.

The moments in *Moving Midway* where myth and history collide make for a powerful and complicated film. Many of those moments, which primarily come when Dr. Hinton appears in conversation with a white member of the Silver/Cheshire family, suggest a breaking down of racial and gender divides – more specifically, the disruption of traditional Southern masculinities – which occurs as the relationship between Robert Hinton and Godfrey Cheshire develops throughout the film. It is in those moments when Cheshire's effort to complicate narratives of "Southern" identity becomes the most clear. Through his film, Cheshire pulls together multiple visions of the South, multiple Southern identities, multiple Southern pasts into a narrative that seems to easily accommodate such multiplicity. While *Midway's* move represents a reconciling (literally and figuratively) of experiences and histories into a familial as well as regional narrative that accounts for and makes room for the multiple yet connected histories within it, the film itself cements the bonds between black and white and mixed-race family members while also making their seams visible to viewers.

In this vein, *Moving Midway* works towards overcoming the "lenticular logic" of many South-focused texts, to borrow an idea articulated by scholar Tara McPherson in her work, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*.<sup>2</sup> The adjective "lenticular" comes from the particular lens used in a certain type of souvenir postcard. I recently purchased one of these cards of the gardens at Versailles. You hold this postcard in front of you at one angle and see the placid water of the Apollo Fountain and bronze statuary shining in the sun. Move the card up or down, and a plume of water erupts, rippling the water all around. As hard as you might try, it is impossible to see both images at the same time due to the lenticular lens.

ABOVE The photograph of Selanie with Charles Lewis Hinton, which appears in the documentary

<sup>2</sup> Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); quotations from this book will be cited parenthetically.

“The moments in *Moving Midway* where myth and history collide make for a powerful and complicated film.”

—Margaret McGehee

McPherson tells us that these are what she always called 3-D postcards, and “the coating . . . is actually a lenticular lens, a device that makes viewing both images together nearly impossible” (26).

The postcard McPherson has in mind, however, is much more provocative than the one I purchased at Louis XIV’s chateau. In the card she once came across, you see a typical Southern belle figure in front of a plantation home, but when turned, the image becomes that of “a grinning, portly mammy.” Viewing the two together is impossible. Thus, lenticular logic, she claims, “is capable of representing both black and white; but one approaches the limits of this logic when one attempts to understand how the images are joined or related” (26). Applying this to early- to mid-twentieth-century literature and popular culture, McPherson claims that while many texts from that period included black and white Southerners, they did not fully point to how their lives were connected. In the later part of the century, she argues, many writers continued to avoid investigating such connections, specifically by erasing black Southerners from their texts’ purview. “A lenticular logic,” McPherson writes, “is a monocular logic, a schema by which histories or images that are actually co-present get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time. Such an arrangement represses connection, allowing whiteness to float free from blackness” (7). Some works, she adds, “break free of such a limiting schema, refusing both the covert representations of the lenticular, as well as the more overt modes of an earlier period” (8).

When she says “covert representations” here, McPherson refers to texts and films from the 1980s and ’90s (like *Steel Magnolias*), which provide a singular focus on one side of the racial divide, thereby “enact[ing] a separation” that “fix[es] categories” of racial difference.

By “overt representations,” she means works like *Gone With the Wind* that place white and black Southerners within the same scenes or frames, in turn visually and overtly enforcing those differences but failing to examine how the two groups’ lives were intimately intertwined. As McPherson points out, “Mammy’s physical labor and ‘supporting’ role allow Scarlett to perform femininity” (55), while “Mammy’s own interiority is denied by the novel” (60).

The mammy figure was often crucial to the agenda of plantation narratives’ authors, but *Moving Midway* does not incorporate that figure



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ABOVE An overlay of photographs of Midway Plantation taken approximately 100 years apart, in 2004 and circa 1900



PHOTOGRAPH BY CONRAD RICHARD JORDAN; COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE; MOVING MIDWAY, LLC; AND FIRST RUN FEATURES

in any significant way. At the same time, it also does not delve deeply into the lives of black women connected to the Hinton family in the past or present. One image of Selanie appears in the film, a photograph of her standing next to Charles Lewis Hinton; viewers briefly meet Sylvia Wiggins, the widow of Hinton family historian Lawrence Wiggins, whose commentary focuses on her husband, his genealogical research, and his backroom meetings with a white cousin; and viewers watch as Godfrey Cheshire interacts with a few distant African American female relatives at a reunion. In general, black women tend to be absent from most of the film's frames, as they are largely absent from the family's narratives, suggesting that the documentary does not fully escape a lenticular mode of representation.

Overall, however, *Moving Midway* falls in line with some of the works that McPherson claims reject both overt and covert lenticular modes of representation, moving out of the confining parameters of the lenticular lens. The filmmakers are not as bold as Kara Walker, whose silhouettes McPherson offers as prime examples of overcoming the lenticular mode, but they do seek to provide an overt representation of race relations in the South and to interrogate the connections between the black and white members of the families portrayed. While Godfrey Cheshire is the lead filmmaker – in that he conceived of, wrote, produced, and directed the documentary – Robert Hinton also collaborated with him as an associate producer and chief historian. Two individuals, who historically might have been the two images of a lenticular postcard, creatively merge to produce an image and a text – this film and the story that it shares with its audience. To a great extent, they succeed in moving Southern narratives beyond the lenticular mode and structure, particularly through their inclusion of multiple voices within the film.

First, a note about the multiple agendas that ultimately converge within the film's narrative arc. The film began as the effort of Godfrey Cheshire to document the move of his family home. Once Cheshire learned of Robert Hinton's existence, the film became a collaborative effort on both parts to chronicle the house's move and to unravel and attempt to make sense of their mutually shared heritage and history as represented by the iconic antebellum house and the land on which it had stood for over a century. This collaboration, and the move itself, then led to the "reunion" of the families (or at least symbolic heads of the two branches, as the party consists predominately of the white Silver/Cheshire family members), which is documented in the film's conclusion. While the two filmmakers place their stories and

"I had this realization that I had a Southern identity as well as an African American identity."

—Robert Hinton





“By bringing families into the same screen and into the same domestic and narrative ‘space,’ does a film like *Moving Midway* keep the wounds of Southern history open and fresh?”

—Margaret McGehee



views side-by-side through in-depth, honest conversations, some work remains for the family members at large, and gender norms only begin to be challenged in the film’s final frames. Yet, the “two” families *symbolically* become one within those concluding moments, and, to some extent, the lenticular lens melts away, the binary logic broken by the spell of reunion.

But moving past the lenticular does not necessarily equal reconciliation. Perhaps that is not even the goal of those individual Silvers, Cheshires, and Hinton’s invested in the reunion. In his review of the film, critic A.O. Scott says as much: “to his credit Mr. Cheshire does not oversell [the party] as a moment of reconciliation.”<sup>3</sup> Is reconciliation beyond the performance of basic pleasantries possible for families who have been separated for generations by culture, geography, and history? We can hope so, but the film leaves that work to be done off camera – and leaves us to wonder. The film inspires the question as to what texts that reject lenticular modes (covert or overt) of representing race contribute, or don’t contribute, to the process of racial healing. By bringing families into the same screen and into the same domestic and narrative “space,” does a film like *Moving Midway* keep the wounds of Southern history open and fresh? Or can we expect that exposing the wounds to air will assist in their ultimate closure?

The film initially moves Southern texts towards overcoming the typical lenticular mode of racial representation through the inclusion of multiple voices within the documentary, particularly multiple voices in conversation with one another (as opposed to the monologues that the figures on each side of the card might have traditionally offered). The roster of speakers includes Cheshire’s most immediate family members – his mother, his cousin Charlie, and at least six other Raleigh-based white relatives; the men responsible for moving the house – the head of the trucking company and the lead contractor; the women responsible for cleaning the home; and perhaps most importantly, in terms of overcoming the lenticular logic, African American descendants within the Hinton line.

Cheshire and Hinton are not absent from the film. They are frequently on camera, and in most of those scenes, appear in conversation, side-by-side. Those instances are central to this overcoming of the lenticular logic, particularly in terms of breaking down racialized gender divides between white and black men in the South. First, their conversations tend to revolve around what we might expect to be emotionally and politically charged issues – the causes of the Civil War, for example, or what Midway’s move really means for Cheshire and Hinton. Cheshire’s progressive politics surface throughout the film, but it is clear in the more intimate moments that he is torn between his appreciation for his familial home (and the mythologies surrounding it) and his awareness of the broader history of oppression in which it played a role.

<sup>3</sup> A.O. Scott, “Packing Up the Plantation, and Finding Unexpected, Distant Connections,” Rev. of *Moving Midway*, *New York Times* 12 Sept. 2008: 13E.

“Controlling land is controlling your own destiny to some degree.”

—Robert Hinton

Robert Hinton also has mixed allegiances. In one scene, the two men discuss their feelings toward Midway’s move:

*Hinton:* When I was much younger, I told a friend I wanted to become so rich I could buy the entire state of North Carolina and blacktop it. This [move] works because . . . you and your family get to keep your house, which is at the center of your collective identity, but I have the pleasure of knowing that what used to be Midway Plantation will soon be covered with concrete and asphalt.

*Cheshire:* Surely you can’t like that.

*Hinton:* Yes, because nothing significant will ever grow there again.

*Cheshire:* Why is that good?

*Hinton:* Because my folks did the growing!

*Cheshire:* Don’t you want to see their legacy continue on?

*Hinton:* This [pointing to the house] is all of their legacy I need right here.

*Cheshire:* That’s all you need, huh? But didn’t the land mean something to you?

*Hinton:* Only if they ended up owning it.

*Cheshire:* Uh-huh. Well, is owning all that important? I’m not sure. I don’t own any of it, but it means a lot to me.

*Hinton:* Controlling land in an agrarian society. Controlling land is controlling your own destiny to some degree.

*Cheshire:* Well, how did you feel when you saw the [house] lift up the other day?

*Hinton:* It was strange but good because it meant that was the first step in preserving the house. It would stay in the family that had owned it from the beginning, and as ambivalent as I am about the slavery experience, that is still important to me. (*Moving Midway*)

Dr. Hinton is appreciative of the house’s preservation for the sake of the larger family’s history, but he is not sad that the land it once stood on will soon be transformed into a shopping center. Perhaps



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN CRELL; COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE, MOVING MIDWAY, LLC; AND FIRST RUN FEATURES



[Click here to watch](#) Godfrey Cheshire and Robert Hinton discuss their vastly differing perspectives regarding Midway Plantation.



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earlier he would have liked to see the house razed; now that he has made connections with the house-owning family, absolute loathing is hard to sustain. As Dr. Hinton tells Cheshire at one point, he had not expected to *like* Godfrey.

That ambivalence is not surprising, especially given the way Dr. Hinton is brought into Midway in the scene entitled “Delayed Homecoming” near the documentary’s beginning. Charlie and his wife invite Robert and Godfrey to visit them at Midway and spend the night. Upon Dr. Hinton’s arrival, Charlie addresses him as Dr. Hinton and tells him that his “first duty” is to sign the guest book. Later, they refer to his arrival as a “homecoming” – Robert adds the adjective “delayed” – but interestingly enough, he must register himself as “guest,” signaling his position as a guest in their house. As they begin to talk in the parlor, Robert mentions how “fascinating” it is for him to think that “she” (Midway) was here while he was growing up, unaware of such connections in Raleigh’s predominately black neighborhood of Chavis Heights. Charlie jokingly responds, “We didn’t know much about Chavis Heights either.” They all laugh, and the tension seems to be broken, as Charlie brings their differences, marked in racial-spatial terms, into the open. They are all aware of the factors that have both linked and separated their families for generations, but they seem ready to move forward to put their respective pasts and histories into literal conversation – and to recognize their similarities while doing so. Dr. Hinton confesses:



[Click here to watch](#) Robert Hinton’s initial visit to Midway Plantation prior to the move.

One of the great epiphanies for me was, like, 1963 or ’64, I went to an SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] conference . . . and I met these folks from the Southern Student Organizing Committee, and these were white kids who had been part of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] . . . and at this time I am a serious black nationalist. . . . I’ve got hair out to here [gestures to his head], you know, growling at white folks, you know. [Laughter] I meet these guys and I have this really confusing realization that I am more comfortable talking to these Southern white kids than I am talking to the Northern black kids. . . . I was constantly explaining myself to blacks from the North. . . . [The Southern white kids] always knew exactly what I was talking about in terms of food and culture and everything. And that’s when I had this realization that I had . . . a Southern identity as well as an African American identity. (*Moving Midway*)

Despite a perceived shared identity of “Southern,” Dr. Hinton’s position within the space of the home is still somewhat ambiguous. The next day Charlie takes Robert on a tour of the property, first to the site of the slave burial ground, located behind a housing development but legally preserved as a cemetery, and then to the location of what would have been the slave quarters. Charlie is well-versed in the history of slavery on the plantation and proceeds to describe the laborious process involved with picking cotton, a lesson that must clearly be for the benefit of the film’s viewer since such information would

not be news to Professor Hinton, whose dissertation was on North Carolina cotton culture.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Charlie's tour intrigues the viewer on multiple levels. He and his family are keenly aware of their role in the system of slavery, and he does not seem to hide anything from Hinton or the viewer. This open acknowledgment and discussion of their shared history suggests that the two sides of the lenticular postcard have begun to merge. Dr. Hinton is at once a welcomed guest on the Silvers' property and yet a descendent of their "property" and tied by blood and sweat to the land on which he stands and to the economy that Charlie describes. It is a surreal moment to see the two men, intimately connected through a shared ancestral past, standing near the house's well, dug by slave hands, talking about slavery in a simultaneously intimate and historically distanced way.

But perhaps this is because the link between Charlie and Robert does not take as solid a root throughout the film as that between Godfrey and Robert. The film – a representation of their shared history – is *their* project, though with significant assistance and hospitality from Charlie, the chief engineer behind Midway's move. Cheshire and Hinton overtly present in one part of the documentary the extent to which they are both similar and dissimilar. Roughly the same age, they both grew up in Raleigh, but in different parts of town – Godfrey on the west side with its Carolina Country Club, as he points out; Robert in the projects of Chavis Heights in east Raleigh. Dr. Hinton's dissertation at Yale focused on cotton culture in North Carolina; Cheshire, a film critic and journalist, has spent a good part of his career looking at representations of the South in cinema. With their narratives juxtaposed in this part of the film, Hinton and Cheshire initially seem to be representative of binaries that long characterized our understanding of Southern culture – white and black, rich and poor, myth and history. Yet the film ultimately works to make a palimpsest of those narratives, revealing the two as integral and connected parts within the same "text" of Southern history.

In fact, their friendship at times seems to represent a "bro-romance" of reunion, to make a poor pun out of Nina Silber's seminal work, *The Romance of Reunion*. In that work, Silber examines the ways in which Northerners in the decade following the end of the Civil War produced sentimental "metaphors and cultural images of reconciliation" that would promote the reunion of the nation's sectional foes. In many of the narratives of this period, Silber claims, "marriage between northern men and southern women stood at the foundation of the late-nineteenth-century culture of conciliation."<sup>5</sup> Fast-forwarding to the late twentieth century, cinematic "buddy" narratives seem to represent similar attempts to deal with the longstanding divisions between Southern men and Southern masculinities, black and white. In films such as *Forrest Gump*, *The Green Mile*, or *A Time To Kill*, a white male



[Click here to watch](#) Charlie Silver and Robert Hinton talk about the history of slavery at Midway Plantation.

“Hinton and Cheshire initially seem to be representative of binaries that long characterized our understanding of Southern culture – white and black, rich and poor, myth and history.”

—Margaret McGehee

<sup>4</sup> Professor Hinton's dissertation is entitled "Cotton Culture on the Tar River: The Politics of Agricultural Labor: From Slavery to Freedom in a Cotton Culture, 1862–1902" (Yale University, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993) 7; subsequently cited parenthetically.

Southerner and a black male Southerner, who initially seem at odds with one another, develop a friendship that ultimately allows them to overcome some great obstacle and ultimately to see past their racial and cultural differences. The male leads work together and typically “save” one another in some respect. Yet, their relationship is rarely, if ever, one of real equality. Such feel-good films typically only reinforce notions of paternalism, even if initially conceptualized as contemporary gestures toward symbolic racial reconciliation, a later incarnation of the type of text examined by scholars like Silber and David Blight.<sup>6</sup> Many of these films also tend to rely on stock characterization, often infantilizing African American male characters.

Thus, reclaiming and recasting African American masculinity, intelligence, and personhood – and chipping away at historically racialized gender divisions characteristic of the lenticular mode, more broadly – seems to be a central, yet more subtle, goal of Cheshire and Hinton in their film. The filmmakers showcase the breaking down of social barriers in the moment when Dr. Hinton accompanies Godfrey Cheshire’s mother to a re-enactment of a Civil War battle. With banjo music playing in the background, we watch scenes of the blue and the gray in faux combat. The American and Rebel flags are visible. Dr. Hinton is shown looking one way and then the other, almost in a state of confusion; Mrs. Cheshire, scared by the gun or cannon fire, covers her ears. In the following moment, the two stand next to each other against the backdrop of the re-enactment, scenes of which intersperse their conversation:

*Dr. Hinton:* What does the Civil War mean to you? When you think about the real Civil War, what does it mean to you?

*Mrs. Cheshire:* Well, it means a lot to me. It was a terrible, terrible war. You know, they talked all about nothing but slavery. And slavery was not the whole thing. It was the idea of states’ rights and the Union trying to put their rules and regulations on the Southern states.

*Dr. Hinton:* When you talk about states’ rights, states’ rights to do what?

*Mrs. Cheshire:* To govern themselves and take care of their own problems. But I do think the Southerners had a lot of quarrels with the Union.

*Dr. Hinton:* You just think there’s too much emphasis on slavery as a cause?

*Mrs. Cheshire:* Yeah. Sure do. Uh huh. (*Moving Midway*)



[Click here to watch](#) Robert Hinton and Elizabeth “Sis” Cheshire discuss their opposing views about the Civil War as they watch a re-enactment.

<sup>6</sup> David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001).

“Some family members remain locked in that way of seeing and talking about the South, but later generations, like the house itself, are moving on.”

—Margaret McGehee

Here, Mrs. Cheshire very matter-of-factly states her case even as it is unclear whom she means by the “they” that she references (perhaps the talking-head historians that appear elsewhere in the film?). Dr. Hinton doesn’t push – perhaps out of politeness, or perhaps that was cut from the film. But when one-on-one with Godfrey, he expresses his ideas a bit more fully. Hinton comments that it looked like the re-enactors were enjoying themselves but that he feels the event represents a “misremembering of the War, of Southern history, and why all this stuff happened” and that “the absence of black people” is evidence of that misremembering. In response, Godfrey Cheshire brings up the states’ rights issue again; Hinton subtly cuts his eyes at him and smiles; Godfrey nervously responds, “Don’t look at me like that” (*Moving Midway*).

But here they are, looking at each other, part of the same frame, part of the same Southern history. And it’s those visual and verbal juxtapositions that help to work toward undoing the lenticular visions of Southern experience that came to characterize earlier works of literature and film. Some family members remain locked in that way of seeing and talking about the South, but later generations, like the house itself, are moving on. As Hinton states, “I am happy for [Confederate re-enactors] to keep fighting the War as long as they keep losing it” (*Moving Midway*).

While the use of multiple voices and the juxtaposing of white and black family members help the film move past the lenticular focus, the inclusion of two literal reunions – two family reunions – also figures into moving *Midway* beyond the irreconcilable narratives of Robert’s family’s slave past and Godfrey’s family’s slave-owning past and into moving white men and black women, white women and black men, *and* black men and white men into the same frame. While the middle portion of the film richly documents the house’s move – a fascinating process to watch given the time, detail, manpower, and no doubt the cost (though never disclosed) involved – a significant portion of the later part of the film deals with the theme of reunion. If we think back to the notion of the lenticular lens, it becomes apparent that the problem with such a device is that it prevents us from seeing the interconnectedness of two images even as it joins them structurally. Ideally then, reunions allow for at least superficial reconciling of the two sides of the family, the two representations of history and heritage.

In the first instance, Cheshire is invited to a reunion of the African American Hintons. Introduced to the group, he is shown moving from table to table, chatting and taking pictures with his cousins. This portion of the film comes across, at least to this viewer, as somewhat staged, or forced and, in the broader context, is a weaker part of the documentary. Perhaps this is because while Cheshire is chronicling his discovery of his relatives, the relatives who are “discovered” by Cheshire in his familial exploration are not all that surprised to see him; they have been aware for years that their lineage was anything but “pure blooded.” Regardless, Cheshire formally inserts himself into their space; he’s welcomed in, and he in turn incorporates the family



PHOTOGRAPH BY J.D. WHITTIRE; COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE; MOVING MIDWAY, LLC; AND FIRST RUN FEATURES

he has just learned he has into the space of his project, a film that he initially intended to be just about the move of his white relatives' house.

The viewer learns as well in this section of the documentary that Cheshire and Hinton are not the first to put their lineage onto film. Godfrey goes to visit Sylvia Wiggins, the widow of Lawrence Wiggins, a man who had come to Midway many years back with a photo of his ancestor, Ruffin Hinton (son of Charles Hinton and Selanie). Godfrey learns from Sylvia that Lawrence had himself videotaped while narrating

the family's genealogy, taking it upon himself to preserve their family's history and memory in film for later generations whom he felt no longer wanted to listen to older generations tell stories. Cheshire says that he recognizes the same motive within his own documentary project. Watching Godfrey watch Wiggins brings to mind the image of Russian nesting dolls – one wrapped within the next, though always separate in their individual integrity. For Wiggins and Cheshire, they are separated by lenses and screens and time, their reunion “just missed” due to age, geography, and more broadly, the legacy of slavery and segregation.

The reunion that concludes the film, however, is a bit richer and more meaningful. Abraham Hinton and his grandson, having traveled from their home in Harlem, arrive at the relocated Midway. Charlie greets Abraham Hinton and invites him to come into the house, to which Mr. Hinton jokingly responds, “I can go in?” In one of the stranger moments, as the van carrying the Hintons arrives at Midway, Godfrey announces to his mother and cousin Charlie, “They're here.” They seem to freeze in their tracks; their eyes get big; they go silent. The past has arrived at Midway's front stoop, and there's no turning back, reminding us of the film's epigraph, Faulkner's statement that “the past isn't dead. It isn't even past.” As Charlie and others enthusiastically welcome Mr. Hinton into the home, in and around which his ancestors once toiled, the moment is not without an awkward feel – too many people crammed in a small foyer. Mrs. Cheshire seems excessively effusive at times. A camera crew awkwardly enters the foyer to capture the meeting of Abraham Hinton and Mrs. Cheshire. Mr. Hinton doesn't seem to quite know what is going on. Everyone, including Godfrey, seems tense. At the same time, there is a flirtation of sorts between Mrs. Cheshire and Abraham Hinton – he lightly hugs her while teasing that he's “only seventy”; she refuses to state her age but then whispers it to him and to him only (though the microphone picks it up); they pat each other's arms and backs from time to time; they share a laugh over their shared knowledge of and experience with rabbit tobacco.

“The past has arrived at Midway's front stoop, and there's no turning back.”

—Margaret McGehee



[Click here to watch](#) as Godfrey Cheshire views Lawrence Wiggins's recorded narrative about the history of Midway Plantation and discusses the complexity of the resulting interracial familial ties with Sylvia Wiggins.



[Click here to watch](#) scenes from Abraham Hinton's visit to Midway Plantation.

The physical exchanges between the two familial elders are striking in large part because they mark the home's movement into the twenty-first century. Such overt moments of affection, or at the very least understanding, are representative, to some extent, of a breaking down of the long-standing taboo regarding social interaction between Southern white women and African American men.

Perhaps that moment could represent an epilogue to the reunion romances of the late nineteenth century. As Silber points out in *The Romance of Reunion*, gender was always central to Northerners' postbellum narratives about the South. She argues that "Yankees sought to re-create the Victorian ideal through the reconciliation process" and "the union of North and South [via marriage] restored the sense of domestic harmony the northern society no longer possessed" (9–10). Can we consider the final reunion presented in *Moving Midway* as an extension of this notion? The cameras give significant attention to the metaphorical uniting of the two familial heads – a (transplanted) Northern black man and a Southern white woman. Does their "union" bring peace, at least superficially, to the fraught and violent narrative of Southern history as embodied by these two figures?

To take such gendered and racialized moments a step further, it is interesting to note the ways in which the spaces within the film are regularly gendered by the relatives narrating Midway's story and transition. The house is repeatedly categorized in feminine terms as a "she." Christening her like a ship upon her "sail" to the new property, Charlie, with Dr. Hinton and his wife nearby, refers to Midway as "a grand ol' lady and she loves to have parties and if we didn't have something to drink, she wouldn't be appreciatin' it. So we're gonna celebrate her move and launch her out to a new site" (*Moving Midway*). He proceeds to break a bottle of champagne on the truck carrying her forth and Robert follows suit.

Referring to domestic space or ships in feminine terms is nothing new, but let us think for a moment about the symbolism here in terms of Old South mythology regarding Southern white womanhood. This home, allegedly inhabited by the spirit of Miss Mary, the family matriarch, has been lifted from its foundation – its pedestal – and



PHOTOGRAPH BY J.D. WHITMIRE;  
COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE;  
MOVING MIDWAY, LLC: AND FIRST RUN FEATURES

ABOVE Elizabeth "Sis" Cheshire, Charlie Silver, and Abraham Hinton at the re-opening of Midway Plantation

ABOVE CENTER Mary Boddie Carr Hinton, the great-great-grandmother of Godfrey Cheshire, photographed circa 1900 in front of Midway Plantation

ABOVE RIGHT The great-great-aunt of Godfrey Cheshire, family matriarch and storyteller Miss Mary Hilliard Hinton





COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE, MOVING MIDWAY, LLC

“I cannot make sense out of myself without understanding this house and being involved with this house.”

—Robert Hinton



COURTESY OF GODFREY CHESHIRE, MOVING MIDWAY, LLC; AND FIRST RUN FEATURES

while it will be restored to a virtually identical homeplace within a short span of time, its purity cannot remain intact. And maybe this is taking the argument a bit too far, but (Miss) Midway has been, as of the first party, and will be “entered” by representatives of the Hinton line, a reversal of the more typical sexual politics between male master and female slave that led to the Hinton line in the first place. Up until then, the house has remained pure in its white femininity, representative of the Silver/Cheshire heritage, while the grounds on which Midway originally sits, as shown to Dr. Hinton earlier in the film, are a racialized and masculinized space that is essentially thrown away – sold to the highest bidder (Target?) – in the name of unsullied “virgin land” nearby that will bring the peace and calm (and lack of traffic) the Silvers so desperately seek. In this sense, the lenticular postcard of Miss Mary on one side and Mingo on the other remains intact, though perhaps the exchanges between Mrs. Cheshire and Mr. Hinton remind us that Mingo and Mary were always intimately connected in a figurative sense. As Dr. Hinton tells Godfrey and Charlie in the documentary’s conclusion, “I cannot make sense out of myself without understanding this house and being involved with this house” (*Moving Midway*).

Given the lasting impact of slavery and segregation on Southern communities, overcoming the lenticular mode within texts about those communities – that is, bringing two distinctive images, and practically speaking, two *cultures*, into one frame and revealing their interconnectedness – is a difficult task. Breaking apart racial binaries that for centuries have shaped – and in turn have been reinforced by – the spaces, landscapes, economies, gender constructions, and relationships that constitute the South is a project beyond the scope of one film. At the same time, *Moving Midway* helps to move us away from the comfortable and easy covert lenticular mode of representation characteristic of late-twentieth-century texts, in effect offering an optimistic possibility of racial healing and reconciliation. ■



[Click here to watch](#) the transformation of Midway Plantation from 1900 to the current location post-renovation in 2006, as shown in the closing scene of *Moving Midway*.

KAREN BALTIMORE designed this essay and the poetry in this issue. A student of NCLR Art Director Dana Gay, she was named “Outstanding Art Student” at Meredith College in spring 2014 and graduated from Meredith’s graphic design program in fall 2014. More of her work can be found on her [website](#).

## TWO EPISTOLARY OFFERINGS FROM THE NORTH CAROLINA DIVISION OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

a review by  
*Lorraine Hale Robinson*

**John R. Barden, ed. *Letters to the Home Circle: The North Carolina Service of Pvt. Henry A. Clapp (Company F, Forty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, 1862–1863)*. Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1998.**

**Judkin Browning and Michael Thomas Smith, eds. *Letters from a North Carolina Unionist: John A. Hedrick to Benjamin S. Hedrick, 1862–1865*. Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2001.**

LORRAINE HALE ROBINSON wrote, from 1998 to 2007, 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 enthusiastically and wisely when called upon for advice.

Two important collections of North Carolina Civil War letters published by the North Carolina Division of Archives and History are now available from the publisher as a complementary set. *Letters to the Home Circle: The North Carolina Service of Pvt. Henry A. Clapp (Company F, Forty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, 1862–1863)* first appeared in 1998; the now-companion volume, *Letters from a North Carolina Unionist: John A. Hedrick to Benjamin S. Hedrick, 1862–1865*, was originally published in 2001. Together, the volumes present both intimate and publically revealing pictures of Union-occupied Eastern North Carolina (especially New Bern and Beaufort) during the Civil War.

In the time before the twenty-first century tsunami of communications media, the letter was "it." Letters certainly conveyed information, but they also brought to some distant locale a tangible object – unfolded, held in the hands, read and reread, refolded, and then unfolded and read again – that in many ways was the absent letter writer. Letter writers choose what to write (or not to write – to conceal as well as reveal). Reading letters a century and a half after their creation requires a careful decoding of the psychological filters that writers often adopt – a careful attention to the perspectives and prejudices of the writer.

*Letters to the Home Circle* is a remarkable set of documents. The originals of the letters are, apparently no longer extant, but what remains is a mother's careful handwritten transcriptions. The dedicatory note reads:

To  
Henry;  
as a  
permanent testimonial  
to the value  
of these autographic materials  
of a true devotion  
to our household  
and our  
perplexed and sorrowing  
country  
This Transcript,  
a labor of reciprocal love  
is  
most affectionately inscribed  
by  
His Mother  
Dorchester,  
June 10, 1863.

Already, the reader is aware of a deep and abiding affection that characterizes the writer's (and transcriber's) family – Private Henry Austin Clapp's "home circle." Clearly, the family (as modeled by transcriber Mary Ann Bragg Clapp) is both highly literate and dedicated to the nation. Immediately following the above dedication is his mother's "prefatory." This contains a brief biographical sketch of Henry Clapp, including his many academic accomplishments and the circumstances of his nine-month term of enlistment in the 44<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Massachusetts. The transcriber states that "she has not assumed the liberty of omitting any portion of the series . . . and affording what may be held as a *literal* portrait of the young, patriotic and christian [sic] soldier" (5; italics in book). She goes on to state that in neither the original letters nor in the transcriptions is there any intent to instruct or entertain anyone beyond the family, who were the recipients of the



COURTESY OF TRYON PALACE

letters. Mary Ann Bragg Clapp's affirmation of the private nature of the letters and her transcribed testimonial are also reflected in Private Henry Clapp's tone, writing style, and purposes: the letters are personal, slightly pedagogic (the value of education pervades the entire epistolary oeuvre), and entertaining. The recipients of the letters were family members and close family friends, and Clapp writes accurately, but from the stance of an affectionate friend or loving family member not wanting to worry the home circle unduly. For example, in a letter dated January 25, 1863, Clapp writes, "We are all doing famously and more than half of our time is up – four months only and then New England ho!" (108).

The second volume in this now-companion set, *Letters from a North Carolina Unionist*, is an equally remarkable – but quite different – set of epistolary documents. The writer, John A. Hedrick, served as the US collector of

revenue at the port of Beaufort, and the principle recipient of the missives in this collection was his brother, Benjamin S. Hedrick, an anti-slavery Republican who went on to live and work for the Federal government in Washington, DC. Originally from Davidson County, both brothers (somewhat unexpectedly for people from interior North Carolina counties) were strong Unionists – older brother Benjamin intensely anti-slavery, John somewhat more moderate, sharing with Eastern North Carolinians a level of racism typical of the period which may have helped in John's maintaining friendly relations with white inhabitants of the coastal region. In a letter dated October 21, 1862, John Hedrick both reports his weight and comments on the local response to the Emancipation Proclamation: "There are many here who seem willing that the negroes should be freed, provided they be removed from the country" (47). John Hedrick's political bent was particularly

suited to the area of Eastern North Carolina where he would work and write: the coastal region where he was based, was less allied with the Confederate cause in general and less devoted to the preservation of slavery than were many other areas of the state. From his vantage point in Beaufort, the well-educated John Hedrick provides a panoramic view of life, commenting on personal concerns; politics (local, regional, and national); society, especially matters racial; the military; and public health, especially the 1864 yellow fever epidemic. For example, in his letter dated January 1, 1863, Hedrick reports in detail on local elections. A somewhat vexing issue in that contest was the controversy that arose as to the official residency of the winning candidate:

Holding an office at Washington does not bar a man of his right to vote at his former home but as Mr. [Jennings] Pigott lived in Washington part of the time without being in office, I do not

know whether he would be excluded.

. . . I say that Mr. Pigott is an inhabitant of this State now and, that with being 25 years old, and seven years a citizen of the United States, are the only Constitutional qualifications. (73)

Another *obligato* runs through the letters: John entreating his Washington-based brother to do something about John's compensation as revenue collector, citing delays in remuneration or describing in detail the long list of tasks assumed also to be the domain of someone holding that post. With a tinge of mild irony, on October 19, 1863, John Hedrick writes, "I recieved [sic] yesterday your letter of the 12th. containing the consoling expression that 'a man seldom gets his money when he earns it.' . . . [But] I have had so much business to attend to lately that I have had no time to write you any letters" (162). Compensation – especially in light of the many and varied duties – remains in the forefront of John's mind and of John's communications with his brother.

Distinguishing both letter collections is exceptionally fine research by the volumes' editors.

John R. Barden provides material that introduces letter-writer Henry Clapp and the general culture south of Boston, MA, in which Clapp grew up. Clapp, himself a descendent of early Massachusetts Bay colonists, came from a family that had generations of public servants. His father, however, had left the Congregational denomination for the Episcopal church, eventually serving as senior warden of the Dorchester, MA, Episcopal parish for over three decades. Tax records show that, socioeconomically, the Clapp family lived a very comfortable life. Other historical documents reveal that a dozen Clapp family members served in the military during the Revolution. Barden provides details about Henry Clapp's time at Harvard College and establishes the foundation for Clapp's own "traditional" response to the Civil War's call to arms. Barden then moves Clapp to Eastern North Carolina, describing the occupation of New Bern, the town where Clapp would be based.

Barden's editorial method is careful and transparent: he explains in the introduction how his occasional insertions of missing letters or punctuation and "conjectural readings" are identified (xxx). Notes for each letter conveniently appear immediately following the letter. The volume also contains a topically arranged bibliography and a thorough index. The source for Barden's edition is in the collection of Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens, the North Carolina State Historic Site in New Bern. Complementing Henry Clapp's text are illustrations from the sketchbook of Fred W.

Smith Jr. of Company C of the 44<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment (also in the collection of Tryon Palace).

Judkin Browning and Michael Thomas Smith, editors of the John S. Hedrick letters, provide introductory material that sheds light on Hedrick's background, most especially as the Hedrick family held varied views on the institution of slavery. Benjamin and John Hedrick's mother (the first wife of their father) held strong anti-slavery views, and her home education of son Benjamin clearly was a factor in Benjamin's joining the Republican party. But Benjamin and John's mother died in 1842, when John was not yet five years old, so her influence on John is considerably less than it was on his older sibling. Additionally, John also would be affected by the public fallout over his brother's strong anti-slavery position, resulting in Benjamin's dismissal from a faculty position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. John's plans to further his education in Chapel Hill, therefore, shifted, and he first entered Davidson College and then graduated in 1861 from New York's Cooper Institute. It was Benjamin's position in Washington, DC, that would lead, eventually, to John's appointment as revenue collector in Beaufort.

Editors Browning and Smith also provide the reader with a clear explanation of their method – retaining spelling and punctuation "eccentricities," inserting brackets around material originally cancelled by the writer, and italicizing and bracketing editorial insertions (xxvii). As in the other volume, notes are conveniently



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

located immediately following the letter to which they apply, and a selected bibliography (by type – manuscript, public documents, etc.) and a detailed index round out the volume. Originals of Hedrick’s copious correspondence are held in the Southern Historical Collection of UNC Chapel Hill and in the Hedrick Papers of Duke University Special Collections.

Much of Henry Clapp’s military service in New Bern revolved around his “appointment as census taker in New Bern’s African American community,” and this task provided Clapp with regular and quite cordial contacts with a population whose recorded history is either sketchy, or charged with overwhelming racial prejudices, or non-existent altogether: Clapp’s accounts provide an almost unique window into “the Civil War experiences of this half of New Bern’s population” (xiv). Clapp reports:

The census business goes on well enough[.] We have ‘taken’ all the town including its immediate out-skirts (out squirts Knapp [a fellow soldier] calls them) and have only three negro camps left – said three containing, by the best estimate, about twenty-five hundred souls – some of which, I guess, by the way are as white as various of their Carcassian brethren’s [sic], though the bodies may not correspond in hue. (158)

The writer’s style is erudite, filled with literary and other allusions, and, by turns, sprightly (in lighter moments) and reflectively thoughtful when examining weightier issues such as “the state of the country” (124). Clapp’s own high value of education is clear as he encourages the female recipients of one of his letters to

COURTESY OF ARCHIVE.ORG



“keep up the rhetoric class. I was thinking the other day that after we have finished “Comus” [by John Milton] we would read Macbeth together next year” (42). The letters also provide evidence of a continuous stream of packages (from North to South and vice versa) – often filled with items requested by Clapp: pepper or an Episcopal prayer book or a “flask filled with the best of brandey [sic]” (60) or his own small gifts to recipients back home.

Like Clapp, John Hedrick came into contact with different kinds of people. Hedrick also had occasion to make visits from Beaufort to New Bern, so there are points of comparison in both Clapp’s and Hedrick’s narratives. Of particular interest are Hedrick’s extensive accounts of the “volatile political background” of Eastern North Carolina and of Hedrick’s “obsessive antipathy” (xviii) for Maine native Charles Henry Foster who was a Murfreesboro journalist at the time. Additionally, Hedrick’s *Letters from a North Carolina Unionist* provides accounts of

“buffaloes” (local men who served in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> North Carolina Union Regiments), information that exists almost nowhere else in contemporary sources.

These letters – written and received – transmit powerful, close observations of coastal North Carolina during the Civil War; so, in a way, Henry Clapp and John Hedrick are nineteenth-century members of the *res publica literaria*. Obscure in origin, this term was widely used to depict the long-distance intellectual communities that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But Clapp (in his forty-four letters) and Hedrick (in his more than two hundred letters) create their own kind of vigorous mid-nineteenth-century epistolary polity.

With these well-designed and well-edited volumes, readers become, themselves, arm-chair travelers to a rich nineteenth-century republic of letters, a polity intimately and publically revealed by Henry A. Clapp and John S. Hedrick. Both volumes are recommended. ■

## FINALIST, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE

BY MARCUS GREGORY JOHNSTON

*desertion*

Yes, if you must know, I am  
the fulsome crapshoot & prism  
of our day.

I am the ageless, nameless wonder –  
the desperately cool, young, frank, & defiantly  
hot.

I am the coup de grâce don't you know – the Mao Zedong reincarnate.

I am the mindless, merciless cunt who stole your dignity, manners, & charm.

Many eons ago I emerged & billowed so gracelessly from the hot-stuffed but artificially beginning yo-yo  
(or small potato) phases & far-out places of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana.

I enjoyed me some carousing too in those long-gone & never-to-be-found debaucheries of yore,

not to mention some empty

cabbages,  
canisters,  
saliva,

& cataclysmic clunkers (& high-caloric cabuggabooms)

of what I liked to call  
(in my more memorable moments & undergarment)

*Lake Titicaca, motherfuckers!*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> i.e., *effeuiller la marguerite*

Listen to **MARCUS GREGORY JOHNSTON** read this poem at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference. The poet received a BA in English from the University of Georgia in 1999 and an MFA in creative writing from UNC Wilmington in 2003. He now lives in Rockville, MD, with his daughter. His poem "reconnaissance" was runner-up in the 2011 Pocatigo Poetry Contest sponsored by the journal *Yemassee*. He also received one of two honorable mentions in the 2012 Writers at Work annual poetry contest. He has completed one book-length manuscript of poems and is working on a second one.

all the while deftly shoveling the impossible  
 contradictions, contraband, & disheveled contraindications  
 into the falsely glowing embers of pit,

feeling,  
 however,

a regularly measured & growing disdain

(for the sake of progress & heaping forevermound of outrageously proportioned *ditz*)

disguised ever so cleverly as

(& with far more vain than)

a saffron heart (if you please),  
 a whiff & a will-o'-the-wisp of something more than, O,

I don't know,

anything more than  
 this.

\*  
 v/r,

shine



*Red, Black and Blue* (mixed media: acrylic, graphite, charcoal, masking tape on canvas, 40x30) by George Scott

Raleigh resident **GEORGE SCOTT** grew up in Monroe, NJ. He graduated with honors from NC 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 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. His art has been exhibited in several shows in Raleigh, NC, including a solo exhibition at Lee Hansley Gallery. The artist and his wife, Sara Birkemeier, own and operate 8 Dot Graphics in Raleigh. See more of his work accompanying 2012 and 2013 Doris Betts Fiction Prize finalist stories in *NCLR Online 2013* and *NCLR Online 2014*, and on his [website](#).

## “COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES”

a review by Amanda M. Capelli

**Diane Chamberlain. *Necessary Lies: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013.**

AMANDA M. CAPELLI is currently a Doctoral Fellow of English Literature at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She has published and presented essays on modern American literature with a special focus on women authors of the South, including her current project on Elizabeth Madox Roberts.

A New Jersey native, DIANE CHAMBERLAIN now lives in Raleigh, NC. She is the author of twenty-four novels, several of which are set in North Carolina, including her most recent book, *The Silent Sister* (St. Martin's Press, 2014). The author has a master's degree in clinical social work from San Diego University, and before her writing career, she worked as a hospital social worker and had a private practice as a psychotherapist.

Diane Chamberlain's powerful new novel, *Necessary Lies*, diverges from her previous work to focus on one of this nation's most shameful periods of history. The Eugenics Sterilization Program, with its forced neutering of men and women alike, sounds like something from a science fiction novel, but it was very much a reality. From 1929 until 1975, North Carolina continued to enforce the Eugenics Sterilization Program, long after many other states had already eliminated this practice reminiscent of the eugenics experiments of Nazi Germany. During this time, North Carolina sterilized over seven thousand of its citizens who, according to the author's note, were deemed “mentally defective” or whose sterilization was considered “for the public good,” which meant unmarried women with children, African Americans, and children from poor families.

Chamberlain reports in her author's note that “North Carolina was the only state to give social workers the power to petition for the sterilization of individuals” (338). This distinction, combined with the 2011 hearing for sterilization victims and Chamberlain's own experiences as a social worker, became the underlying impetus for writing the novel. While the North Carolina House of Representatives approved a bill which budgeted 10.3 million dollars for sterilization victim compensation, the Senate has not supported the plan and the money remains in political limbo.

For Chamberlain, this novel stands as a voice for the victims

without one. She emphasizes that the narrative in *Necessary Lies* could have easily been sensationalized to represent any number of the atrocities that occurred during the program's tenure; however, the stories of Ivy and Mary Ella Hart were more the norm, and, as Chamberlain writes, “all the more horrific” (339).

Chamberlain's heavily-researched novel succeeds in bringing the real faces of the sterilization program to life. Her characters represent the spectrum of people affected by the program: from the social workers making the decisions, to the young girls sterilized without their knowledge, to the women who chose sterilization as the only option for their family's survival. The two narrators highlight the extreme disparities found within Southern society. The year is 1960, and Jane Forrester, a twenty-two year-old newlywed and recent college graduate, takes a job in Raleigh with the Department of Public Welfare despite her new husband's wish that she stay home and start their family. Robert, Jane's pediatrician husband, refuses to accept his wife's decision to work, arguing that their marriage won't survive if Jane “insist[s] on putting the needs of other people ahead of [her] husband's.” The fact that this is a job that she doesn't “need to be doing” makes her insistence on doing it that much more of an insult to a man who views himself as a sturdy provider and veritable “catch.” What more would a “normal” girl want? (270).

Meanwhile, young Ivy Hart struggles to keep what's left of her

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







family together by working out in the tobacco fields of rural North Carolina. After her father's death and the institutionalization of her mother, Ivy finds herself responsible not only for her own life, but the welfare of her older sister Mary Ella; her diabetic grandmother, Nonnie; and Mary Ella's illegitimate child, Baby William. At only fifteen years old, Ivy, who also suffers from mild epilepsy, carries the family's burdens on her young shoulders: "I watched my grandmother digging into the bowl of banana pudding and my sister holding her secrets as close as she held her baby, and I wondered how much longer we could go on this way" (13).

The focal point of the story surrounds the ethical quagmire Jane finds herself in as the Harts' new caseworker, as Ivy's pregnancy and history of seizures, combined with her extreme poverty and lack of a traditional familial structure, place her at the top of the list for sterilization. However, the novel's

real strength goes beyond this central tension and is illustrated by the rich historical details Chamberlain artfully weaves throughout the narrative. An early scene finds Jane at the doctor's office hoping to gain access to the new birth control pill. During a time when the "man of the house" was the ultimate authority on all things pertaining to his family, it is no surprise that the doctor requires her new husband's approval before writing any kind of prescription. It is small scenes like this one that serve to emphasize the larger cultural belief that women cannot and should not be in control of their own bodies, a belief that enabled the practice of forced sterilizations in the US to continue into the 1970s.

Although the cultural history adds depth to the world Chamberlain has crafted, the main narrative, at times, falls flat. Both Ivy and Jane have suffered through the loss of family members in horrific accidents. Jane's father and sister died in a car crash in which she was the only survivor, and Ivy's father was killed in an agricultural accident. While their struggle to rise above society's perception of them inevitably draws the two women closer together, the connection often comes across as contrived. For this reader, the verisimilitude of Chamberlain's story as it relates to the two protagonists is lost in the final chapters of the novel. The finale is too perfect, the loose ends too neatly tied together.

In truth, it is the supporting characters who make this novel worth reading. Lita Jordan, Ivy's African

American neighbor and fellow worker on Mr. Gardiner's tobacco plantation, is the mother of four children, each one purported to be from a different father. While the racial tensions between poor whites, poor blacks, and the upper class are in the background of this novel, the truth about Lita's family brings that conflict to the forefront and bares a much more sinister reality than just multiple fathers. Ultimately, Lita's story centers on a stereotype that this reader had hoped not to find, but it is within that stereotype that the much darker truth about our nation's history is revealed.

Diane Chamberlain ventures into the realm of historical fiction, choosing to focus on some of the more reprehensible moments in our nation's recent past. *Necessary Lies* is a portrait, on one hand, of how those in the margins of society continued to be subjugated in a socially acceptable way. However, Chamberlain's Jane Forrester represents the real men and women who fought for and continue to fight for the reparation of inequalities of the past. Jane refuses to follow the path that society has deemed appropriate for a woman of her class and race, but, as Jane's mother points out toward the end of the novel, "Sometimes coloring outside the lines can cost you . . . only you can figure out if it's worth it" (306). For Jane, saving Ivy at the risk of her own social and economic ruin is worth it. Chamberlain succeeds in showing us that while darkness is inherent to the human condition, love, hope, and perseverance are there, too. ■

2014 *Doris Betts Fiction Prize Finalist*BY TAYLOR  
BROWN

# WORLD WITHOUT

**MALACHI WAITED.** The men would come coal-faced from the mouth of the mine, dark-dusted as if coughed up, nothing unblack save eyes and teeth. The survivors of some hellish underworld, perhaps.

The horn blew. Quitting time.

Malachi watched them ascend, waiting for his brother. The handles of the overhead conveyor line bounced as the men released them, no sound from this distance. Malachi looked down at his hands. Coal-black crescents underneath his nails, over his cuticles in arcs. Coal all over like gloves you couldn't take off. He balled his hand into a fist. Pale cracks yawned at the knuckles.

When he looked up again his brother's face appeared, eyes and chin protruding the dark. His face was streaked lighter than the others, more sweat. This was only his first week back stateside, home, and already they were about to strike again. The miners. Tomorrow. Malachi had taken a half day of leave for meetings, planning. Now he stood at the gate.

Jesse came toward him, his aluminum lunchbox, dairy-barn-shaped, dangling from one hand, his thermos from another. Both hanging on the slight crook of a knuckle. Malachi worried one of them might slip. Jesse walked up and slugged an arm around him.

WITH ART BY JOHN URBAIN

TAYLOR BROWN's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in more than fifteen publications, including *The Baltimore Review*, *The New Guard*, *CutBank*, *The Coachella Review*, and *storySouth*. His story "Rider" received the 2009 Montana Prize in Fiction, and his story collection *In the Season of Blood and Gold* was published in 2014 by Press 53. He lives in Wilmington, NC.

NCLR Fiction Editor Liza Wieland remarked upon her selection of this story for honorable mention, "I admired 'World Without End' for its dark and beautiful writing about murder and vengeance in a coal-mining community. I am reminded of Flannery O'Connor's injunction that the use of violence in fiction should never be an end in itself, but should show forth the qualities in the characters which are least dispensable - in this case loyalty and a deep sense of justice."



*Night Path*, 1973 (oil painting and collage, 39.25 x29.5) by John Urbain

COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ARTIST, 2008.43.04.20

“Little brother,” he said.

Malachi could smell hot mash on his breath, like nitro, dangerous both in the mines and out. Always was anyway, for Jesse.

“You come to make sure I wouldn’t be here tomorrow? No scab?”

“I just came to pick you up.”

“Yeah right,” said Jesse, his chapped lips crackling toward a smile.

Malachi shrugged, his head down. “Car’s over there,” he said, nodding.

Their parents’ old Cutlass kicked over on the third try. Malachi gunned the motor to keep it running. Black smoke roared from the tailpipe. The road down from the mine was crooked and steep, the guardrail mangled or busted-through at old moments of wreckage, the thin metal torqued and scream-twisted into jags that could slice your finger. Men had died on this road, drunk or crazed or high. Others run off, some said.

**JOHN URBAIN** (1920–2009) was born in Brussels, Belgium. In 1922, he moved with his parents to Detroit, MI. Drafted into the US Army in 1941 as an infantry corporal, he saw action at the Battle of the Bulge, was wounded, and upon his return to the US, began his studies at Black Mountain College on the GI Bill. While there, he studied under Josef Albers and met his future wife and fellow artist, Elaine Schmidt. The couple moved to Paris and studied art at the Academie de la Grande

Malachi looked at Jesse. His brother was looking the other way, toward the mountain walling them in on that side: angular planes of blasted rock, overlaid gridlines, an exposed mapwork of inch-wide drill grooves where the dynamite had been seated to blast the mountain for a road.

“You couldn’t believe these tunnels they had,” said Jesse.

“Who?”

“The Viet Cong,” Jesse shook his head. “This whole universe underneath the ground. They had field hospitals down there, armories, underground temples. Meanwhile we bombed hell out of the jungle with the fifty-twos, doing shit-all.”

Malachi had heard about the tunnels from a local boy who’d been drafted, then come home early with a missing leg. He’d heard Jesse had been one of the ones they sent down there, underground, just a flashlight and his platoon leader’s .45. A tunnel rat. But this was the first time his brother had hinted at his tour, the details.

“So they put you down there all alone?” he asked.

Jesse didn’t say anything. He was staring out the window at the passing mountainside, naked-blown pale, and barren, like a wall of exposed bone. Finally he nodded. “Shoulder-tight down there, lot of the time,” he said. “For them little gooks to fit, you know. I was least afraid of being underground, a course.” He skimmed his bottom lip with his teeth, as if about to say something else. He didn’t.

Through the windshield before them more hills, sharp ridges of them bluing into the distance like eroded ramparts, the late-fallen daylight spilling across them in ragged tracings that quivered like something that could just dry up, be gone for all time.

**HIS BROTHER WAS  
LOOKING THE OTHER  
WAY, TOWARD THE  
MOUNTAIN WALLING  
THEM IN . . .**

Chamiere and the Academie Julien. Upon their return to the US in 1953, he became the art director for the Phillip Morris Company, where he remained until his retirement. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the North Carolina Museum of Art, and the Asheville Art Museum, as well as in numerous private collections in the US and abroad.

The silence mounted. The double-barred asphalt ahead of them was rippled and cracked, sun-bleached, clinging to the blasted stone of the hill through the sharp curves as if to keep from falling into the dark yawn of the valley, the shadows welling out of it like a tide.

Malachi rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. Maybe he hadn't washed them as well as he could have today, on purpose.

"Well we're looking to get some of what we deserve this time, from the company. It's been real bad while you were gone. I don't know if you heard." Malachi ran the back of his hand under his nose again. "Real bad. Strikebreakers, gun thugs, everything."

He examined Jesse out of the corner of his eye. He thought he saw his older brother nod slightly, his jaw slightly ajar, his eyes staring out the window the whole time, a long way off.

They reached the stop sign at the bottom of the mine road and turned toward home, the road cresting above a crumbling outlay of unplumbed and identical shotgun shacks, like the hobby-board town of a model-trainman gone all to dust, the surrounding hills crowding and dark like the hobbyist's basement junk with a dirty sheet thrown over it.

The Cutlass rattled down amid the unpaved streets, amid porch planks warped and skewed. Men sat in their rockers, gummed and chinless, coal-spittle gleaming at the corners of mouths. In the near-fallen dark Malachi made his turns by counts, this many houses and right, this many and left. No streetlamps or signs.

"You want to come for supper at Mama and Daddy's?" he asked.

Jesse shook his head no.

As they passed, Malachi looked into the yellow-lit glow of their parents' house, where he still lived. He drove on. His older brother's house was the last one on the street, on the left. Empty. Malachi pulled to a stop out front. The windows housed a darkness cold and blue. A lot of deep corners in there. Silence. Jesse patted him thanks on the knee and got out, his lunchbox and thermos in tow. He started up the stoop.

"Hey," called Malachi, leaning one arm out the window. "You - ?"

Jesse stopped and turned on the top step. "I'll be there," he said.

"Sunrise," said Malachi. "I'll pick you up."

Jesse gave him a quick two-finger salute and disappeared into the cold dark of the house, the one



**THE WINDOWS HOUSED  
A DARKNESS COLD AND  
BLUE. A LOT OF DEEP  
CORNERS IN THERE.**

his wife had left him in his absence. Left him the last time they'd struck. There'd been no money for anybody then, and a baby to feed, and Jesse gone to a tropic war.

The door clanged shut behind him. No lights came on against the dark.

More meetings that night. Naked bulbs over folding chairs and tables. Malachi at the head of one. Around him faces grim and pale, near alien to daylight. Sunken hollows underneath eyes round and wide-welled to see what was what when underground. They squirmed uncomfortably underneath the high-wattage light.

One of them spoke, hand-picked. An old lady who'd lost a husband and son to the mines. First to a case of black lung, second to a light-off of sulfur gas. She urged them to keep the picket strong, to show up day in and out, no matter the hour, the hunger, the troubles at home. She urged them not to be roused by gun thugs, strikebreakers, scabs. She told them no violence nor blood could win them better pay, health benefits, running water. She told them she'd lived through the bloody thirties and knew this was true. Lastly she sang an old mining song of lifeblood taken, husbands and children, too. A call to organize, as they were doing now. Her voice was brittle and croaking, the power dwindling in her lungs.

In the back of the room sat a line of old-timers, men dying in one way or another. They shook their heads and stared at the floor, the concrete all nicked and scarred by so many old scrapings of tables and chairs.

Come dawn the horizon appeared, the high-ridged serration of a world thrust ragged from the earth, behind it rising a boon of sky new and pink as something fresh-butchered in all that daylight beyond.

Many had shown for the strike, a throng three-deep to block the mine road. Behind the picket-line the razor-wire gate of the mine rattled open, inside it a slouching threat of men in leather jackets and knitted caps. All in black or darkest brown, all skulking, smoking with their coat pockets heaved by handguns. Word had gotten out. Malachi knew that meant strikebreakers, men hired out from surrounding counties to fill the emptied slots. Scabs. He knew that meant the negotiations would be protracted, the strike, too. And some part of him, small and shamed, was enlivened by the prospect of so many days of unencumbered daylight, no matter the cost, the hunger and wailing of children. The danger. Beyond the gate and gun thugs, the miscellany of machines and conveyers, stood the silent maw of the mine, waiting.

Beside him sat Jesse on the hood of a car. He was wearing a sleeveless denim vest, a Winston stuck burning from his mustache at an angle, an opened thermos steaming on the hood next to him. The sun broke white-burning over the crooked mountains that rimmed them and rolled across its dark-nesses in a tide of light. Jesse pushed the bridge of his mirror-lens sunglasses higher under a low-billed baseball cap, as if to hide.

When the first carload of strikebreakers appeared on the turn below them, the engine choking and sputtering as it climbed, the picketing men and women hardened and tightened of a single mind, the asphalt blocked. Behind them the hired men stirred.

It was a white Ford four-door, heavy-rolling into the turns with loaded-in men. It slowed near the picket line, stopped, then nosed forward at a creep. A muscled young man leaned his head and arm out the driver's window, a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of his shirt.

"Hey now, we got to work, too, you know."

He was blonde on his head and forearms, his skin golden like American wheat. His teeth were white.

Threats and curses greeted him from the crowd. He put his head back in, the sun gleaming off the glass so brightly you could see nothing of the interior. The car kept coming at a crawl. The picketers stood unmoved. When the bumper nudged the first naked shin, the crowd swarmed, screaming, beating in the roof, the hood, the trunk with fists and elbows. Malachi started in but checked himself, Jesse making no move from his seat on the hood.

"If all the miners in this state could just come together," Malachi said, as if watching from some wise distance, as if no mob-rush burned in his chest, no fire to jeer and pummel. Just then he saw a fist sail in through the driver's window, then fleshy arms started in through the rears as well. Out of nowhere a pipe. It white-spidered the windshield with a crack. The Ford lurched in reverse, people jumping away as it retreated down the road tail-first until the first bend.

Malachi looked back toward the mine and saw what he expected: the sky-blue pickup of the mining company's security boss, Lester Pilsner. His twin, Carl, riding shotgun on the bench seat. Pilsner parked the truck between the picketers and the front gate. Behind him the dark swagger of hired men floated closer, each of them with one hand in his coat.

Pilsner got out. He was a mean square-bellied grandfather of a man, dyspeptic. He'd jumped on Sicily and Normandy in the Second World War. His spine was canted, his mouth grim and tight, the corners down-pulled in creases toward his chin like the hinged jaw of a wooden puppet. His huge forearms

COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ARTIST, 2008.06.06.64



Untitled, 1983 (serigraph with collage, 15.5x11.5) by John Urbain

were green-bruised with tattoos, eagles and anchors, the designs muddled by torque and age. The silver butt plate of a .45 sagged from his trouser pocket.

Malachi felt his brother stiffen beside him at the sight.

“When they give that son-of-a-bitch a gun?”

Gun thugs were one thing, but old Pilsner had always relied on his fists, or at most a two-by-four, something sporting.

Malachi stood off the hood, getting ready. “I believe they just let him carry the one he always had under the seat.”

“That son-of-a-bitch,” said Jesse. He was off the hood now, too. Years back, Pilsner had broken their daddy’s jaw for mouthing off at the company president after a friend of his had been knocked silly by a swinging boom and stayed that way, his brain added to something that produced only stammers and spit.

Malachi started toward Pilsner. He’d been chosen for this: talker, soother, peacemaker. He felt Jesse surge forward beside him and stuck out his hand to bar him.

“Let me handle this, Jesse. We got to keep cool.”

His palm touched the brutal constriction of his brother’s belly, the soft innards torqued roundly and hard as a snake or something cruel. The muscles quivered and relaxed.

“All right,” said Jesse.

Malachi walked toward Pilsner. The old man leaned one hand on the hood of his truck, the other resting lightly on the butt of his pistol. Waiting. He seemed ancient and calloused as some storybook monster, a creature that only grew stronger and meaner with age.

“Lester,” said Malachi, nodding respectfully to him.

Pilsner tipped his head in return, then waited silently, a headmaster waiting for the dunce to explain himself. Malachi could smell his sour breath.

“We have issues that need to be brought to management’s attention.”

Pilsner did not move his head, neither to shake or nod. “This here is a public road, illegal to blockade.”

“We don’t want no problems, Lester.”

“Then you best vacate the premises. This here is an illegal blockade of a public road.”

The old man invested his words with no emotion beyond his natural ill-will. Nothing personal. A policeman stating facts. Malachi could feel his brother’s eyes upon his back, the crowd’s, too, their ire swelling.

“We will,” he said, “soon’s management sits down at the negotiating table.”

“You have five minutes to disperse this unlawful crowd.”

“Then alert management of our grievances.”

“All that grievance shit ain’t my concern, boy. Moving you off the road so mine operations can resume, that is.”

Malachi stepped suddenly forward into the man’s space, as if pushed.

“I beg to differ, sir. I think it damn well better be your concern.”

When the flat clap of the old man’s palm struck his ear he went down with a resounding bell in his skull, first hitting the hood, then slipping to the pavement. He rolled over, dazed, looking up into the dark bulk towering over him, casting his slack flesh in shadow against the road. He tried to see where the pistol was, was it out, but the silhouetted figure loomed shapeless before him. Then he heard boot soles sounding across the road, a single pair of them shouting their speed, and then collision, crack, the pop of knuckles on bone, the crackle of cartilage.

“You son-of-a-bitch!”

There was Jesse above him, small, the bare flesh of his arms catching the light in split-second moments of terrific seizure, all veins and tendon, then thrown again into silhouette, and the bruised swell of the older man’s strength coming to light, wresting the advantage, the two figures grappling in this mania of power and flesh, the hood of the truck thundering behind them, the sweet reek of bourbon and soured breath all around them like an aura.

COURTESY OF ASHEVILLE ART MUSEUM COLLECTION, GIFT OF LORNA BLAINE HALPER, 2007.27.05.29



*Lavender Night*, 1979 (acrylic paint and collage, 14.88x15) by John Urbain

He glimpsed his brother's hand now clamped upon Pilsner's neck, his finger bones quivering, the older man's eyes rolling white, his mouth stretched taut against his yellowed teeth.

Malachi tried to rise from his pool of shadow underneath them.

"Stop," he croaked. "Stop."

The limb-locked coupling growled and bled over him like some singular monstrosity, all tooth and nail tearing its own self apart.

"Stop —"

He held out his hand. They broke apart before his outstretched fingers with a horrible crack, like split stone, each from each thrown away so that Malachi was blinded for a moment in the power and light of the new day's sun.

Forests of blood lay glimmering on the pavement. Jesse had already been taken away, just vicious red streaks marking where he'd screamed and writhed, gone still. Many gentle hands guided Malachi away, into a waiting car full of gentle whispers. The car reversed down the road toward a turnaround spot. Through the sun-crazed glass of the windshield he watched the twin brothers grow smaller beside their truck, the unbloodied one, Carl, tapping the pistol he'd used against his leg.

Malachi wanted to be enraged, full of violence like his brother had been for him. But the rage would not come. He sat in his parents' home amid the milling overflow of grievers and comforters, amid the outlay of crockery and woman-made mouthfuls. People overflowed into the yard and street. He felt alien and unmade among them, no words gentle or vicious to gift the babble. He thought of the twins on the mountain. Nothing. He thought of his brother, undone in so much daylight. He went looking for him.

He slipped out the back and threaded his way between emptied houses, a ghosted town. Only an old man who could not leave his porch, the act too much for black-gone lungs. The old man followed the young man's passage with his eyes, his head unmoving, his mustard-colored oxygen tank standing behind him like the apparatus of an aged spaceman gone to seed. Malachi had seen once, in school, photographs of seabirds caught in a spilled slick of oil from a ruptured tanker, their wings black-crippled and unspreadable like the insides of the old man's chest. Neither he nor the old man made any nod to one another.

He pushed on the door of his brother's house, the uncoiled hinges groaning to reveal a dark swallow of curtained insides. He stepped through. It was

cold inside despite the day-high sun, and everything a deep blue: the rough-planked floors, the bare walls, the stained ceiling. The furniture had been pushed flush to one wall. He walked toward the kitchen, slanted panels of light curling over his arms, chest, face. In his wake the pale light fell again into its canted enfilade, illumining tiny cyclones of dust motes.

The handle of the refrigerator was cold. He pulled it open. An empty tub of metal grates; it hissed its cold into the room. In the final back room a single mattress lay on the floor, a snarl of unmade sheets and blankets gone stiff and cold. Malachi opened the door to the small rear stoop. There was an old right-handed pupil's desk set at an angle. In a pail below, the broken glimmer of whiskey bottles. It was getting dark. He slid into the small desk and slipped his hand into the cubbyhole underneath. Up came a pint bottle. He broke the seal and sipped.

The sun had fallen behind the mountains. Up here they had less daylight than the flatlands, rimmed in as they were by mountain rock on all sides. Just here or there the twinkle of a kerosene lamp on a hillside, maybe the campfire of a hunter or outlaw or some exile of the world below. Malachi propped his right arm on the narrow curve of the desktop, the bottle dangling over the end. Lucky he was right-handed. Jesse had not been.

He sat drinking off the bottle until the stars began to scrawl like comets across the night sky, long filaments of space dust on star-crossed trajectories, light-givers like his own sun in cold dark places of infinite distance. He loved them for that. Forever he had feared the cold and dark, for he knew there were cavities in the earth where no light had ever shined, or should. Worlds entombed he was meant to puncture and plunder. Places where Jesse in his darkness had been at home. Places where he, too, would have to go.

The stars burned up there while he finished off the bottle, and then he stood, a lone man under his own vast and unmapped candelabra of starlight. All those infinities; he stared up at them as though

**T T**  
**HE THOUGHT OF HIS  
 BROTHER, UNDONE  
 IN SO MUCH DAYLIGHT.  
 HE WENT LOOKING  
 FOR HIM.**

from the bottom of a well, the valley walls barreling his vision on all sides. One way out. He walked back inside and searched in the closet, under the bed.

Another meeting in the church basement that night. Malachi slipped in, standing at the back unseen. Somebody's cousin had called from the jailhouse. Carl was up there shooting the bull with the sheriff, his big feet eased up on a sitting chair. No handcuffs.

Fury wet the mouths of many. Teeth showed. But the old singing woman shuffled up to the podium and spoke of peace. And then others said words like *leverage, public opinion, hearts and minds*. Words Malachi had once used, even introduced to them.

He lowered his head and slipped out, past the line of oldest-timers. They were the only ones who saw him, the cold mask of his face. Their brittle bodies straightened as he passed, watching.

Carl Pilsner was urinating off the side of his porch that night when his chest exploded before his eyes, a fountain of meat and blood that glittered the woods beyond his home. Malachi watched from the other side of the river, the fluted barrel of his brother's deer rifle emitting a silent blue plume like a cigarette.

Dawn was yet an hour distant, but already far-off thunder caromed through the valleys. Malachi was counting on this: the rain to wash evidence from the scene. He crossed the river in his small draft boat, beached it on the gravel before the man's house, approached the body. He rolled him over. There was light yet in the old man's eyes, dwindled but there, and a rasp in his chest. The bullet had just missed his heart.

Malachi threaded a rope over the man's chest and under his arms, then knotted the two ends into a hand-loop to drag him with. The old man hardly fought, his limbs flapping in faint mimes of rebellion. Malachi rolled him into the front of the boat and pushed off.

They floated the river, the dark pull of the water here or there evinced in white rips of tide. A half mile down, Malachi edged them toward a high monument of rock off which he and his brother and other boys had once dived to prove their courage. He nosed the boat into shore at a narrow landing that shone palely from a long history of scarring keels. He thought the old man would be dead by now but found his eyes open, his breaths shallow and sharp. He hauled him out of the boat and fought his bulk across the trail of rocks and roots toward the boarded-off mouth of an ancient mine.

The slanted boards peeled away easily, as they always had, their nails unseated by trouble-seeking boys. Inside Malachi switched on his headlamp. The mine walls were close. He looked ahead, the squared support beams illuminated in a warping twist into darkness. He began to drag. His lungs seared; his face was hot. He could not hear the dying breath of the old man over the pounding of blood in his skull. A hundred yards down was the offshoot he remembered. He took it. Before long they were there.

He collapsed at the edge of the mineshaft, a black well of darkness into which they'd thrown boyhood miscellanies, coins and marbles, stones and glass bottles, only to hear the earth swallow them without even a belch.

He looked down at the old man with his headlamp. There was the dimmest knowledge in the old man's eyes, the subtlest harmony in his breath, his throat wet, his chest gaped and whistling. Malachi sought for some words, some benediction for brothers sundered, lost, but nothing came, a cold hollow where his words had been.

He rolled the older man to the edge of the pit, then over, into darkness. Loose coins scattered from the old man's pockets, twinkling, heralding his fall into the abyss. They winked out, like stars gone. Malachi shut off his headlamp and put his ear to the rim. He was listening for conclusion, an end to the man's fall, but heard nothing, no sound in that darkness save the silence of a world without end.

He fled.

He ascended the tunnels in darkness, no lamp-light, fleeing toward dawn, daylight, a glut of sun. But when he breached the surface there was only the gaping cavern of night undawned. He fell to his knees on the gravel beach, his face contorted, his hands clawing at his chest, as if to unbury his heart to the river snaking blackly through the valley. But his heart just beat, beat, beat – dumb with mercy. After a time he rose slowly to his feet and slipped his boat into the water, sliding downriver, east, out of the valley, a silent figure silhouetted darkly against the dawning world. ■

**ASCENDED**  
**HE ASCENDED THE TUNNELS**  
**IN DARKNESS, NO LAMPLIGHT,**  
**FLEEING TOWARD DAWN,**  
**DAYLIGHT, A GLUT OF SUN.**



## ANOTHER ADDITION TO WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA'S LITERATURE OF PLACE

*a review by Brent Martin*

**Jeremy B. Jones. *Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland*. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2014.**

**BRENT MARTIN** lives in the Cowee community of Western North Carolina and is the author of three chapbooks of place-based poetry, *Poems from Snow Hill Road* (New Native Press, 2007), *A Shout in the Woods* (Flutter Press, 2010), and *Staring the Red Earth Down* (Red Bird Press, 2014). He is also a co-author of *Every Breath Sings Mountains* (Voices from the American Land, 2011). His poetry and essays have been published in such venues as the *Wildbranch: An Anthology of Environmental and Place-Based Writing*, *Kudzu Literary Quarterly*, *Pisgah Review*, *New Southerner*, *The Fourth River*, and elsewhere. Read his essay "Hunting for Camellias at Horseshoe Bend" in *NCLR 2011*. He currently serves as the Southern Appalachian Regional Director for The Wilderness Society.

**JEREMY B. JONES** earned his MFA in nonfiction writing from the University of Iowa and now teaches at Western Carolina University. His essays have appeared in numerous literary magazines and have twice been named "Notable" in *Best American Essays*.

COURTESY OF JEREMY B. JONES AND JOHN F. BLAIR PUBLISHER



The mountainous landscape of Western North Carolina is rich with music, art, and literature, along with a history of conflict and change. It is particularly rich with literature of place, and Jeremy B. Jones's debut book, his memoir *Bearwallow*, makes a significant contribution. Jones takes the reader on a journey to his native Bearwallow Mountain, near the Henderson County town of Fletcher, and draws for the reader a literary map both internal and external, that reveals the complexities of being native to a place and the threats and changes this place faces today. *Bearwallow* begins with the author's family moving into the region in the early nineteenth century, displacing the native Cherokees who had made Bearwallow home for centuries, and ending with the current arrival of developers marketing their gated and exclusive mountaintop developments as "communities." Adding to the growing complexity of the place is the new Hispanic working class who provide both developers and the area's remaining farmers with cheap labor.

In between are vivid portraits and stories of conflicting family loyalties during the Civil War, tales of nineteenth- and twentieth-century local mountain class dynamics, family feuds, and searches for lost graves and POW camps, all accompanied by introspection and the questioning of Jones's own identity and rediscovery of his past. The book is also part lamentation. "I'm trying to return to a world that no longer exists" (165), Jones tells us as he goes further into the story of attempting to reconnect with home and history. The Appalachia of yore is but a remnant, and he must place himself within what the historian Marcus Lee Hansen called the "principle of the third generation interest" (qtd. in Jones 163).<sup>\*</sup> Accordingly, modernization, affluence, and outside influences have led the generation of Jones's mountain parents to new customs and ideas. The author identifies himself as the third generation of Hansen's theory, "curious, backward looking" (163), he says; he sees the remnants of Appalachia but is unable to hold on to them.

Jones returns to his native Bearwallow Mountain following

ABOVE **Mark Gilliam, Jeremy Jones's great-grandfather (fifth man standing from left) in front of one of the first combines in Western North Carolina, 1914**

<sup>\*</sup> See Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1938).

graduate school and a teaching stint in Honduras to discover that the mountain faces the threat of development. Accompanying this threat (to so many rural Western North Carolina counties) is the loss of tradition and consciousness of place. As Jones moves the reader through these various internal and external struggles, he subtly juxtaposes these recent changes with the more violent removal and cultural upheaval of the Cherokees, and the change his own Scotch-Irish family inflicted upon the land and culture with their arrival.

While visiting old family haunts and reacquainting himself with the mountain's history and people, Jones works in a local elementary school as an ESL teacher for both American-born and newly-arrived Hispanic students. Adding a significant dimension to the story of modern Bearwallow, Jones examines the lives of this new generation of immigrant students and their parents, people who have also lost connection to their homeland and place, adrift in a landscape where the language and culture are unfamiliar. The diminishment of "local" culture that is lamented in *Bearwallow* is

the result of outside influences and forces, including an influx of immigrants both legal and illegal (developers, retirees, migrant workers), resulting in a much less violent form of disposition than Jones's ancestors forced upon the native Cherokees, but a disposition nonetheless. This tale of cultural displacement is all the more poignant juxtaposed with the author's time teaching in Honduras, himself a visitor in a strange land and unfamiliar culture, wrestling with his own attempts to communicate effectively, influence change, and make connections to tradition and a foreign place. Jones adds another interesting dimension to his struggle by comparing himself to the missionaries and teachers who arrived in Appalachia a hundred years ago to save what they considered a backwards people.

"The only thing that is constant is change," Heraclitus said, and there is considerable irony in the history of a place where change was so brutally inflicted upon

the native Cherokees, leading to their removal and destruction of identity, and where, two hundred years later, change, removal, and destruction of identity is being inflicted upon Jones's own Appalachian heritage (sans violence and destruction, although mountaintop developments could arguably be described as a form of carnage). One can only wonder how Hansen's theory will be applied to the third generation of Western North Carolina Hispanics, or the affluent descendants of those inhabiting the newly gated communities of wealth and isolation. Yet Appalachian identity will likely continue in some form for the foreseeable future, albeit a more commoditized and marketable version. There is still a strong sense of place in the region even if it now exists largely in the form of crafts, music, literature, and the mass production of legal moonshine. *Bearwallow* will serve as a reminder, though, of the many dimensions of history that lie beneath this facsimile version and make us all the more aware of the dynamics that are serving it up. ■

COURTESY OF JEREMY B. JONES AND JOHN F. BLAIR PUBLISHER



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK FILE, ROMANTICASHVILLE.COM



ABOVE Fourth-grade students dancing during Mexican Independence Day festivities at Edneyville Elementary School in Hendersonville, NC, 16 Sept. 2005

LEFT View from on top of Bearwallow Mountain (See more of Mark File's photographs of Bearwallow [here](#).)

## PITFALLS OF PARENTING

*a review by Annie Frazier*

**Drew Perry.** *Kids These Days: A Novel.* Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2014.

**ANNIE FRAZIER** grew up in Raleigh, NC, on her family's small horse farm and now lives in Florida where she attended New College of Florida in Sarasota to study ancient Greek language and literature. Her first published story, "Sakura" (in *NCLR* 2014), was a finalist in the 2013 Doris Betts Fiction prize competition. *NCLR* editors included it among six Pushcart Prize nominations submitted in 2014. [Listen](#) to the author read from and talk about this story at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference.

**DREW PERRY** lives with his small family in Greensboro, NC, and teaches at Elon University. His debut novel, *This Is Just Exactly Like You* (Viking, 2010) was selected as a finalist for the Flaherty-Dunnann prize from the Center for Fiction and listed by *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as a "Best of the Year" pick. *Kids These Days* has already received praise as an Amazon "Best of the Month" pick as well as being placed on *Kirkus Reviews'* "Winter's Best Bets" and "Books So Funny You're Guaranteed to Laugh" lists. Perry has also been published in *Black Warrior Review*, *Atlanta, Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Huffington Post*.

*Kids These Days* is Drew Perry's hilarious and poignant second novel. The story is told from the point of view of Walter, an intensely obsessive, pitifully naive, and very much adrift man whose dryly comic and idiosyncratic view of the world makes him a surprisingly charming narrator.

We meet Walter as the recession is in full swing, his wife Alice is pregnant, and he has just lost his job selling loans at a bank in Charlotte. Apprehension about becoming a parent paralyzes him, much to Alice's understandable chagrin. In the face of such calamity, the couple moves down to Alice's deceased great-aunt's beachfront condo in Florida. Alice's sister Carolyn and her family live nearby, and Carolyn's husband Mid offers Walter a job.

Things have the potential to fall nicely into place, until Walter realizes Mid is at least a hint shady in his many business undertakings. Mid owns a locksmith business, a sunglass shop, two parking lot ice machines, several questionable and risky real estate ventures, and a pizza joint with a less-than-legal secret menu. He's shifty about bookkeeping and shiftier about what exactly Walter's job entails.

As the novel unfolds, the depth of Mid's fraudulence reveals itself to Walter and begins to catch up with Mid, often in amusing ways. A wise man would avoid Mid's

business. Yet Walter stays on, partly because Mid is family and partly because the job promises an immediate paycheck in a stagnant economy, but mostly because Walter tends to do the opposite of what he probably should.

Walter's passivity is apparent in the very first lines of the book: "I'd agreed to it – the baby – because I'd decided that was what was owed. That if your wife, who you loved beyond measure, wanted a child, you were supposed to think it was a fine and perfect plan" (1). Walter has agreed to something he finds terrifying. Problematically, the more Walter's fear consumes him, the more unwilling he seems to find a way past it. Walter tells Alice he's trying to change, then admits to himself, "I wasn't sure if I actually was" (135). He spends a good deal of time wondering how he ought to feel, based on how he sees most people react to impending parenthood, and concludes that "all those people knew exactly how to do this, did not flinch in the onrushing face of certain peril. They'd simply come wired with something I hadn't" (39).

Walter's fears of fatherhood are compounded watching his four nieces (a toddler, twelve-year-old twins, and a harmlessly rebellious fifteen-year-old) spin out of control each in her own way – most notably, "the traveling circus of Delton being fifteen" (147). Walter's dangerous position

as right-hand man to a bumbling swindler, who eventually confesses “the whole wrecked catalog of his life” (99), doesn’t help his confidence in becoming a competent adult, either. To Walter, it’s all a sobering peek into the potential future: “The whole of it a flip book, a shoebox diorama” (174).

Walter does sometimes break the stream of bullheaded dread with moments that display a lot of heart and sincerity. Occasionally Walter takes a breath and becomes almost fatherly, as in one lovely moment when he anticipates naming the baby: “Try to imagine it on a report card, on the back of a jersey, on a driver’s license. . . . See her writing it inside the covers of her books, at the top corners of her papers, signing it to a marriage certificate, a mortgage, a contract. Try to hear it coming out of her cousins’ mouths. Her uncle’s. Her mother’s. Try to hear it coming out of your own” (303–304). Or another moment, when Walter and Alice see the ultrasound for the first time: “there it was – the windshield-wipered image up on the screen, black-and-white, grainy, a channel you couldn’t quite tune in. . . . Alice reached for my hand. She was crying. I was, too. It wasn’t possible not to” (38). Moments like these show that Walter has good instincts; they’re just often overridden by his fear of the everyday crises of child-rearing that loom before him.

*Kids These Days* is slyly and sarcastically funny. Perry’s humor frequently emerges when least expected, mostly by way of short,

pointed moments that say a lot in very little space: The twins, practicing tae kwon do on each other, “hollered out vowel sounds after every move” (12). Alice’s obstetrician’s teeth “were so white you wanted to tell somebody about it” (41). After Mid’s shoddy operation inevitably crumbles, Walter finds himself “somewhere in Florida in a vandalized Camaro with a box of hundred-dollar bills in my lap” (262). Summing up his fascination with Mid’s parking lot ice machines, Walter describes, “Sixteen pounds of glistening, frozen-solid ice, delivered instantly while you stood there in the sanctified glow of the very future itself” (117).

Some of the most touching and telling moments in the novel come in the form of Walter’s sarcastic teenage niece Delton, who sometimes “looked like she’d put her makeup on with a push broom” (142). Despite the fact that Delton starts dating a nineteen-year-old who convinces her a tattoo is a great idea and with whom she eventually runs away across town, she’s in some ways the most level-headed member of the family. Walter watches her “like she was some kind of exhibit” (68) and determines that “she’s got three wishes, each one of them that she not be fifteen anymore” (274). The more Delton rebels, the more it becomes clear that she seeks normalcy of some kind, which her family cannot provide.

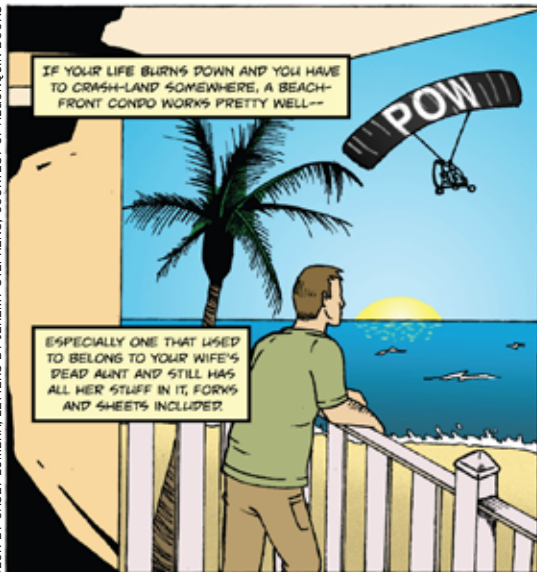
Interwoven with Mid’s unscrupulous dealings, Walter’s panic, and the family’s general dysfunction is the tangible oddity of Florida.

Perry’s descriptions deftly capture the state’s weirdness, wildness, ugliness, and beauty, always with the sense of slight wonder most non-natives have at the mere existence of such a ridiculous place. The novel is set on the Atlantic coast somewhere not far south of Jacksonville, an area Mid and Carolyn still like to consider undiscovered Old Florida. Walter, however, thinks it’s “more like people had discovered things down here, but weren’t altogether sure what to do with their find” (35).

Perry cleverly illustrates the bafflement one feels arriving in Florida from somewhere else. It is a beautiful place, but it also isn’t. In scenes all involving pavement, Walter sees “what seemed like five thousand miles of pine and palm and kudzu” (7), “egrets in the medians, stark white against the persistent green of everything else” (297), an orange sunset that “turned even the parking lot into something it wasn’t, something fabulous, something adorned” (294), and myriad highway signs for towns down the road: “If we were not in paradise, there was at least a billboard every five miles that would tell us how many exits were left before we got there” (297).

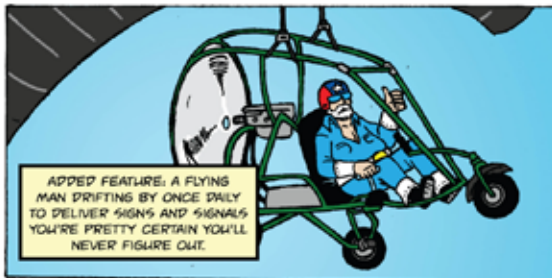
Perry’s writing possesses remarkable style. He crafts his sentences finely, yet they feel effortless. He has an impressive ability to find humor where others might not and to describe a place in such crisp detail that it becomes its own character – as flawed and reaching and crazy as the people populating it. *Kids These Days* leaves a lasting impression by being funny and wild, yet always deeply affecting. It is truly a delightful read. ■

COLOR BY CASEY LUMBRA, LETTERS BY JEREMY STEPHENS; COURTESY OF ALGONQUIN BOOKS

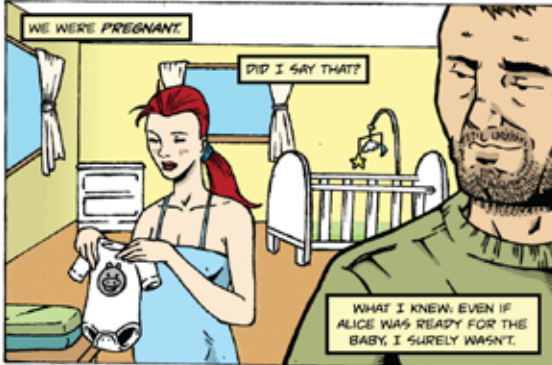


IF YOUR LIFE BURNS DOWN AND YOU HAVE TO CRASH-LAND SOMEWHERE, A BEACH-FRONT CONDO WORKS PRETTY WELL--

ESPECIALLY ONE THAT USED TO BELONG TO YOUR WIFE'S DEAD AUNT AND STILL HAS ALL HER STUFF IN IT, FORMS AND SHEETS INCLUDED.



ADDED FEATURE: A FLYING MAN DRIFTING BY ONCE DAILY TO DELIVER SIGNS AND SIGNALS YOU'RE PRETTY CERTAIN YOU'LL NEVER FIGURE OUT.



WE WERE PREGNANT.

DID I SAY THAT?

WHAT I KNEW, EVEN IF ALICE WAS READY FOR THE BABY, I SURELY WASN'T.



AND THE JOB WE MOVED FOR, I MOVED FOR, KEPT GETTING LOST.

BENT, REWRITTEN.

WHO BUILDS AN EMPIRE OUT OF PARKING LOT ICE MACHINES?

MID DOES. MY BROTHER-IN-LAW.

"WHY DON'T YOU COME DOWN?" HE SAID. "WE'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT."

HE WAS AN INVESTOR. AN ENTREPRENEUR. A MONEY MAN. A GOOD GUY.

ALSO A POSSIBLE SMALL-TIME MONEY-LAUNDERING DRUG DEALER. OWNER OF THE YELLOWEST CAMARO IN AMERICA.



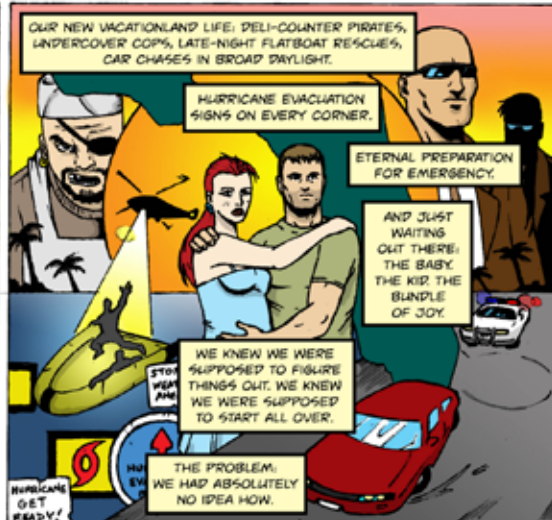
AND LIKE AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR CHILDREARING, OR BIRTH CONTROL, OR BOTH...

MID'S DAUGHTER, OLIVIA DELTON. FIFTEEN YEARS OLD. A NEW NICKNAME EVERY WEEK.

SMARTER THAN ALL OF US.

THE DAUGHTER YOU FEAR, THE DAUGHTER YOU HOPE LIKE HELL YOU GET TO HAVE.

A MESSENGER SENT FROM OUR FUTURE LIVES.



OUR NEW VACATIONLAND LIFE: DELI-COUNTER PIRATES, UNDERCOVER COPS, LATE-NIGHT FLATBOAT RESCUES, CAR CHASES IN BROAD DAYLIGHT.

HURRICANE EVACUATION SIGNS ON EVERY CORNER.

ETERNAL PREPARATION FOR EMERGENCY.

AND JUST WAITING OUT THERE. THE BABY. THE KID. THE BUNDLE OF JOY.

WE KNEW WE WERE SUPPOSED TO FIGURE THINGS OUT. WE KNEW WE WERE SUPPOSED TO START ALL OVER.

THE PROBLEM. WE HAD ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA HOW.

## COZY UP WITH A NEW SOUTHERN MYSTERY

a review by Joseph Horst

**Ruth Moose. *Doing It at the Dixie Dew: A Mystery*. New York: Minotaur Books, 2014.**

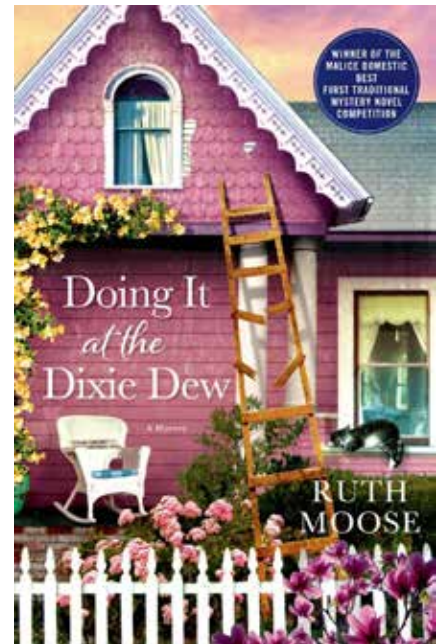
JOSEPH HORST teaches English at ECU, where he received his MA with a concentration in creative writing in 2005. His short story "Old Glory" was published in the *Slippery Elm* literary journal in 2013. His full-length play *Enemies* was produced in 2008 by a partnership with the Magnolia Arts Center in Greenville, NC, and his ten-minute play "Calliope" was performed in Napa, CA, in 2012, in the inaugural 8x10: 10-Minute Play Festival, sponsored by the Napa Valley Playhouse.

A native North Carolinian, RUTH MOOSE was a member of the Creative Writing faculty at UNC Chapel Hill for fifteen years and now lives in Pittsboro, NC. She has a BA from Pfeiffer University in Misenheimer, NC, and an MLS from UNC Greensboro, and she did post-graduate work at the Universities of Virginia and Massachusetts, Shenandoah University, and Oxford University in England. *Doing it at the Dixie Dew*, her first novel, won the 2013 Minotaur Books/Malice Domestic Best First Traditional Mystery Novel Award, and St. Martin's Press is publishing a second "Dixie Dew" novel, *Wedding Bell Blues*, in 2015. Moose has published three collections of short stories, *The Wreath Ribbon Quilt* (St. Andrews Press, 1987; August House, 1989), *Dreaming in Color* (August House, 1989), and *Neighbors and Other Strangers* (Main Street Rag, 2012). Read her short story "Playing Baby Dolls with the Girls" in *NCLR 2002*. Her stories have been published in Holland, South Africa, England, and Denmark, as well as the US. Her honors include a MacDowell Fellowship and a Chapman Family Teaching Award.

"People don't go to a bed-and-breakfast to die, do they?" With that opening line, Ruth Moose's first novel delves into the "cozy mystery" genre based in the fictitious town of Littleboro, NC. Winner of the 2013 Minotaur Books/Malice Domestic Best First Traditional Mystery Novel Competition, *Doing It at the Dixie Dew* proves to be a worthy contribution to the genre and highlights the small-town Southern culture that seems to fade with each passing year.

Beth McKenzie Henry, born and raised in Littleboro, NC, returns home when her grandmother Margaret Alice (or Mama Alice, as she's affectionately known) falls down the basement stairs. After Mama Alice's death, Beth inherits the big house with its wraparound porch and decides to convert it into a bed-and-breakfast. The expenses of this endeavor aren't the only major problem Beth faces with this decision. The first one is when Lavinia Lovingood, a member of one of the town's founding families, returns to Littleboro and dies in the Azalea Room at Beth's B&B. When Beth later discovers the strangled body of the local priest in his church and the police determine Lavinia was poisoned, suspicions start to mount, and Beth unwittingly starts searching for answers. Beth's inquiries tangle her in a web of old-town politics, jealousy, and physical danger that she and her best friend from high school, Malinda Jones, must work through and escape from before they become the next victims.

*Doing It at the Dixie Dew*, even with its tongue-in-cheek title, fits very neatly into the "cozy mystery"



COURTESY OF ST. MARTIN'S PUBLISHING GROUP.  
JACKET DESIGN BY DAVID BALDESSINGH ROTSTEIN, ILLUSTRATION BY TOM HALLMAN

genre and has been compared to works by Carolyn Haines and Joan Hess. As described in a 1992 *New York Times* article, the genre usually includes works whose protagonists are female and settings are based in homey, quaint locales like the fictitious Littleboro, NC.\* Any sex and violence in a cozy mystery is alluded to rather than given in graphic detail; Beth's eventual night with her handyman/love interest Scott Smith is dispatched within a page of the book with vague dialogue reminiscent of a 1930s movie constrained by moral codes.

Though some of Moose's characters are broad swipes of the pen with almost no individual characterization (the handyman is a good example), the author has an excellent handle on the dialogue of her Southern characters, such as Mama Alice's mantra, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, do without" (123). Moose also deftly

\* Marilyn Stasio. "Crime/mystery: Murder Least Foul: The Crazy, Soft-boiled Mystery," *New York Times* 18 Oct. 1992: [web](#).

explores the effects of progress that small Southern towns have gone through and currently endure.

The lone employee of the B&B and old-time friend of Mama Alice, Ida Plum Duckett, who seems to know more about the town than she lets on, tells Beth, “You don’t know the ways of Littleboro anymore. Things change underneath more than they change where you can see them and it’s not always for the better” (188). Moose recognizes that the tenor and success of small towns evolve (and sometimes devolve, depending on whom you ask) with the march of “progress.” Beth remembers talking with Mama Alice on the subject:

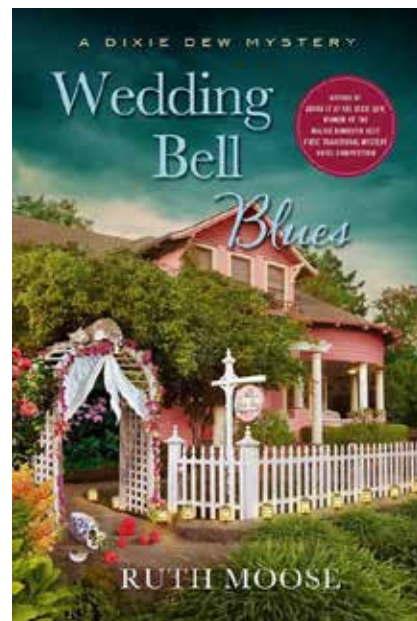
“Ye gods and small towns.” I said, sighing and raising both arms in the air. “I give up. The wheels of progress passed this place right by and kept on rolling.”

Mama Alice laughed. She said she could see both sides. She wanted

Littleboro to stay small, be a place where everybody knew their neighbors and that still had shops downtown.

I said I would like it to stay small, old-fashioned and picturesque, but I also wanted it to be able to have a bookstore that didn’t just sell Bibles and Bible-school supplies. (80)

As one can find in one of Mama Alice’s recipe books, Moose sprinkles healthy doses of insights into the culture of the Southern small town, complete with church bells on Sunday mornings, neighbors bringing cakes over to commiserate after a recent death, a statue of a Confederate soldier still standing watch in front of the old courthouse, and any place you want to go being within a reasonable walking distance. Anyone who has grown up in similar towns in North Carolina will recognize such things as the town newspaper, the *Littleboro Messenger*, always called “The



COURTESY OF ST. MARTIN'S PUBLISHING GROUP. JACKET DESIGN BY DAVID BALDESINGH KOSTEN, ILLUSTRATION BY TOM HALLMAN

Mess” by the townfolk. Events of the Littleboro Women’s Club and Junior Women’s Club are covered on the front page, but in Littleboro, one can find more information at Juanita’s Beauty Shop than by reading “The Mess.” ■

## IRA DAVID WOOD III RECEIVES THE 2014 NORTH CAROLINA AWARD FOR FINE ARTS

Ira David Wood III received the 2014 Fine Arts Award for his prominent work on stage and screen. Born in Rocky Mount, NC, and raised in Enfield, NC, Wood currently resides in Raleigh. Many know him for playing Scrooge for forty years in the stage production of *A Christmas Carol* at Raleigh’s Theater in the Park, where he serves as Executive Director. He has also performed leading roles in Paul Green’s *The Lost Colony*, playing both Sir Walter Raleigh and Old Tom. Wood’s original plays include *Eros & Illinois* (1978) and *Requiem for a King* (1986), both of which were performed off-Broadway. Wood’s previous honors include the Order of the Long Leaf Pine from the State of North Carolina, The Morrison Award from the Roanoke Island Historical Association, and the Distinguished Alumni Award from the UNC School of the Arts. In 2010, he was inducted into the Raleigh Hall of Fame. ■

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



RIGHT Ira David Wood III wearing his North Carolina Award medal, presented to him by Governor Pat McCrory, Raleigh, NC, 13 Nov. 2014



## “LOVE JUST THE WAY IT IS”

a review by Sally F. Lawrence

**Elizabeth Spencer. *Starting Over: Stories*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014.**

**SALLY F. LAWRENCE** taught for many years in the ECU English Department and now lives in Maine. She has served as an assistant editor of *NCLR* and reviewed several books for past issues, as well as written essays about the bookstores in Ocracoke (in *NCLR* 2005) and the Early Girl Eatery in Asheville (in *NCLR* 2007).

**ELIZABETH SPENCER** is the author of eight short story collections and nine novels, including *The Voice at the Back Door* (McGraw-Hill, 1956), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1957. Born in Mississippi, Spencer moved to North Carolina in 1986 and taught at UNC Chapel Hill until her retirement in 1992. She is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Award of Merit Medal for the Short Story from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the North Carolina Award for Literature. See Terry Roberts's article on Spencer's play *For Lease or Sale* and Gary Richards's sidebar essay on her play *Light in the Piazza* in *NCLR* 2009, and Spencer's own essay, "Look Homeward, Angel: Of Ghosts, Angels, and Lostness," in *NCLR* 2003.

How fitting that Elizabeth Spencer should be the 2013 winner of the Rea Award for the Short Story in recognition of her seven decades of contributions to the short story, just as her new collection, *Starting Over*, arrived in bookstores. This award, established by Michael M. Rea and managed by his widow, Elizabeth Rea, was created to encourage short story authors and to give recognition to a form often overshadowed by novels. Writers Richard Ford, Tom Franklin, and Lee Smith, jurors for the 2013 Rea Award, offered the following citation with the award:

Elizabeth Spencer is a permanent and treasured part of the American short story vocabulary. Her stories sparkle with acute and often startling intelligence. They are alert to the otherwise unobserved, vital nuances of our most secret selves. They are witty, frequently mordant, emotionally thorough, and both far-ranging and surprising in their sympathies and in their sharp vision of where our human accounts come due.\*

As a master of the short story form, Spencer continues to offer her readers fresh perspectives about familial connections in *Starting Over*. Those who have read her other collections will see echoes of her favorite themes: the unknowable hearts of even our closest relatives, the way a memory of a loved one can form a veil, how the pondering of a mystery can overwhelm a person, and how a person can become submerged in a still pool of time.

In "Return Trip," set in Asheville, NC, Spencer plays with Thomas Wolfe's "you can't go home again" theme as distant cousins try to recall what happened during a

misspent night together many years before. The protagonist's husband wants to go forward – away from old family stories, but a cousin's visit returns them all to Mississippi where the mystery began. In contrast to Wolfe's admonishment, Patricia dangles her feet in the New River only to be swept back to the Mississippi voices of her family and youth while the distant cousin disappears into the future, deciding that he, indeed, can't go home again. What makes Spencer such an exquisite crafter of tales is that the ending is satisfying without a resolution. And the mystery remaining seems completely appropriate.

Another mystery awaits the protagonist in "The Boy in the Tree." Does Wallace see a boy munching peanuts and dressed in his own childhood clothing, or does he just imagine that he sees this boy? What Spencer asks us to consider is whether or not that distinction even matters, as long we are reflective enough to winkle out the message in the vision. Wallace does care to puzzle through meanings: "He would wonder now if happiness always came in packages, wrapped up in time. Try to extend the time, and the package got stubborn. Not wanting to be opened, it just sat and remained the same" (43).

Another mysterious boy haunts the protagonist in "On the Hill." Eva's urge is to help the boy, yet her husband cautions her to stay away from the boy's family and not to interfere. Again, Spencer helps us understand Eva's conflicted feelings by taking us inside her head and her heart since she (having recently had a miscarriage)

\* Quoted from the Rea Award press release "Elizabeth Spencer is Winner of 2013 Rea Award for the Short Story": [web](#).



so wants to care for the little boy. This quiet story with its speculative plot resonates because we've all pondered the lives of casual acquaintances or wished we could help a lost child, and we've all been caught up in the social boundaries that keep us from confronting neighbors.

Divorce is the context for "Rising Tide," a tale of a single parent and her daughter. In this story, the mother and daughter are both testing the perceptions of racial barriers as they navigate the new phases of their lives and their changed relationship. Despite "a thin line of small quarrels between them," mother and daughter do manage to start over (82). The mother, a classic Spencer protagonist, moves forward with caution, but her keen sense of humor and innate courage keep her on track. In another tale of divorce, "Sightings," a man's daughter suddenly turns up at his house, having left her mother's house. Much to the surprise of the father, he and his daughter let an accident that haunted them fade away as they bumble forward happily and forge an alliance.

The protagonist in "Blackie" has also started a new life in a second marriage with a husband, a father-in-law, three stepsons, and a dog to care for and to make her feel needed. Called back into the past by a plea from her irascible ex-husband for a visit before he dies, Emily reconnects with her son. He later turns up at her new family's house, where he's made to feel most unwelcome by her stepsons. Has Emily become like Blackie, the loyal dog, there just to do the bidding of her husband and the

three stepsons? Or will she and her husband create a more inclusive family as she stands up for her son? One can't help but hope she'll find a way to make her son a more important part of her life, but Spencer never turns away from the complexity of family life and split loyalties and the sometimes tenuous ties between parent and child, so it's up to the reader to imagine the family's future.

The collection ends as it began, with a story about cousins, one of whom returns to his uncle's house where he spent his childhood summers. As a child who lost his mother and whose father is emotionally distant, Rob felt he wasn't quite a part of his uncle's family, yet he is drawn back to attend his cousin's wedding. As he strolls through the house recalling those distant summers, Spencer shows us his loneliness and longing:

*Sometimes alone with his aunt he had sat on the floor near enough to lean against her and at times she would stop stitching and bend over to muss his hair. He might be discouraged at some way they had acted down below and she might know that without his saying anything because when she touched him, she would press him encouragingly and say: "How's Rob? Bless your heart." He liked having his heart blessed. (194)*

As "The Wedding Visitor," Rob does find what he was looking for during his return to the past, and we sense a person who leaves the wedding feeling more at home and complete than when he arrived.

One of Spencer's favorite themes – the elastic pull of the past and its way of either freeing or capturing a character may seem particularly Southern since

it was a favorite William Faulkner theme as well. But Spencer's characters, while Southern, seem more universal in their family connections and in their emotional reactions to the past. Having lived in Italy and Canada as well as the South, Spencer seems able to keep Southern characters true to their settings, yet lift the context and themes of her stories away from regionalism.

Her characters are often the families of professionals that one might find in New England or the Midwest or anywhere, family members trying to love one another and succeeding as often as they fail. Many of her characters are quiet introverts who spend time reading and pondering the meaning of their experiences. Her fascination with the relationships among cousins gives her a special perspective from which to write about family issues: the cousins are aware of what goes on within the inside circle but view it from outside, offering the reader a feeling of being part of the narrative and of watching it unfold as well.

Much as some readers want a story to end with all the loose ends tied up, Spencer is unflinchingly honest about some of her characters' inability to determine the outcome or to unravel the mysteries they've set in motion during the plot. What she does do is create such complex, well-developed characters that the reader comes away from these stories with a sense that each tale is complete. The ragged edges of family love are left ragged, and the reader senses that he or she has a deeper understanding about "love just the way it is" (142). ■



COURTESY OF TERRY KENNEDY

## PRESENT-TENSE DRIFTERS

a review by Jim Coby

**Michael Parker.** *All I Have in This World: A Novel.* Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2014.

A native of Guntersville, AL, **JIM COBY** is a PhD student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. His studies primarily focus on Southern literature and culture, and he has presented at regional and national conferences on subjects ranging from the music of the Drive-By Truckers to the Mardi Gras Indians. His dissertation examines the effect of meteorological abnormalities in novels by William Faulkner, Barry Hannah, and Jesmyn Ward.

**MICHAEL PARKER** is a Professor of creative writing at UNC Greensboro who now divides his time between his native North Carolina and Austin, TX. *NCLR* has published several of his essays over the years and an interview with him in [2005](#). Read more about this author in the story about one of his most recent honors, the R. Hunt Parker Award, in *NCLR Online* [2012](#). Parker will be the honoree of the 2015 North Carolina Writers Conference in Washington, NC, in July.

We Americans love our cars. In every installed halogen light, lift-kit equipped truck, or after-market bass speaker, we see the dedication and infatuation owners have with their automobiles. Symbolically, of course, it is far more than the six-cylinder engines and leather seating that intrigues us; it is the uniquely American promise of freedom and escape that our interstates provide. American literature as varied as *On the Road* (1957), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), and even large chunks of *In Cold Blood* (1966), demonstrates this concept, so Michael Parker joins a strong roster with his new novel, *All I Have in This World*. Set primarily in the West Texas town of Pinto Canyon, but spanning much of the East Coast and over half a century, Parker's novel explores what it means to love, lose, and find forgiveness, all from the driver's seat of a sky-blue 1983 Buick Electra. Fellow North Carolina author Randall Kenan once noted, "Michael Parker knows everything about the human heart."<sup>1</sup> After reading Parker's breathtaking and sensual new novel, I find it difficult to contest Kenan's statement.

*All I Have in This World* revolves around three principal characters. The first is Marcus, a man haunted by his personal and financial failures, who becomes a transient wanderer following the foreclosure of his beloved North Carolina

carnivorous plant sanctuary. Reeling with self-loathing from the loss, Marcus meanders southward, vaguely in search of freedom in Mexico. In Texas, he encounters Maria, a lonely West Coast transplant who returns to her small Texas hometown in order to wrestle with questions about her adolescence and confront the lingering fallout over her high school boyfriend's suicide. During her subsequent stay she decides to put her culinary talents to use by opening a farm-to-table restaurant.

Maria's aspirations of restauranteering intersect with Marcus's need for a car when the two unceremoniously meet on a used car lot called Amazing Deals!. Here, Parker introduces readers to the novel's most compelling character – the aforementioned sky-blue Buick Electra, a car so well-made and curvaceous that one of its more religious owners sells the thing out of fear that it will lead him toward impure thoughts. Through a series of flashback vignettes, we learn about this hulking land-yacht's previous owners and how it finds its way into the hands of Maria and Marcus, who decide on a whim to share joint custody of the car. As he did in his most recent novel, *The Watery Part of the World* (2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* [2012](#)), Parker weaves his narrative lines in order to give his new novel a scope as vast as the

<sup>1</sup> Randall Kenan, "Publication Day: *The Watery Part of the World* by Michael Parker," Algonquin Books Blog 26 Apr. 2011: [web](#).

ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT **Michael Parker** reading from and signing his new novel at UNC Greensboro, 20 March 2014

landscape it covers: Maria's quest for redemption and Marcus's for self-reflection mingle with glimpses of the Electra's former lives. From its production in Missouri to its eventual landing on car lots in Cleveland, OH, and later Pinto Canyon, TX, Parker explores the many incarnations of the Electra and its various owners, thereby drawing larger points about a distinctly human interconnectedness.<sup>2</sup>

In this premise, all of the potential trappings for an overly sentimental romance plot exist. In the hands of a lesser artist, Marcus and Maria's mutual story – the chance meeting at the car lot and their joint longings for someone to fill a gap in their lives – could have quickly devolved into melodrama. Instead, Parker deftly realizes his characters as two human beings who need each other, but not in the conventional romantic sense. Rather, they find security in the effortless conversations they have with one another, free from any saccharine expectations. By foregoing the easy opportunity for romance, Parker has created two remarkably memorable and enduring characters and a charming literary friendship.

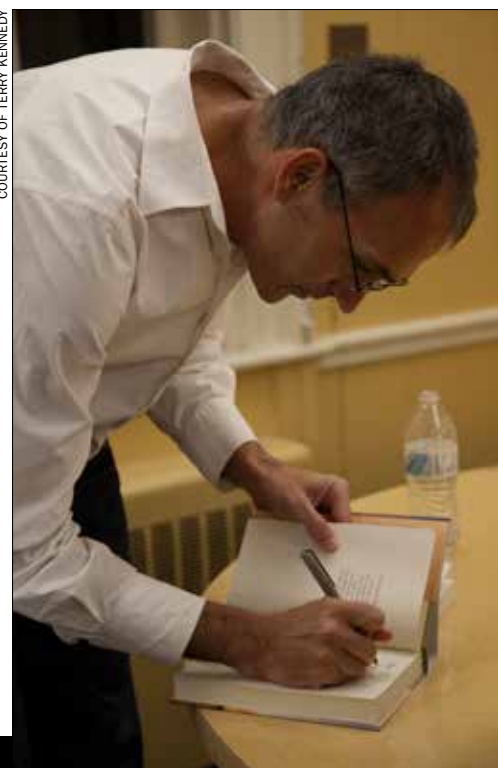
Despite some of its weighty subject matter, *All I Have in This World* is a surprisingly funny book. Whether he is describing Marcus's obsession with lists – “Being a product of the American public school system, Marcus was an

ace at chart making” (156) – or manufacturing a particularly humorous exchange, such as when Marcus and Maria each try to give the car away to the other – Parker's sense of humor remains present and understated. A professor at UNC Greensboro, Parker suffers no fools when mocking the academic world in his novel. While he may have reached the pinnacle of skewering academia in his satiric short story by way of faux undergraduate essay, “Hidden Meanings, Treatment of Time, Supreme Irony, and Life Experiences in the Song ‘Ain't Gonna Bump No More No Big Fat Woman,’”<sup>3</sup> he makes a concerted effort not to let this target rest in his novel. Characters such as the overly educated, yet still ill-informed Dr. Elwood, who “advises” Marcus in his initial planning of the plant museum, “claim[ing] he needed to ‘make’ it – sexy” (244), clearly show that Parker has plenty left to say on the subject. These moments of levity are welcome additions and help balance the work.

The language of *All I Have in This World* is sparse and colloquial; Emily Barton has noted in a *New York Times* review that Parker's prose contains “a seeming effortlessness that belies the labor behind it.”<sup>4</sup> In this new novel especially, references to popular culture and esoteric subjects mingle, which gives the feeling

of not so much reading a novel as speaking with an old friend on a long ride, a friend who is equally well-versed in disco and botany. As a result, it is tempting to power through the novel in a single sitting. But like any good road trip, Parker's book is about far more than getting from point A to point B, and to read these journeys quickly is to do them a disservice. Instead, meander and cruise slowly through the pages; take the scenic approach to the work and linger on Parker's beautiful descriptions. Let Parker's clear and concise prose fill your need for an engaging story and relieve your wanderlust. Enjoy the ride. ■

COURTESY OF TERRY KENNEDY



<sup>2</sup> The short story that follows this review is one of the flashback chapters of the novel, reprinted here with the permission of the author and publisher.

<sup>3</sup> This short story is included in Parker's collection *Don't Make Me Stop Now* (Algonquin, 2007). Hear the author read this story on the *Mirth Carolina Laugh Tracks*, a dual-CD component that NCLR produced with the 2008 humor issue.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Barton, “Who Was Theodosia Burr?” rev. of *The Watery Part of the World* by Michael Parker, *New York Times* 20 May 2011: [web](#).

# A MIGHTY PRETTY BLUE

*Shafter, Texas, 1986–2003*

**BY MICHAEL PARKER**

*with art by Jo Ann H. Hart*

**JO ANN H. HART** has been a member of the art faculty at UNC Pembroke since 2007. She received her BFA in painting and drawing at Texas Tech University and her MFA in painting at the University of North Texas. Her work has been exhibited in such venues as the North Carolina Museum of Art; the Gertrude Herbert Institute of Art in Augusta, GA; the Brooklyn Art Library in New York; the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur; and the Banshi College in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. She has served as a member of both the Committee 100 and the Education Committee for the North Carolina Museum of Art, and she received the Fine Arts Award for Community Enrichment at the University of North Texas, where she was also honored with the Golden Eagle Award for community commitment. See more of her work on her [website](#).

## THE DAY THAT THE BUICK

CORD BOUGHT FOR HER SHOWED UP IN THE DRIVEWAY, EVELYN HAD TAKEN THE PICKUP INTO TOWN. They had been down to one vehicle since Evelyn had hit a pronghorn coming home from church one night four months earlier.

All Evelyn said about the Buick when she got home was, “It’s a mighty pretty blue.”

“I know you never cared to drive this thing into town,” Cord said, helping her unload groceries from the extended cab of his truck, but of course what he meant was, I want my truck back and I will be goddamned if I am going to hang around town waiting on you to practice choir.

A month later Cord had a heart attack. He died alone, out penning cows. He was just sixty-six, but he hated doctors and hospitals, even though his father and one of his brothers had died young with bad hearts. Evelyn buried him and came home to the cries of mother cows calling for their babies. It was time to separate the calves from their mothers, and her husband’s friends and neighbors had skipped the funeral to take calves away from their mothers because this is what her husband would have expected them to do. This is how they should pay their respects. In all her years out here she had never gotten used to the wails of cattle mourning their taken-away calves. Sometimes it would last three or four days. She’d run fans and sometimes even turn up the radio to drown it out, but it lingered even after the cows had given up on ever seeing their babies again and then it was their silence that got to her. How could any of God’s creatures put up with the loss of a child and go right on eating and sleeping? She didn’t see how that was possible. She had wanted children and her husband had not. Cord was from a large family and had nothing to do with any of his siblings. Two of his sisters up in Fort Worth she had never even seen since their wedding forty-four years earlier. The few times Evelyn brought

up wanting children, Cord said, “Once you start, you have to keep on going. You can’t have just one, because they’d need someone to play with and they say one is just as much work as five. More work, because the older ones will raise the youngest and let you do your chores. Fill a house up with young’uns and they’ll grow up hating how you made ’em share everything from toys to oatmeal to dungarees.”

Evelyn thought this was either the strangest reason she’d ever heard of for not having children or the saddest. Because he did not want his children to have to share? She knew Cord had grown up in a house where nothing ever got talked about. He said to her once when they first started dating that his parents acted like two kids in a contest to see who could hold their breath the longest. About purple in the face and bug-eyed three-quarters of the time. He only mentioned this the one time, but she never forgot it because she had grown up in a house not too far off from what he described. Her father, home from work at the sawmill he ran, sat in his chair next to the radio asleep with his mouth open, and her mother sat knitting across the room from him. The whole house filled with flies that Evelyn went around swatting just to exercise something so deep and buried in her she favored it, something a little cruel and a lot desperate, maybe what made her marry whom she married when she married and surely what made her – still in the dress she wore to the funeral, her house filled with women of the church come to comfort her with rectangles of Pyrex they all knew she would give to the Mexican girl who came twice a week to help her around the house, or feed untouched to her dogs – climb into the Buick he had bought her and drive the six miles of two-track out to where the men were loading up the calves to the cries of mothers and tell them she wanted every last cow off the ranch as soon as they could move them, cow and calf and bull, all of them, and when they



*Peach* (collage, digital print, film, paper, ink, LED light) by Jo Ann H. Hart

opened their mouths to tell her what she knew would be what her husband would have said to this, she got back in the Buick and backed it the six miles to the house, getting within the first half mile a crick in her neck so awful she welcomed it, for this sort of pain was far preferable to what she felt listening to the cows keep up their vigil for the calves who were not coming back.

The Buick went backward as good as it drove forward. She winced at the pain in her neck as she remembered a time when her older brother was driving her to a friend’s house in town and they came to a fork, and she said, “Go straight,” and her brother taunted her, saying, “You mean forward, dummy, not straight.” Her life had been straight but not forward. A path with no forks, but she *stood* in it more than traveled up or down it. She’d never thought to notice a difference between straight and forward until her smart-alecky brother claimed there was one.

The crying cattle were gone, but she still heard their cries in the wind whipped up in the winter night. After a year she sold the ranch and bought a small green cottage in town with a patch of grass and three oak trees. First shade she’d been able to savor other than a porch in nearly forty years. She was sixty-four years old. She pulled the Buick up under the carport and rolled the windows up tight against the dust, and there it sat. She was six blocks from church and only two to the market and she hardly ate anything but cottage cheese and Pepperidge Farm cookies and did not cook more than a sweet potato.

In all her years out here she had never gotten used to the wails of cattle mourning their taken-away calves.

Her life had been straight but not forward. A path with no forks, but she *stood* in it more than traveled up or down it.

Her sister Edith and her husband came down from Amarillo when Evelyn turned seventy-two. They had meant to come when she turned seventy but something came up and then it was two years before they could make the drive. They were sitting out on the porch when her brother-in-law Herb got up and walked over to the Buick and started poking around it. He had already tried to put a washer in her kitchen faucet and it leaked worse than before, and here he was, about to act like he knew something about cars even though he sold insurance. Evelyn supposed this was his idea about what he ought to do when he visited a widow. She thought it was kind of sweet, but she didn't like it when he started asking her questions about the Buick.

"How long has it been since you drove this car?"

"I drive it to the store some, but when it's nice out, I'd rather walk."

"That's a classic right there," he said. Then he said he was going off to the library to do some research. When he was gone, Evelyn said to Edith, "What is Herb wanting to do research on exactly?" and Edith told Evelyn what she already knew, that Herb didn't have one iota what to do with himself when he was a guest in someone else's home and the reason they hadn't come on her seventieth was that Herb acted like he was sick. "Let's just let him go on acting like he's going to take care of everything," Edith said. "That way he'll be out of our hair."

Herb came back in an hour and told Evelyn that she owned a mint specimen of the last Electra they manufactured.

"You could get top dollar for that car," said Herb.

"How's she going to get around if she sells her car?" Edith asked her husband.

"She said herself she hardly ever uses it." He turned to Evelyn and said he would be happy to take it off her hands.

Edith said, "Herb, come inside for a minute, I want to talk to you." They went inside the house and Edith tried to whisper but it came out like a scream strained through a towel. Evelyn heard every word. Her sister lit into her husband, accusing him of trying to take advantage. Herb said he was going to pay her what it was worth, he liked the car, he'd drive it himself, and Edith said, "You got two trucks, Herb, and one of them sits in the yard," and no.

While they were in the kitchen arguing, Evelyn studied the Buick. It struck her as funny that it would turn out to be worth a dime. But she didn't need another dime. She was set from selling the ranch and even if she were about to starve she would never try and make money off that vehicle. How could she admit to her sister and Herb the real reason she had let that car sit, even when she would have saved time or stayed warmer by driving it? How could she admit that she had never even turned on the radio because every time she got in that car she heard the cries of all those mother cows sounding out their loss night and day?

But that wasn't the worst of it. It took her moving into town and living alone for the first time in her life and not minding it at all to realize her husband had bought her that Buick for the same reason he claimed he did not want children. He was tired of sharing his vehicle. Had he not wanted children because he did not want to share her? Was that out-and-out selfish or was there somewhere in it a sweetness? Was it straight or forward? Her brother had claimed there was a difference, but even if there was, she did not see how, at this point in her life, it mattered. ■

This story is excerpted from *All I Have in This World* by **MICHAEL PARKER** © 2014 by Michael Parker. Reprinted by permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. Read more about the novel and the author in the preceding review and on the [publisher's website](#).



## REDEMPTION, INSPIRED AND QUESTIONED

*a review by Lisa Proctor*

**Joseph Bathanti.** *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless: Essays.* Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2014.

**Earl Swift.** *Auto Biography: A Classic Car, an Outlaw Motorhead, and 57 Years of the American Dream.* New York: HarperCollins, 2014.

**LISA PROCTOR** teaches writing at ECU where she has served on the editorial board and as an assistant editor of *NCLR*.

**JOSEPH BATHANTI** earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Pittsburgh and an MFA from Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC. The Pennsylvania native moved to North Carolina in 1976 to work in the VISTA program and has remained in North Carolina ever since. He is currently a Professor at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. His novel *Coventry* (Novello Festival Press, 2006) was reviewed in *NCLR* 2008. Read more about Bathanti with the review of his recent prize-winning poetry collection, also in this issue.

Virginia writer **EARL SWIFT** is the author of four previous books of nonfiction: *Journey on the James* (University of Virginia Press, 2002), *Where They Lay* (Houghlin Mifflin, 2003), *The Tangierman's Lament* (University of Virginia Press, 2007), and *The Book Roads* (Houghlin Mifflin, 2011). This fifth brings the journalist to Eastern North Carolina, Moyock, NC, specifically, where his subject, a 1957 Chevy, winds up.

*Half of What I Say Is Meaningless* and *Auto Biography*, the latest offerings from Joseph Bathanti and Earl Swift, respectively, each reflect on the interplay between our individual and collective histories and how our connections to each other – and to the world – can serve as a path to redemption. Each author's approach is compelling, but their use of the checkered pasts of key characters (including, in Bathanti's case, himself) to explore these themes is quite different – and ultimately reveals what I would posit is a fundamental weakness in *Auto Biography*.

Former North Carolina Poet Laureate **Joseph Bathanti** begins his collection of essays, *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless*, by wrestling with how, for creative nonfiction writers, there is an “involuntary – and even wholly innocent – reflex to fabricate when memory falters” (1–2). The genre, he writes, is “nitroglycerine . . . rocking precariously in a rickety wagon driven by drunken mule skinnners, pulled by drunken mules, along a mud-scarred, rocky, potholed road” in the way it must balance truth with invention (4). Bathanti tells us that in his own efforts to “figure out what happened,” even he can't be sure of what's real (5). I say, no matter. The beauty and depth of Bathanti's storytelling is seductive. We would readily forgive the fabrications; we don't want to question its authenticity. For the reader, the rawness of emotion in *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless* is too real *not* to be real.

Bathanti treats every environment, every relationship, every experience as unique – and meaningful because of its uniqueness. In “Blind Angels,” a poetry reading in Bathanti's hometown, Pittsburgh,

becomes a catalyst for the author to ruminate on his ambivalence toward Catholicism and his ardent desire for forgiveness and redemption. His early experiences at confession are almost harrowing – “a dizzying collision within my seven year old cranial vault between metaphysics and mathematics.” He is plagued by guilt that he cannot remember exactly how many times he has committed a given sin. The urgency in his prose here is striking: “I was not only distraught gauging precisely the quantity, the sheer freight, of my mortifying transgressions; but, more than anything, catatonic at the thought of admitting to my Confessor, [within] an inch of my face, in a totally blackened box the size of a phone booth, that staggering sum” (107). By the time he reaches puberty, he has had enough. It's no longer about the minor infractions of childhood. Now his sins are “capital crimes” that he is “too ashamed, too scared” to confess (108). The burden of committing the sins is bad enough, but the additional weight of lying about them is just too much. His absolution is to walk away from confession forever.

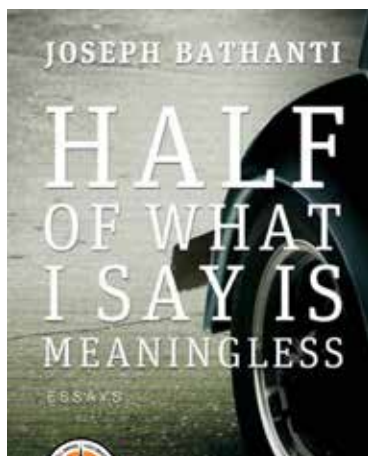
But, as is true with most things in life, it's not that simple. An encounter with an inebriated homeless man outside the gallery where he gave a reading reminds him how much forgiveness does matter to him. The urgency, panic even, that fueled Bathanti's childhood guilt gives way to gratitude, and yes, forgiveness. He realizes that this “dispossessed, heartsick, homeless derelict” is his “savior,” who “suffers in [Bathanti's] place.” When the man asks for a hug, Bathanti obliges. When the man asks for money, this time Bathanti ignores childhood admonitions

to walk away. He considers the money “both alms and payoff, the amortization of guilt. . . . Twelve dollars seems cheap to keep him in the gutter instead of me” (113).

Gratitude and redemption are also reflected in what is arguably the best essay from the collection, “Ghostwriting.” Here, Bathanti shares an experience from his days teaching creative writing at Iredell County Prison in Statesville, NC. The real “story” in the piece actually comes from one of the prisoners, Bull City – an at once sentimental and gripping tale of another prisoner, Forty-four, someone who held the respect and admiration of Bull City and many of his fellow inmates. It is a day like any other until the inmates realize that Forty-four has gone missing; a search of the prison grounds reveals that, in what appears to be an escape attempt, Forty-four is caught in the razor wire of the prison fences and bleeds to death trying to extricate himself. In the course of Bull City’s story, a crucial detail is revealed about Forty-four’s identity that only emphasizes the poignancy of his loss for the prisoners.

Bathanti makes clear that “Ghostwriting” is not his tale, not his experience. Perhaps it is this confession, to himself and to the reader, which makes his telling-of-the-telling of the story so compelling. Who these men are and where they are is not lost on Bathanti: “You have to sit back like it’s nothing, like there’s not a thing in the world you’d be shocked by. The men you sit in the room with could kill you” (130). He understands that “all of this writing . . . [is] in the services of being released from the penitentiary” (135). In the hands

of a less deft author, Bull City and his story could easily have been colored in the broad strokes of schmaltz or cynicism. Bathanti, however, is able to steer clear of these go-to stereotypes, highlighting at once the dignity and the brutality of the inmates. As Bull City reads, Bathanti’s first inclination is to question the veracity of the story, but the nods of the others in reaction convince him, “Bull City is recounting something that really happened.” Bathanti is impressed with the story’s vulnerability, its “lack of swagger and defiance” (131). He recognizes that what gives the story its raw power is that Bull City is telling it. Technical weaknesses are not important. Once again, however, the need to confess plagues Bathanti. “When I first heard the story of Forty-four, I swore that I would not steal it. It belonged to Bull City and was his to tell.” But in the end, he decides, “How could I not tell you about it? . . . [It] is too amazing a story to remain forever, like all the other stories doing dark and silent time, behind concertina” (137). Readers of “Ghostwriting,” and every other essay in *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless*, actually, will be grateful he did.



In *Auto Biography*, Earl Swift recounts two stories in parallel: one about a 1957 Chevy 210 Townsman six-passenger wagon and another about Tommy Arney, the “outlaw” of the book’s subtitle and the man who ultimately restores the ’57 Chevy to its original glory. There is a lot about *Auto Biography* to like. When Swift turns his full attention to the car and the sometimes pivotal role it plays in the lives of its fourteen owners, the narrative becomes, in many ways, a fascinating ethnographic examination of mid-century American culture and the evolution of American car culture. However, his approach to telling Arney’s story is less effective. Clearly, Tommy Arney is meant to be a sort of antihero. But Swift’s efforts to establish Arney’s outlaw cred are a little too eager – and too often eclipse what should be the book’s real focus.

*Auto Biography* begins at the end, so to speak. We meet Tommy Arney, the brash owner of Moyock Muscle, “a scrubby five acres crowded with roughly four hundred old cars” (4). At this point in time, Arney and his crew are working to get the lot organized to comply with a Currituck County ordinance. When the representatives from the county arrive to inspect the results of their hard work, it doesn’t take long for one of them to point out what he sees as the high likelihood that most of these cars are “too far gone to save” (7). They have no concept of what a “project car” is, so Arney leads them outside to a 1970 Chevy Chevelle. It’s a mess, and Arney readily points out all the things that “shouldn’t be” in the car’s current condition (8). When he challenges the county men to put



a dollar value on the Chevelle, he is delighted to share with them that just the day before, a man in Connecticut paid forty-five hundred dollars for that very car. But to Arney, the value of the cars on his lot is about much more than money: "So what you might think is junk, another man's going to see as treasure," he explains. "Because this . . . is American history. And the people who buy a car like this understand that" (8–9).

It is a compelling point of view – and one that the reader will definitely be interested in exploring through Swift. He uses Arney's special affection for the '57 Chevy to establish the structure of the narrative: the Chevy and the man were "born" within a year of each other, and both came to be in Norfolk, VA, at the same time. So the story of how their "lives" eventually converge will be woven together, too. The descriptions of the early lives of man and car at once emphasize both the promise and the hardship that characterize mid-century America. When the car arrives in Norfolk, its chrome is "flashing," and "its two-tone paint bright." Of Arney's arrival, Swift writes, "His childhood hadn't gone to hell at that early juncture, but that was pretty much foretold. You could look at Arney's family and see trouble coming just as surely as you could decipher the Chevy's VIN" (21). The contrast is stark, but effective. Both have a long life of use and abuse ahead of them.

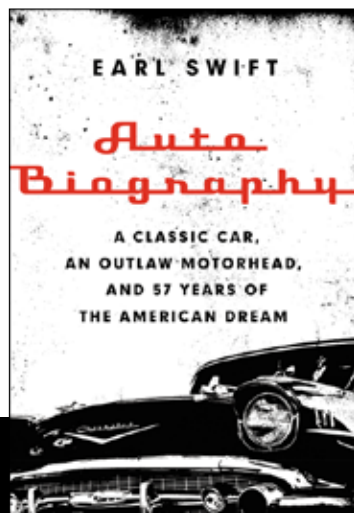
Swift's telling of the early life and, later, rebirth of the Chevy is the strongest aspect of the book. Nicholas Thornhill, the wagon's first owner, perfectly encapsulates the mid-century consumer in the market for a Chevy: financially conservative, of moderate means, pretty much in all ways "middle of the road" –

just like the Chevy brand. The '57 model, though "surprisingly upscale for a car for the masses," is "humble enough to be within reach of the working-class stiff and stylish enough to advertise his respectability, perhaps even modest prosperity" (28). The perfect choice for "a man of few needs, simple pleasures, and a humble past." The promise – or "optimism" as Swift calls it (24) – of the Chevy reflects the idyllic portrayals of American life in TV shows like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. The Thornhills – and certainly the Arneys – fall far short of this cultural ideal. At the same time, there is an almost romantic quality to Swift's descriptions of the restoration of the car itself. He (and by extension the reader) is attentive to even the smallest detail in the process – and in those moments, we are reminded of the promise the Chevy once held, and we are glad that it has this chance at redemption.

The stories of the owners of the Chevy who come after Thornhill become progressively vague, perhaps symbolic of the ever-worsening condition of the car and its gradually diminishing role in the lives of those owners. However, it is in these voids that the fundamental weakness of *Auto*

*Biography* emerges. The fact that Tommy Arney has been dealt a bad hand in life is clear; no one could reasonably argue otherwise. However, there is at times a seeming bloodlust in Swift's telling of these stories that is unsettling. He wants us to know that Arney is a fighter – literally and figuratively – but the undercurrent of glee that runs through some of these stories doesn't have the effect Swift might have intended. An incident in which Arney uses a dog as a bludgeon to beat another man senseless appears to be of particular fascination for Swift; he returns to it at least three times in the first half of the book. If the goal is only to make clear that Arney is someone to be feared, then Swift succeeds without a doubt. But if we are meant to perceive Arney as a modern antihero, Swift's portrayal falls short. In the end, we believe in and are hopeful for the possibility of redemption for the '57 Chevy, but for Tommy Arney, not so much. To say that he fights his way through life is an understatement, but his story as told in *Auto Biography* does not inspire the admiration Swift seems to be aiming for. The shift in focus toward the end of the book only serves to reinforce the perception that, despite Swift's assertion that he is a changed man, Arney is and will forever be a thug.

Redemption is a powerful theme in both *Half of What I Say Is Meaningless* and *Auto Biography*. But, whereas Bathanti inspires us to believe in the possibility even in the face of overwhelming adversity, Swift in many ways forces us to question it. ■





PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSH TEFER;  
COURTESY OF EMILY McDONALD

## OVERCOMING THE SOUTHERN CULT OF AUTHENTICITY

*a review by Zackary Vernon*

**Wiley Cash. *This Dark Road to Mercy: A Novel*. New York: William Morrow, 2014.**

In 2014, **ZACKARY VERNON** finished his PhD in English at UNC Chapel Hill. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Merrimack College. His work on American literature and film has recently been published in scholarly journals such as *Studies in the Novel*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, *Appalachian Journal*, and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Read his interview with Ron Rash and Terry Roberts and his Pushcart-nominated essay on Allan Gurganus in *NCLR* 2014.

**WILEY CASH** grew up in Gastonia, NC, and he currently lives in Wilmington. He earned a BA from UNC Asheville, an MA from UNC Greensboro, and a PhD from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. A *New York Times* bestseller, Cash's first novel, *A Land More Kind than Home* (HarperCollins, 2012), received the Southern Independent Bookseller Alliance Book Award for Fiction of the Year and the John Creasey New Blood Dagger Award from the UK's Crime Writers' Association, and was a finalist for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize and for the American Booksellers' Association Debut Fiction Prize.

Critics almost universally hailed Wiley Cash's debut novel, *A Land More Kind than Home* (2012), and an impressive range of literary heavyweights – including Bobbie Ann Mason, Ernest J. Gaines, Clyde Edgerton, and Fred Chappell – trumpeted the novel for its engrossing plot, its masterful use of first-person narration, and its fierce depiction of the people and landscape of Western North Carolina. But I think Cash's second novel, *This Dark Road to Mercy*, is a much more satisfying read.

A few months ago, I moved to Boston. But I've lived in Chapel Hill for the past decade and before that I'd lived in South Carolina since birth. I won't wax romantic, but I miss the Carolinas, and getting to read and review *This Dark Road to Mercy* was just the medicine I needed, particularly since the novel is a traveling tale that moves through the parts of the Carolinas I know best.\*

*This Dark Road to Mercy* is written from the first-person perspective of three characters: Easter Quillby, Robert Pruitt, and Brady Weller. Easter is a twelve-year-old girl who is struggling, along with her six-year-old sister Ruby, in the foster care system of Gastonia, NC. Their mother has

died of a drug overdose, and their previously negligent father, Wade, a former minor league baseball player for the Gastonia Rangers, emerges from nowhere and tries to reenter his daughters' lives. Desperate to reconnect with what little family he has left, Wade abducts Easter and Ruby from their foster home and takes them on a search for a place of their own, which all three wayfarers are equally eager to find.

Although Wade's intentions with his daughters are good, the situation is complicated by the fact that he is fleeing the local "hillbilly mafia" from which he has stolen hundreds of thousands of dollars (111). As a result, Wade and his daughters are pursued throughout the novel by the mafia's henchman, Robert, who wants to collect the money, but who also has a personal vendetta against Wade from their days playing minor league baseball together. Also in pursuit is Brady, the girls' legal guardian, who is searching for them for both professional and personal reasons. A failed father himself, Brady takes the girls under his wing. His protection of them gains increasing significance and ultimately suggests a reconciliation for his own blundered fatherhood.

\* In an interview that appeared in *NCLR* 2013, Cash talks about a similar longing for North Carolina while completing his PhD at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. In fact, he says that "several bouts of homesickness" motivated his choice to set *A Land More Kind than Home* in Western North Carolina, despite the fact that its narrative was inspired in part by a story that took place in Chicago (George Hovis, "The Seen And The Unseen," 94).

*This Dark Road to Mercy*, like *A Land More Kind than Home*, is an irresistible novel. I read both within a couple of days, and they are engaging to the point of being addictive. But Cash's second novel demonstrates a maturity in Southern storytelling that the first lacks to some extent. *This Dark Road to Mercy* escapes what may be an inevitable pitfall for a first-time novelist whom publishers and critics insist on labeling "Southern": trying to be original while employing some over-used tropes. *A Land More Kind than Home* is all about tobacco farmers and snake-handling Pentecostals in the remote mountains of North Carolina. While this is undoubtedly good fodder for a Southern story, it seems a bit tired. I'm sure HarperCollins is thrilled to market such a narrative, but I can't help but think that the continuing obsession with the cult of Southern authenticity may be detrimental to the future of the region's literature. While productive conversations about "post-Southern" Southern identity continue among academics, these discussions seem to matter little to the wider reading public, and New York-based publishers are as eager as ever to peddle largely bygone Southern stereotypes.

I wonder if a young novelist, particularly one branded as being "Southern," has to clear all the abandoned mountain hollers and tobacco farmers and serpent-wielding, tongue-speaking Pentecostals from his literary imagination before he can write about the "Southern experience" that most young, contemporary Southerners have actually lived. And that's precisely why I relish *This Dark Road to Mercy* – it documents and revels in

the Carolinas that I knew growing up. The characters allude to zombie movies and *Law & Order*; they play Oregon Trail; they listen to Guns N' Roses, Celine Dion, and The Eagles; and they eat at Chili's, Waffle House, Bojangles', and a Mexican restaurant called Pepé Frijoles. There are no Agrarian fantasies in the novel and no tortured Quentin Compson-esque agonizing over the state of Southern identity. Instead, we see Southerners imbricated in popular culture, participating in both national and transnational flows of economic and cultural exchange.

For example, in addition to the cat and mouse game that unfolds throughout the novel, *This Dark Road to Mercy* is obsessed with baseball. Far from being about isolated Southerners concerned with quirky regional exceptionalism, Cash's characters in this novel are head-over-heels for "America's pastime." The novel is set in 1998, and Cash seamlessly integrates into the narrative the late '90s Mark McGwire–Sammy Sosa struggle to achieve homerun domination. This historical circumstance

is pervasive, and rather than making it disruptive, Cash manages to turn it into a continuing bonding experience for Wade and his daughters as well as an interesting instance of the South being fully involved with the wider world.

In one particularly interesting and, dare we say, "post-Southern" scene, Wade takes his daughters to Myrtle Beach, and while there he buys Easter a raft with a large Confederate flag on it. Easter, whose first boyfriend in Gastonia is African American, immediately objects to the flag, which, she says, "means you hate black people." In the hands of a less-subtle, less-skilled Southern novelist, I can imagine this scene devolving into the well-trod debate between a racially informed history of the South and a "heritage not hate" line of reasoning. Refreshingly, though, that doesn't happen in *This Dark Road to Mercy*. Instead, when pressed by his twelve-year-old daughter, Wade only says, "That ain't what it means." Then he admits that he has no idea what the flag means: "But I know it doesn't mean that" (83). This



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN WAINWRIGHT

ABOVE LEFT **Sims Park, former home of the Gastonia Rangers**

RIGHT **Wiley Cash at the 10<sup>th</sup> Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, Greenville, NC, 21 Sept. 2013**

flaccid argumentation seems more realistic for contemporary Confederate flag-toting Southerners than some dramatic altercation about history and identity. The flag, all too often, is a signifier without a clear signified, and Cash hones in on this ambiguity in a remarkably well-handled intergenerational conflict. There are no fireworks and relatively little drama, which I think is how it should be in the here and now. In other words, must novelists give undue drama to issues that remain a concern solely for those at the outermost fringes of Southern culture? Cash seems to suggest that such tortured conversations are a thing of the past for many Southerners, and I say good riddance.

What Cash gives drama to, and rightfully so, are the lives of real, believable characters. While the characters in *A Land More Kind than Home* seem to fall into

three categories – the good, the bad, and the misguided – the characters in *This Dark Road to Mercy* are more ambiguously (and thus more realistically) portrayed. There are no dark-hearted, maniacal preachers here – just everyday people fighting for (and sometimes against) family. All have motivations – and legitimate ones – but no one seems inherently good or evil. Evidence of the strength of Cash's storytelling in his new novel is the fact that I empathized with all the characters, without exception.

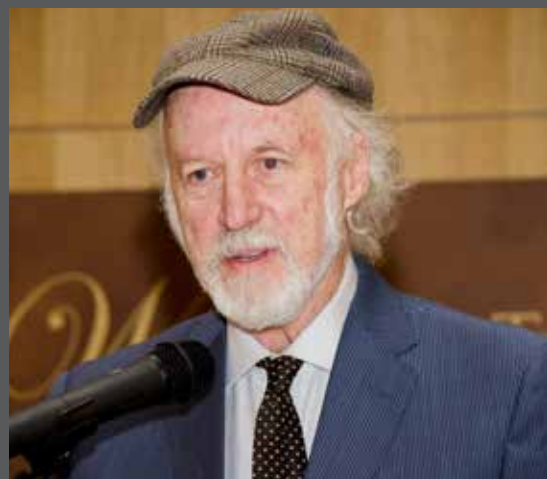
In addition to an in-depth investigation of human nature, Cash provides a fascinating exploration of the idea of "home." His epigraph, from Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), observes that "In yourself right now is all the place you've got," which functions both as a refutation to Eudora Welty-inspired place-obsessiveness in

the South but also to the necessity of physical place as the basis for home, a luxury the itinerant Quillby sisters do not have.

Cash's novel provides a sense of place that is based on family, friends, psychological wellbeing, and the unexpected and yet satisfying confluence of local and global cultures. To my ears, this rings true. I don't miss the hermetically sealed hollers, tobacco farming, and religious fanatics of days gone by. I do miss the mountains along the Blue Ridge Parkway, minor league baseball, fried catfish in Gastonia, and the charming tackiness of Myrtle Beach. Does this list just reinscribe an alternate brand of Southern stereotype? Perhaps. But that's the North and South Carolina that I remember, and that's also the late twentieth-century Carolina experience that Cash records with authenticity and authority and beauty. ■

## ALLAN GURGANUS RECEIVES THE 2014 R. HUNT PARKER AWARD

Allan Gurganus received the 2014 R. Hunt Memorial Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association for his significant contribution to North Carolina literature. The protagonist of this author's first published fiction, "Minor Heroism" (published in 1974), was the first gay character in a *New Yorker* short story. His first novel, *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (Knopf, 1989), has been translated into twelve languages; it won the state's Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction and the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Gurganus is also a recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature and a member of the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. Accepting the award, Gurganus spoke of the wonderful education he received growing up in North Carolina. A native of Rocky Mount, Gurganus left his home state to attend college, to serve in the Vietnam War, and to teach, but he has returned home and now lives in Hillsborough. His years in New York inspired his novel *Plays Well With Others* (Knopf, 1997; reviewed in *NCLR* 2000 and the subject of an essay in *NCLR* 2008). For other *NCLR* content by and about this award winner, see our [online indexes](#). ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW WAHNER;  
COURTESY OF NC OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

ABOVE Allan Gurganus accepting his Parker Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, New Bern, 7 Nov. 2014

## MAPPING THE UNKNOWN SELF

*a review by George Hovis*

**Joseph Bathanti. *Concertina: Poems*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013.**

**David Radavich. *The Countries We Live In: Poems*. Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag, 2014.**

**GEORGE HOVIS** is an Associate Professor of English at SUNY College at Oneonta. A native to North Carolina, he earned his PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill. He has published short fiction and literary criticism on Southern writers in various venues and is the author of *Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction* (University of South Carolina Press, 2007). See his article on Fred Chappell in *NCLR 2011*, his essay "Ten North Carolina Stories That Ought to be Films" in *NCLR 2012*, and his interview with Wiley Cash in *NCLR 2013*.

Two recent volumes by North Carolina poets depart familiar terrain of the state's landscape and literature. Whereas David Radavich's *The Countries We Live In* visits locations throughout the US, Europe, and beyond, seeking an expansive consciousness through global travel, Joseph Bathanti's *Concertina* goes behind the razor wire of North Carolina prisons to peer into lives that may feel as otherworldly as those of another continent.

**David Radavich**, who has served as President of the Thomas Wolfe Society and produced some of the most important recent criticism on Wolfe, follows in the footsteps of North Carolina's first great literary globe trotter. Like Wolfe, in *The Countries We Live In*, Radavich mines personal memory of travels abroad to meditate on universal human experience. In these poems, which seek extension of the self through immersion in other cultures and other selves, travel is considered the perpetual state of our existence.

The volume opens with an aubade, set in an indeterminate tourist destination, or possibly merely the restaurant district of one's own neighborhood – in either case, a location where human labor conspires with the sun and the turning earth to offer the paying traveler all the glories of another day. In characteristically chiseled images and short lines, Radavich describes this feast for the senses:

A shopkeeper hoists baskets  
with a pole, a waiter  
  
polishes silver teapots  
wearing gloves,  
  
a thin smoker  
in high heels swings

hips by  
like signposts.

From these particularized images, the perspective progressively expands to take in the universal and sacramental experience of daily starting over:

Food will again  
enter bodies,

breaths  
will gather air

the way  
gases swirled

before astronomy  
ached in the aerosphere.

Like Whitman, in "Every Day the World Starts Again," Radavich connects the quotidian to the cosmic, calling our attention to the repeated miracle of life.

The volume's final poem serves as a bookend to its opening. In "Salut," we are reminded that the apparently endless, cyclic journey of human life does indeed have an endpoint, from which the time between *hello* and *goodbye* will appear remarkably brief. After pondering the extremes of human creativity: on the one hand, "poems, paintings / . . . dancers that swirl / into infinity," and, on the other hand, "corpses, condoms, / drug paraphernalia, polystyrene," the omniscient speaker muses,

What a species this was  
that came and went  
like a comet,

tail not  
so very long  
and blazing off

with its special dust  
into the galaxy.

In between these two cosmic perspectives on our shared earthly sojourn, Radavich's poems inhabit a wide range of destinations.

The poems are frequently set in places the poet remembers visiting with his spouse and children – as in “Beachside Near Belfast, 1975.” To the tourist in this city torn by religious war, “it’s easy to forget / the barbed wire back in town” and to enjoy a swim in the sea undivided by sectarian strife. Nevertheless the poem reminds us that, beyond the traveler’s oblivion, deeply “rooted animosities” map the landscape. Similarly, in “Meteora,” the casual pilgrim confronts the chasm that divides his religious tourism and the devotion of monks who “can live atop mountains, / never coming down.” The speaker here identifies himself with throngs of tourists separated from the religious tradition to which they do homage, visitors

who can't quite climb the faith

of these contemplators  
yet buy their crosses, stare  
at icons, stand back with cameras  
trying to frame God

so high, so remote

we feel faint climbing  
down, massaging our knees,  
leaving all those colors

in busses headed  
to the flat known world.

Occasionally, as in “Outing” and “Taverna,” Radavich turns the tourist’s eye briefly to ponder how he is seen by locals whose working lives are devoted to maintenance of the expatriate vacation, where

Everyone overeats and naps,  
this part of living where  
time moves slowly  
knowing itself.

If, as these lines suggest, one of the goals of travel is a deeper self-knowledge, inevitably part of what is known is exile. Travelers who seek escape from self by immersion in the exotic are relentlessly made to experience the contours of their own separateness. Even armchair travelers, as in “Writing Eye,” are forced to confront their own cultural parasitism. Penned in memory of the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006), who suffered political persecution in the form of long imprisonments under several regimes, “Writing Eye” focuses on Toer’s readers:

In our smooth leather  
chairs under halogen light,  
how could we

remember  
what words are

whose heads  
have not been fired  
in the hands of the street?

Minke, the protagonist of Toer’s *Buru Quartet*, in coming to terms with colonialism, discovers himself a “child of all nations.” The speaker of these poems aspires to some comparable realization.

Not all of the poems reach the impasse of cultural difference. One of the collection’s gentlest and most moving pieces, “Cross-Fertilization,” recalls how the speaker and his partner conceived a child in France after having given up on conception stateside. He remembers how, after coming to terms with the desperate truth that “nothing had worked,” they traveled to France “to forget,” and yet still they

kept thinking words: I secretly

rubbing your belly saying  
*vache*, cow, and *mouton*, sheep  
as the train sped past fields of gold and green

and we dreamed of another life.

COURTESY OF CITY LIGHTS



LEFT David Radavich reading at City Lights bookstore in Sylva, NC

Immersion in another language here serves as magical “incantation,” and travel connects with the stream of life leading forward, escaping the impulse so often found in the tourist’s attempt to arrest time, to capture and preserve something of the past in material repositories:

Journeying is more  
than a visitation:

charm of sight

and smell beyond language  
or cameras framing

for memory and trinkets  
jangling as trophies of having been.

Nine months after  
we got home, words of wool,  
incantations of milk  
became flesh:

Hay-fields splayed  
in our minds  
against the white and blue  
of the delivery room

the last crossing  
of the impressionist’s oil.

“Cross Fertilization” offers perhaps Radavich’s most sanguine expression of faith in the value of travel and its opening of doors to richer, more vital living. But even when he confronts the cultural differences that prevent the traveler from achieving the fully immersive experience he seeks, Radavich articulates faith in the effort.

The speaker of these poems is no Prufrock fixated on his own alienation. Even in a poem like “Saint Spyridon,” in which the speaker visiting the Greek shrine wonders, “Why, exactly, do they kiss / these bones?” and gawks at the “miniature portraits of madonnas / and saints” and the “line of believers” who kneel beneath the “gold leaf that dances overhead,” Radavich refuses to indulge in cynicism or even to be too much troubled by his own doubts. Rather, he goes through the motions of religious inspiration and supplication with the other pilgrims

and seems content with whatever boon might be visited upon him. What signifies is his willingness to join in the family of man and to humbly submit himself to its rituals:

Almost everyone, old and young,  
removes a golden tallow, pays and parts  
to the sandy plot where prayers  
are planted, sometimes answered,

always voiced in thoughts  
icons tease to consciousness:  
seeking to draw out through the mouth  
to mumbling and the light of day

beside a place where bones  
have lain for centuries, they say,  
and saved this city from catastrophe –

if lips keep demons away.

The wry understatement of the concluding line, underscored by the rhyme, prevents the poem from lapsing into mysticism or superstition at the same time that it places hope in language, in the act of communion through communication, which has bound together for “centuries” those who have visited the shrine and shared a faith.

A number of the poems in this volume chronicle the grueling journey through cancer and chemotherapy. In “Way of All Flesh,” the cancer patient, exiled from the land of the healthy, reflects,

How good it must be  
to love your body.

To feel at ease there,  
as in the shadowed cathedral  
of Toledo perhaps – where believers  
arrive and light  
their golden candles.

“Way of All Flesh” might have easily turned to bitterness or self-loathing, but instead the gentle spirit behind the verses takes us to a place of self-acceptance and communion with the healthy body of a lover, whom he visits “like a Martian / longing to measure every scent.” The rituals of daily life and love return the diseased speaker from these fantastical landscapes that embody his otherness to the faith that

Someday my body may yet  
belong to me. A place  
to want to stay.

I will go there happily  
and find you home before me.

Making omelets perhaps  
from eggs that have been broken.

The cancer patient's return to a familiar, domestic, and shared space underscores his faith that his "broken" body might retain its wholeness.

In addition to meditations on ways life's journey is defined by the vessel of the body, *The Countries We Live In* also studies the ways we journey *beyond* the limits of the body. "Materialism" asks, "What is this life of things?" and satirically contemplates the objects with which we surround ourselves and in which we invest so much of our own psychic energy. The poem employs the extended metaphor of personal possessions borrowing our distracted consciousness. "Does the house remember / we forgot to paint last summer?" the speaker anxiously asks. Elsewhere the objects absorb and deplete our consciousness: "Does the TV know / we are watching, dazed?" Material possessions even summon our guilt; lapses in our habituated attention to them make us ask, "Do the things we neglect / understand how much / we mean to care?" These objects that assume such importance in our emotional lives even infiltrate our most intimate relationships:

I keep hoping  
your objects will like  
my objects,

they're somehow  
compatible if we hope  
to live together

your shades  
and my stripes  
can co-exist.

"Facebook" takes this phenomenon of our disembodied selves to another level. Written for a friend, whose "wry / ghoulish humor" manifests itself in the form of a Facebook site that perpetuates his existence "three years after his death," he is "still smiling, / still

receiving messages." "This could be the afterlife," the speaker muses, "perpetual updates."

*The Countries We Live In* contains meditations on the natural world and numerous poems that reflect on politics, culture, and religion, but throughout the volume, travel is employed as metaphor for our exploratory consciousness, making us more mindful of the various "countries" we inhabit. The volume's triumph can be measured by how thoroughly the reader is taken along on the journey. These are not poems that serve as the poet's purely personal travelogue in verse; rather, they transport the reader into places both exotic and familiar, making us more richly present within ourselves.

In 1976, former North Carolina Poet Laureate **Joseph Bathanti** left his native Pittsburgh and travelled south to spend the next fourteen months as a VISTA volunteer working with inmates in North Carolina's prison system. *Concertina*, named after the spiraling razor wire surrounding those prisons, is an account of that sojourn. The book offers a Northeasterner's perspective on the South and opens to the reader an otherwise unseen part of our region, penetrating walls most of us expect to stay outside. So, although geographically within the borders of the Tarheel State, this shadow Carolina feels worlds away. In contrast to Radavich's short, spare lines, in *Concertina* Bathanti frequently opens up the line, often in the form of prose poems, a form that feels aptly unaffected and accommodating of these narratives of stunted but resilient lives. The book is full of harrowing portraits of the young VISTA volunteer entering the Purgatorial scenes of North Carolina's penal system, such as Central Prison in Raleigh, "a hundred years old, built by convict labor," where 1300 inmates are policed by "guards with Tommy guns," and where

the criminally insane,  
playing badminton on an asphalt court

wrapped in glittering silver concertina,  
screamed obscenities at the girls. A wall  
with bullet holes in it.

One of the most haunting recurrent images of the volume is that of the inmates who attempt escape and find themselves hanging bloody and eviscerated



in the ubiquitous concertina. At Brunswick Camp, an unnamed boy

stuffed pillows under his prison greens,

duct-taped his arms and legs  
with mattress batting, then crabbed

up the fence like a movie creature.  
Hung in the wire all night, undetected,

a prehistoric scarecrow with wings,  
spraddled cruciform,

until the dawn shift change.  
When the sun sighted down,

the tower man shot him.  
Feathers spooled out:

a living-barely grail of retribution,  
hemorrhaging red feathers –

Images as graphic as these are balanced by character portraits, which seek out emotional as well as physical trauma. For example, in “Teaching an Inmate to Read,” “Mickey Rooney,” an inmate with a “mild form” of Down syndrome, confesses that he is the victim of repeated rape and that the guards won’t intervene. The hurt in this poem is shared with the VISTA volunteer – and thus with the reader who both feel a paralyzing impotence and guilt for not acting on the victim’s behalf.

What makes *Concertina* so riveting is not merely the gallery of inmates on display, but also the ways that Bathanti allows us access to his *relationships* with these inmates. Often, his encounters are brief but poignant, as with his medical intervention in the suffering of Juju, a recent convert to Islam, who, while fasting for Ramadan but still suffering addiction, overdoses on some unknown substance. The guards warn the inexperienced VISTA volunteer not to trust Juju, who lies in the sick room “thrashing like a sand shark, // leg irons ringing.” “If you met him

on the street,” they declare, “he’d cut your throat for your shoelaces.” Acknowledging the special opportunity for empathy that his volunteer position affords, Bathanti concludes,

But I hadn’t met him on the street

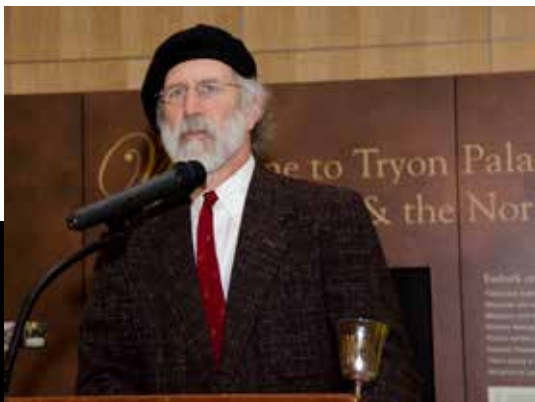
where I never would have held his hand  
and pleaded with him to tell me

what it was  
he’d finally swallowed.

The prisons hold inmates whom Bathanti studies only from a wary distance – such as Cletis Pratt, the first man he “ever saw in irons,” who emerges from two weeks of solitary confinement, his “chiseled impossibly perfect onyx body” reduced by a diet of Thorazine and salt peter to a sagging gut and “two silver dugs.” This character sketch moves from the perspective of the horrified speaker helplessly gazing at the transformed prisoner’s body to identification with the inmate’s loss: in the final lines, the psychic distance between speaker and subject has collapsed, and we bitterly reflect from Cletis Pratt’s perspective on how worthless are the military honors from two tours in Vietnam, which now feel like “ten fucking lifetimes ago.” “Cletis Pratt” models in miniature what the entire volume hopes to achieve: to move the reader from fear of the inmates’ otherness to an identification with their suffering. Another character sketch that illustrates this technique is “Freedom Drive,” which focuses on a transsexual named Dwight, whose intact male genitalia place her in the men’s prison, even though she is known there as Debbie and all the men refer to her as “*the girl*.” Debbie, Bathanti recalls, “wore Honor Grade fatigues on the yard, but come lock-down shed to teddies and camisoles, a straight-up female – you couldn’t tell the difference – with a vicious body and lingerie living in the penitentiary dorm with 180 men who hadn’t had a woman in years. And she fought like a gladiator.” The straight male inmates model for the reader an acceptance of Debbie’s difference.

In addition to such individually memorable inmates, *Concertina* also studies representative types, the most common being the addict. In “Prison AA” the addicts’ spokesperson and cheerleader is Bill, a retired Charlottean who rides his Harley to the

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



LEFT Former North Carolina Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti accepting his second Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, New Bern, 7 Nov. 2014

Huntersville prison where he leads the AA meetings. Bill finally got sober after deciding he was “sick and tired of being sick and tired.” In his AA “drunkalogue,” Bill confesses that his alcoholism reached the point where he was “laid out on the sofa in his underwear,” and “he couldn’t even hold a glass.” The inmates light cigarettes and nod in recognition:

There’s not much they don’t know about getting wasted:  
shoe polish, turpentine, Acqua Velva, deodorant.  
Most of them were fucked up  
the first time they went down –  
then every other fucking time after.  
Bill explains a drunk is always a drunk,  
always recovering. Unrequited thirst,  
yet to quench it is forbidden.

In “Prison AA,” addiction is portrayed as a more comprehensive form of incarceration, one that follows inmates on parole. In “Recidivism,” we learn of a prison guard, Albert Overcash, whose addiction and forgetting the “first principle of his profession: never trust a convict” lead him to a life behind the bars he had previously patrolled. Any reader who has managed (successfully or otherwise) any form of addiction can relate to Albert Overcash, who becomes another liaison between us and these incarcerated lives.

In addition to the inmates Bathanti recalls from his fourteen months as a VISTA volunteer, *Concertina* includes characters from the literature of incarceration and comments on the ways that his interpretation of prison life is shaped by such writers as Dostoevsky, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Robert Lowell.

Finally, there are inmates so surreal they seem to be the stuff of legend: the “dog-boys” of Salisbury camp are a “band of lifers,” who are uncannily attached to a bounty hunter named Luther, an “awful throwback man” on horseback and wearing a Stetson hat, who leads the dog-boys in pursuit of runaways. “Tetched from too long in jail,” the “dog boys” run “on all fours if need be.” More threatening than even these gothic animal-men are the inmates who seem most normal – such as Harold Furr, known as “Teddy Bear” for his pudgy body and “beard that looped // like a horse-shoe ear to ear.” With his “Conway Twitty pompadour” and “mustache of a thirteen year old,” his tool belt and can of WD-40 that he uses on his rounds of prison maintenance, Teddy Bear hardly seems to deserve the reputation as the “baddest man in Huntersville Prison.” The young Bathanti spends his lunch breaks eating with Teddy Bear, pretending they are friends, pretending in his “romantic way” that he too is an “outlaw,” but all the while understanding that if he “so much as licked // a stamp for him,” he would become Teddy Bear’s thrall.

A number of these poems comment on Bathanti’s newness to the mid-1970s South. Just as he learns to navigate the prison system in North Carolina, he simultaneously adjusts to the cultural landmines – most notably those related to race and religion. In “Doughnuts,” he learns to hold his tongue when he observes the enforced obeisance of a black inmate to the prison captain, a good old boy who thrives on the racial overtones of the prison’s power dynamic. In “Moonlite Avenue” he recalls being an apostate

## TWO 2014 NORTH CAROLINA AWARDS FOR LITERATURE

In 2014, two North Carolina Awards were given for Literature, and both of the recipients, Lenard D. Moore and Alan Shapiro, are poets and university professors. The North Carolina Awards are the highest civilian awards given by the state of North Carolina.

Eastern North Carolina native Moore was the first Southerner and the first African American to serve as president of the Haiku Society of America. He has also received the Haiku Museum of Tokyo Award, and he is executive chairman of the North Carolina Haiku Society. His haikus, which have appeared in numerous anthologies, have been translated into multiple languages. Moore founded the Carolina African American Writers Collective in 1992 and co-founded the Washington



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

Catholic attending his first Protestant service with his future wife (a Baptist) and going home and to bed with her where he slept underneath “the ponderous quilts of her ancestors. / Under her pillow snuggled a .22 pistol; / on the nightstand, a red leather Bible, / a gift from her mother.”

The volume’s most memorable poem to address Southern religion – and one that like other poems in the volume so vividly evokes the cultural landscape of the Carolinas in the 1970s – is “Praise the Lord.” This prose poem recounts how Bathanti accompanied from Huntersville Prison to Heritage Village five felons who had been invited to participate in a live taping of *The PTL Club*. Bathanti recalls being “so new to North Carolina” that he thought PTL “a satire, in the vein of *Saturday Night Live*. Jim and Tammy’s spoof of televangelists was brilliant. I laughed – even after I found out the truth.” The five black inmates are coached during rehearsal to “exclaim ensemble during the show, when the cue came: *Praise the Lord*.” The inmates enjoy seeing themselves on the TV monitors and play along during rehearsal, but at the critical moment during the live taping when they are given their cue to shout out their repentant praise, they discover a native dignity that turns them mute: “Jim suddenly holding the mike, like a torch, to their shocked faces as, on the count of three, each camera in the studio pivoted toward them. // They said nothing, neither smiled, nor moved – as if God, in His almighty wisdom, His good taste and discretion, His infinite love for the very least, had struck them stone.” Perhaps because “Praise the Lord” limits itself to the

consciousness of our speaker locked in the year 1976, Bathanti leaves unmentioned Baker’s own white-collar crimes and his subsequent prison term, but the reader is no doubt expected to reflect on the hypocrisy of the free masses who delude themselves into believing they are without sin.

No small part of *Concertina*’s thrill is in entering the lives of outlaws, of connecting with that renegade and defiantly unregenerate element in our own psyches seeking expression. In processing this textual reckoning of guilt and punishment, we might come to understand better the ways our own unresolved issues related to the dichotomies of order and chaos, law and rebellion, community and otherness exacerbate our state’s and country’s hypertrophied penal system. Without ever overtly proselytizing or indulging the romantic notion that prisons are unnecessary, Bathanti matter-of-factly acknowledges his participation in campaigns to reform and limit the growth of the nation’s penal system. A starting point for us might be to follow him through the concertina into the prison yards and cell blocks and to confront the humanity of these richly various inmates, whose suffering deserves our empathy and whose dignity calls for our respect.

In *The Countries We Live In* and *Concertina*, David Radavich and Joseph Bathanti take the reader into exotically other spaces and lives. If we aspire to inhabit a global village, these poets are trusted guides, helping us to recognize ourselves in forms we had not previously dreamed of knowing. ■

**Street Writers Group.** His previous awards include the Sam Ragan Fine Arts Award. Moore earned a BA from Shaw University and an MA from NC A&T. He currently teaches at the University of Mount Olive. Read samples of his poetry in *NCLR 1996* and *2004*.

Shapiro, a native of Boston, is the author of a dozen collections of poetry, including *Song and Dance* (2002) and *Tantalus in Love* (2005), both of which, published by Houghton Mifflin, received the Roanoke-Chowan Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. Shapiro has also published fiction and nonfiction. His other awards and honors include two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and election into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In North Carolina, Shapiro has taught at UNC Greensboro and Warren Wilson College and currently serves as Kenan Distinguished Professor of English and Creative Writing at UNC Chapel Hill. Read an interview with him in *NCLR 2004*. ■



LEFT Lenard D. Moore with Governor Pat McCrory and ABOVE Alan Shapiro with the governor and Susan Klutz, Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, at the North Carolina Awards Gala, Raleigh, NC, 13 Nov. 2014

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW WEAHNER.  
COURTESY OF NC OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY

## ON CATS AND THE COSMOS

*a review by Rebecca Godwin*

**James Applewhite. *Cosmos: A Poem*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014.**

**Fred Chappell. *Familiars: Poems*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014.**

**REBECCA GODWIN** is a Professor of English at Barton College in Wilson, NC. She has published essays on Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, and Thomas Wolfe among other writers in journals such as *Mississippi Quarterly*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Southern Quarterly*. And she has reviewed poetry for *Appalachian Heritage* and *Asheville Poetry Review*. Read her interview with Robert Morgan in *NCLR* 2014. She is a past President of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, and in 2007, she served as the Chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference.

New collections from two of our state's most distinguished poets show their creative powers in top form. Both North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame inductees, these celebrated writers also hold records for winning the Roanoke-Chowan Award in poetry: eight of Chappell's books and four of Applewhite's have earned that honor. To more than two dozen books of poetry, fiction, and critical commentary, former North Carolina Poet Laureate Fred Chappell adds *Familiars*. This delightful collection of whimsical poems celebrates cats in tightly crafted lines marked by classical allusions and clever rhymes. James Applewhite gives us his twelfth book of poetry, skillfully navigating the worlds of memory and cosmic theory in poems investigating the universe's beginnings as well as his own. By venturing into his present life, Applewhite explores space-time movement on a human scale. The humor and good fun of Chappell's poems make them seem lighter than the serious contemplations of space and time in Applewhite's *Cosmos*, yet the collections share a common theme. Using different yet equally impressive techniques, Applewhite and Chappell clarify humans' place in the universe as humble beings who share creation but are not worthy of lording over

it. Both *Familiars* and *Cosmos* explore correspondences, helping us to see and enjoy the meaning of earthly objects and our connection to the whole of creation.

**Fred Chappell's** collection takes its title from the pagan tradition that cats embody a psychic connection to the spiritual realm and often assist humans, especially in their practice of magic. Chappell's cats create a magic of their own with their aloof and enigmatic behavior. His introductory comments explain that *Familiars* grew from the poems in his 2000 collection, *Family Gathering*, which portrays fictional Southern kinfolk, and from the 2004 limited edition *Companion Volume*, which features a portrait gallery of cats belonging to that tribe. Printed by Susanne Martin's Greensboro, NC, Yonno Press on paper made of cat hair, *Companion Volume* convinced Chappell that his feline friends had not finished with him yet. Cats unwilling to be only human companions kept haunting his imagination, demanding their own voice. Twenty-seven of the fifty-two poems in *Familiars* introduce new felines, with twenty-one poems from *Companion Volume*, most reworked, and four from *Family Gathering*. The collection joins T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of*

*Practical Cats* (1939) and the work of other artists such as Charles Baudelaire in creating playful yet instructive takes on cat psychology.

Chappell frames the collection with two variations on the sonnet. “*Difference*,” its title perhaps nodding to slight departures from Petrarchan sonnet rhyme scheme and meter, opens the collection with poignant lines that evoke the passing of human loved ones as readily as the loss of animal companions. “*How powerful a presence is her absence*,” the poem begins, then moves to an ending couplet calling attention to subtle differences in the words we humans employ to make sense of our existence: “*These rooms were quiet when she was resident. / Now they lie silent. That is different.*” Its bookend companion, also italicized in its entirety, likewise pays homage to trusted familiars while focusing on human foibles. A sestet of couplets forms the middle section of “*The Animals of Heaven*”:

*Imagine us in that Hereafter Place  
Where we have changed into another race  
Of beings, no longer clumsy and afraid,  
Neglectful, purblind, and self-satisfied,  
So many times harmful by accident,  
Or, at our worst, cruel by intent.*

Chappell’s collection attempts to correct the error humans make in their relationship with animals, that of “*not seeing through their eyes*,” as this ending poem articulates. The poems between these framing sonnets immortalize felines who show us a thing or two about our shortcomings, including Aelius in “*The Burden of History*,” whose moral fiber gives him compassion for “*This backward and uncultured*” human species that stays “*behind / The evolutionary curve.*”

Not surprisingly, some of Chappell’s drollest lines come at his own expense. In “*Visitor*,” for instance, cat Chloe, visiting his and his wife Susan’s dreams, deems Fred’s mind “*8/10s oatmeal, 2/10s wacko.*” “*What a dolefully peculiar man!*” she concludes. His stab at the place of poets in our world in the last line of “*Tom Juan*” turns a hilarious portrait of a courting tom cat into thoughtful commentary. Tom Juan takes his love to the Rainbow Room, then woos her with vichyssoise and Veuve Cliquot before “*They retreat into the garden to sing / The love duet of Tristan and Isolde.*” Although their music is met with

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN G. HENSLEY



scorn, the reviews at least show someone has paid attention: “*Two dozen mismatched pairs of shoes, / Eight Patterson novels, a child’s tea set, / Cracked coffee pots of various hues, / A delicious hamster that recently died.*” The speaker candidly reflects on such passionate response: “*I know poets who’d be satisfied.*” This balance of whimsy and thought-provoking commentary carries through the collection, making *Familiars* fun for casual readers as well as serious students of poetry.

The allusions that enrich the poems of *Familiars* also satisfy earnest literary scholars. “*Second Thoughts; or, As You Like It*” dismisses the Baconians: “*It was the man Shakespeare who wrote the plays, / While his cat Bardolph contributed the footnotes*” by marching across the pages with inked paws. Nodding to Dickens, “*The Artful Dodger Out of the Bag*” is a story poem, a tall tale in Chappell’s Haywood County mountain storytelling tradition. Modeled on Christopher Smart’s eighteenth-century *Jubilato Agno*, a poem in fragments praising his cat Geoffrey, Chappell’s “*Jubilate Felis*” reverses Smart’s poem’s point of view, letting cat Chloe consider her Mistress Susan in wonderful lines such as this one: “*For she brings in dusty Gravel that I may gladden it with my Piss.*” A terrifically smart poem mimicking the light verse of Don Marquis is “*in re reincarnation.*” Introduced in New York’s *Evening Sun* in 1916, Marquis’s cockroach, archy, a free verse poet in a

former life, could not reach the shift key and letter keys at the same time and so used no capital letters or punctuation in his satiric commentary on city life. George Herriman featured archy and his alley cat friend mehitabel in his comic strip *Krazy Kat*. Chappell pulls off his spoof without a glitch, no capitals or punctuation as an unnamed archy tells his boss of a “slick / talking tom” convincing mehitabel

... not only  
was she cleopatra  
but also marie antoinette  
...  
... and edna st  
vincent millay”

And in “Lady Graye,” “The cat comes in on little fog feet.” What fun for Chappell and his readers. Sandburg, no doubt, would be pleased.

With word play, happy rhymes, and learned references to historical and literary personages as well as common folks like Uncle John and his Hypothcat, *Familiars* celebrates cats of all kinds, from marauders to stately and regal felines, in poetic lines that, as Kathryn Stripling Byer says in a cover blurb, “are as crafty and unpredictable as their insouciant subjects.” Chappell plays with form to signify content, nowhere more superbly than in “Beside Herself,” where a central space divides lines describing Chloe’s disgust with the noncreative, imitative cat who mimics her every move inside a door-length mirror:

Chloe I	finds Chloe II
dimensionless	and untrue,
odorless, silent,	totally ersatz,
not a bit	like other cats.

Every poem brings surprise, and who else but Chappell, among our considerable slate of North Carolina poetic talent, could create a series of odes to cat tails as varied as the aging Sparky, majestic Caesar, and demure Babushka who own them? Chappell’s imagined, family, and literary cats are sure to enchant readers. If these felines reflect human temperament and instruct us through their correspondences to our own dispositions, so much the better.

At the end of “Window Seat,” Chloe discovers a truth that applies as much to Chappell’s poetry as to our own experience: gazing at the beauty outside, “merely pictures” as opposed to the “food bowl, throw rug, . . . litter box, /. . . [and] TV” inside her home, she intones, “Reality’s a comfort, but Art is superior,” especially when it comes to Fred Chappell’s poetry.

**James Applewhite’s** art, of course, takes no backseat to his fellow poet’s work. *Cosmos* continues the thematic concerns and excellent craftsmanship that have marked the literary career of this Stantonsburg, NC, native son. Always interested in science, as shown in earlier titles such as *Following Gravity* (1980), Applewhite brings his curiosity about cosmic beginnings to the fore in this collection, not forgetting the local landscapes also central to his poetic output but integrating them into this study of the universal ordering principle. Light and dark, nature, past and present, movement and stasis form motifs allowing the poet to show correspondences of all things in creation. North Carolina settings such as Stantonsburg, Durham (where Applewhite taught at Duke University for thirty-four years and still lives), Goldsboro, and Banner Elk join Normandy, France, and Oahu, Hawaii, as places where connections form the meaning that gives purpose to humans’ lives.

*Cosmos* opens with a poem encapsulating major themes of the collection. “Reading the Science News” (published in *NCLR* 2013), which references a *New York Times* article from July 2010, brings the discussion of gravity to individuals’ lives:

This adhesion of all mass to itself is  
following the vector of energy downward  
with the thermodynamic arrow, which pierces us  
with our moments. . . .

These moments, of course, form the core of memory, shaping our sense of self and our responses to the world. As the news item triggers memory, the speaker’s “foot slips on the slick bank” and he falls slowly, “know[ing] the time slow down” before he splashes through to his childhood where his brother Henry (the poet’s brother’s name) laughs in their rowboat

named the Peanut Shell. Note the double meaning of “still,” the wonderful tension of movement and stasis, and the interplay of space and time in these lines capturing the permanence of important moments in our psyches:

. . . I stay fixed in motion  
while I swim for the Peanut Shell  
and flop and rock my way inside  
where I am still, in the dimension  
of that separate day, the boat  
drifting not to anywhere but here.

The correspondence of the outer and inner worlds, of gravity and our individual recollections, sets the stage for what these thirty-one poems in *Cosmos* help us to see: that the vastness of the universe makes our moments precious.

This collection’s ordering of poems shows Applewhite’s intent to lead readers gently to a consideration of their place and role in the universal order. The second poem, “A Premonition,” portrays nature’s modeling of patience and appreciation. Wind stirs oaks and maples in “quietly ecstatic celebration” of the gift of rain: trees and grasses “endure their mute, uncommunicable / connection into life of the subsoil / for moments like these.” Trees “rooted / for life in their one place” enact a “simple sacred communion,” seeing meaning in their individual place while connecting to others. In the next poem, “Night Writing,” the writing spider’s web connects camellia sasanqua to crape myrtle to portico, the web reminding the speaker of “faces that loved [him]

once.” Connection at the earthly level becomes a thread, woven through the next poem, “The Guests,” in Applewhite’s description of the deer who become his “second family” after his adult children leave home. When the fifth poem, “Platonic Astronomy,” moves explicitly to the speaker’s search for Vega through his home-built refractor, readers see that earlier connections simply expand into space. “I feel mind and sky correspond,” the speaker exults. The rest of the collection moves in this way, focusing on connections with family, the past, nature, and the stars in attempts to answer the big theoretical questions of how the universe began and what we are to make of our presence in it.

Several poems explore the origins of the universe, the creation of space and time that is the poet’s interest in these poems. “First Light” describes the “explosively expanding cosmos,” and the longest poem in the collection, “Conversation in Faculty Commons,” presents seventeen pages of dialogue between the humanist poet and his cosmic theorist colleague. They debate different views of the universe’s beginnings, the poet invoking the Cyclops to understand the coming of light to the darkness, the paradox of “light in dark, order in violence.” As the scientist and poet discuss the physics of space and time, order versus chaos, and evolution, they move to the question of purpose and meaning. The



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET BAUER

ABOVE James Applewhite reading from his new collection and announcing the 2014 James Applewhite Poetry Prize winner (forthcoming in *NCLR 2015*; in the meantime, listen to his reading of the winning poem [here](#), and hear Applewhite’s reading from his collection [here](#)); also pictured, 2013 winner of *NCLR*’s Applewhite Prize, Susan Laughter Meyers, who introduced the poet and the finalists of the 2014 Applewhite competition at the North Carolina Writer’s Conference, Fletcher, NC, 26 July 2014

poet's response encapsulates Applewhite's philosophy: "I feel a presence / of the sacred, in the first star / of evening," a line connecting to the later poem "First Star" that describes his climbing a ridge above Seven Mile Creek to see the first star appear. When his cosmic theorist friend asks him in the faculty commons to define the sacred, he replies, "It is life. Violently born. Endlessly desecrated. / A mysterious value has been seeded / in Earth-things." The poet feels the meaningfulness of life in ordinary landscapes and moments, in his granddaughter's eyes as she gazes out his upstairs window. These ordinary aspects of existence give evidence of the extraordinary, including the origin of the universe that we do not really understand. Applewhite ties his childhood in Stantonsburg to these larger questions, seeing the effects of "spacetime" in that place's fragrant grass and fireflies circling a pecan tree as he ran: "I felt part / of a whole," he says, to which his scientist friend replies, "You are fortunate, to have felt your place, / . . . in space and time."

Applewhite shows us in this collection that he feels included in the vast, living world. The journeys back through time (to his childhood illness with rheumatic fever during World War II in "Learning the Directions" or to a frozen moment with his brother and parents between church and home in "Time in the First Village") help him to pinpoint his "spacetime" origins and to relish the connections that alleviate the grief over the loss of those family members. The journeys across space, whether to Oahu where he visits Pearl Harbor or to Normandy where he contemplates the sacrifice of men underneath cemetery stones, also connect him to earlier generations as images of war connect to violent cosmic beginnings. A poem from his present life, "Driving from Columbia" (published in *NCLR 2011*) closes this collection with Applewhite's customary imagistic lines reflecting the collection's portrayal of the material world's gift of "space for years / to cross." With his love riding beside him, he values the whole of place and time the

universe has given him to explore and illuminate with his words.

The "love" beside him in this last poem certainly is Applewhite's wife, Jan, to whom he dedicates the earlier poem "Two in October Light," a luminous poem in which he correlates the earth's rotation to our life spans. As a "sunbeam / illuminates a map of [his] years" in the "veins, scars, purple discolorations" on his hand, the poet's metaphoric mind sees that his own hues parallel those of the light spectrum, whose "colors mean union." His quest to grasp life's meaning "softens" as he realizes that "this time of union . . . justifies suffering." That union is with his beloved companion but also, perhaps, with the universe. Poems in *Cosmos* show Applewhite winning his personal war with childhood illness, a fight contextually related to World War II, by seeing hope in the light and stars he observed from his bed. Those images of stars and homeplace stayed with him, informing the writing journey that has brought him and his readers many moments of insight into the order the cosmos's beginning encoded – moments brilliantly captured to show the pleasures of a thoughtful life. ■



*The Reenactors*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

In shadow of a farm-crossed wood I see  
 Reenactors along the crest of a hill –  
 those below, whom they are bound to kill,  
 living in anger, trapped by their history.

Up from the swamp-line, gray soldiers advance  
 across a meadow, into the whistling missiles.  
 Hit, they fall and arise, pain stiffens their wills  
 to live again this bloody glory since

they were mistaken, and must take this chance  
 to fight unconquerably, while those who inherit  
 their stories will go with them in spirit,  
 up the long slope, across the bodies, in reverence.

There at the barricade, those whom they kill  
 and are killed by rise from their uniforms, embrace  
 across the trenches and yet leave no trace  
 of cessation on those still alive in this turmoil.

Only the living could forgive the fury  
 of those still burning, uncanny moments  
 that sawed trees through with bullets,  
 only those present could forget and bury

the tattered shadowy revenants, embodied  
 passions walking visibly undead,  
 violently thirsty for a living blood,  
 killed not defeated, in battle unended.

Where so long a cause lives on in anger  
 its region becomes a religion,  
 where a father slaps son for no reason  
 and all must cherish this glory in error.

COURTESY OF LEE HANSLEY GALLERY



*Soldier* (oil on canvas, 29.75x19.5) by George Bireline

Here at the barricades, a young man dies  
 for his ancestors, voicing those choirs  
 that sing in his head. Spectral others  
 accept his spirit a moment, their sighs

only echoes of their dying cause –  
 voices of the others who shed true blood,  
 yet now wish the blue figures good,  
 as their brothers in death – who realize

it is only theirs, this war they reprise –  
 theirs, this purgatorial slope and the wood –  
 only theirs to re-shed this sacred blood  
 with mute cries, then fall and arise.

**GEORGE BIRELINE** (1923–2002) was born in Peoria, IL, and taught in the School of Design at NCSU 1955–86. After service in World War II, he earned his MFA at UNC Chapel Hill in 1963. A year later, an exhibit of his works at the prestigious Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York sold out. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967.

Bireline's works are in the permanent collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC; the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, VA; the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh; the Mint Museum in Charlotte; and the Ackland Museum of Art in Chapel Hill. See more of his work at [Lee Hansley Gallery](#).

*The Seafarer's Marriage*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

*Bitter breast-cares have I abided—Ezra Pound*

Weary with mere-ways and lacking  
 a leman I turned my lust's prow inland  
 riding the breast-round swells toward anchor,  
 nesting more sure than gull or gannet  
 into cove of a grassy headland.

Listing for cries of long ships in weather  
 I strode the dry ground, aching for unused  
 pleasure of manhood. Then the she I saw  
 on upland meadow seemed fluttering flags  
 to my eye. Her sheets caught wind like  
 sails of long ships, filling my inmost longing.  
 She I knew as the prize of all ages  
 turned dainty in bonnet as tern's wind  
 hovering and my heart went out to her.  
 Duly I joined the dance among jongleurs  
 tasting apple from the roast pig's mouth.  
 Duly in wedding we gave ourselves hostage  
 to the perils of love-troth. Nights we rolled  
 in our ship-wrought bride bed, as billowed  
 by pillows, we rode the Nor-West wind  
 toward isles of the pagans and blest.

Beyond is the dim world's end, where Odysseus  
 conversed with the dreary death-wraiths.  
 They crowded close, these many, murthired  
 in manhood, girls blushingly budding  
 cut off in blossoming, avid to the sacrifice,  
 those of this house which avails only end-gloom.  
 In dream I hailed him across the sea ages  
 entreating drink of the ink-dark blood.  
 Deep in spirit we heard from those throngs  
 of this cloud-webbed coast, kings of old  
 and their queenly lemans, warriors mighty  
 of mold, grand against onslaught of ages.  
 Bitterly I tasted the black sheep's bleeding,  
 hearing nones of my tribe and runes read  
 aloud from the heart-written stone.

**JAMES APPLEWHITE** is Professor Emeritus of Duke University. His numerous honors include a National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Jean Stein Award in Poetry from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Associated Writing Programs Contemporary Poetry Prize, and the North Carolina Award in Literature. In 1995, he was elected to join the Fellowship of Southern Writers, and in 2014, his poem "Barbecue Service" was selected by former US poet laureate Billy Collins as one of the ten poems every North Carolinian should read. Read more about the poet, his work and his other honors in the preceding book review of his latest collection.

Aware of her arms with the raised blood's waning  
 I married her again in a lifetime's reckoning,  
 we sped past dream-quick by faces of children,  
 leaving a vision of our village windows  
 and whiteness of geese across grass  
 and the returning haywain. My spirit  
 flamed out as of old in hardy enduring  
 and we voyaged together, close-caught  
 in a love-caul holding each in each  
 we two a swallow's flicker on icy fathoms,  
 though I recalled her in sun on upland meadow  
 along the barren broken brine-brittle seaboard.

COURTESY OF LEE HANSLEY GALLERY



*Time Reassembled* (oil on canvas, 34x34) by McDonald Bane, 1960

**MCDONALD BANE** was born and raised in the mountains of Virginia. She received her undergraduate degree in general science from Virginia Polytechnic and State University and her MFA in painting at Woman's College, now UNC Greensboro. She has been a member of the faculty at Meredith College, the North Carolina School of the Arts, California State University at Fullerton, and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. She was curator for the Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem from 1977 to 1980. Her work has been exhibited throughout the US and is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Weatherspoon Art Museum at UNC Greensboro the Mint Museum in Charlotte, and the US Department of State. See more of her work at [Lee Hansley Gallery](#).

## KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER: “[HER] WORDS ARE GATES SWINGING WIDE OPEN”

by Tara Powell

*Adapted from a tribute at the 2014  
North Carolina Writers Conference Banquet*

“Some words / are gates swinging wide open,” wrote the honoree of the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference.<sup>1</sup> Indeed. Just such words opened a new chapter in my life twenty-five years ago, when a manuscript copy of *Wildwood Flower* made its way into my hands via my ninth-grade English teacher, who had met and shared work with a poet named Kathryn Stripling Byer at the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching.<sup>2</sup> I’ve written about this for the Arts Council website, how Kay Byer and Alma, the figure at the center of that manuscript, blew my tiny little mind open. Alma’s voice showed me a whole different notion of what poetry could be and put me for the first time in search of what Alice Walker has called “our mothers’ gardens.” And then the poet herself dynamited the rails by actually writing back to me when I sent her an admiring letter and (I’m embarrassed to admit) some of my own scribblings, trying to express what her work had meant to me. She was kind and encouraging: she sent me a copy of her first book and told me I could make friends with the girl in it. When we finally met in person years later, she gave every impression of actually remembering me.

This story hardly matters tonight, except that so many among us could tell one like it. Whether the poet remembered me or not, I remembered her. Kay Byer’s words opened the gates for my teacher and for me that summer twenty-five years ago and for countless other writers and readers since then. “What is the world but our song,” ponders the girl in “Cornwalking” (*Girl* 5). In a more recent poem, an older woman speaks of “want[ing] to give [her]self over to green,” and asks, “Where are such beautiful words // when we need

them?”<sup>3</sup> I can answer that. I and many others have for decades turned to Kay’s beautiful words in joy and in affliction. In North Carolina’s famously generous harvest of writers, there is no one more generous, no one more kind, no one more beloved of our community – not an easy shawl for a truth speaker to wear, and indeed those are waters Kay is more willing to wade in than most. Her alter ego in *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* speaks of “com[ing] a long way / from what’s been described as a mean and starved / corner of backwoods America” (3), and, in *Descent*, another speaker describes “a kindling that transforms whatever it touches / to pure sound,” a “song where I’m kindling a fire / for my fingers to reach toward” (1). “Just one spark,” another poem reads, “That’s all she ever wanted” (*Descent* 13). A spark, a song, green of honeysuckle and wisteria, “a web of voices” catching light.<sup>4</sup> Kay’s work kindles our world. “Just pick a word / and then wait,” a teacher advises in her poem “Correspondence.” “Like a leaf spinning / round in a backwater, / sooner or later it catches the current.”<sup>5</sup>

In Michael McFee’s admiring essay in *The Napkin Manuscripts*, he describes Kay’s work as “song-cycles of survival” (158), and I thought of that phrase when I read the close of her song-cycle “Lost.” The speaker asks,

. . . Let me open  
  
my mouth,  
knowing this is my end  
of the bargain, this yearning  
to say *Here I am*  
but am not. (*Descent* 22)

<sup>1</sup> *The Girl in the Midst of the Harvest* (Lubbock: Texas Tech, 1986) 3; subsequently cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> *Wildwood Flower* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Descent* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2012) 7; subsequently cited parenthetically.

<sup>4</sup> Byer’s phrase “web of voices” is quoted in Michael McFee, *The Napkin Manuscripts: Selected Essays and an Interview* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006) 158; subsequently cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> *Catching Light* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002) 24.

This longing is the heart of Kay's poetic legacy, giving voice to everywoman's yearning to say "here I am," in the midst of darkling currents, fires, and Southern fictions. "I am the harvest," she wrote once upon a time (*Girl 7*). "Pull up the roots," she has written since,

and what do we see but the night  
soil of dream, the night

soil of what we call  
home. Home that calls

and calls  
and calls.<sup>6</sup>

Let us toast her tonight with her own words:

To that hive of bookshelves,  
I journey again,  
letting go of my one life  
to enter the stories of others,

still hungry for words  
and the way they can bring me back  
home to my senses,  
the way they reach out to the world. (*Descent 52*)

For nearly "thirty years I've watched the way / light begins [in your words]. It still wakes me up. Lets me be. / Here. Where I am" (*Descent 57*).

And now, if all those who agree with me will repeat after me, "To our colleague and friend – and most excellent honoree – Kathryn Stripling Byer – your words are still gates swinging wide open. Cheers!" ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF DAVIS



ABOVE Kathryn Stripling Byer speaking at the North Carolina Writers Conference banquet, Fletcher, NC, 26 July 2014 (Read more about the North Carolina Writers Conference [here](#).)

<sup>6</sup> *Coming to Rest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006) 3-4.

Read an interview with KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER in *NCLR 2008* and a short story by the poet in *NCLR 2010*. Byer has interviewed Elaine Neil Orr for the *NCLR 2015* print issue. A native of Georgia, Byer has been a North Carolina resident since the 1960s and was North Carolina's first woman poet laureate (2005–2010).

TARA POWELL received her MA from UNC Chapel Hill in 1999 and her PhD in 2004; she is now an Associate Professor of English at the University of South Carolina. In addition to her scholarly publications on Southern writers, she has published a chapbook of her own poems, *Physical Science* (Finishing Line Press, 2010).

## CAROLINA MOURNING; OR, STILL LIFE WITH SQUIRRELS

*a review by John Steen*

**Laurence Avery. *Mountain Gravity*. Chapel Hill, NC: New Atlantic Media, 2013.**

**Shelby Stephenson. *The Hunger of Freedom*. Princeton, NJ: Red Dashboard, 2014.**

**JOHN STEEN** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at ECU, where he teaches, conducts research on twentieth-century poetry in the Stuart Wright Collection of the J.Y. Joyner Library, and serves as an *NCLR* editorial board member.

**LAURENCE AVERY** received his MA from the University of Michigan and his PhD from the University of Texas, then joined the faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at UNC Chapel Hill. In 2006, he received the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association's R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for his significant contribution to North Carolina Literature, in particular, for his work on Paul Green, including the UNC Press editions *A Southern Life: Letters of Paul Green, 1916–1981* (1994), *The Paul Green Reader* (1998; reviewed in *NCLR* 2000), and a scholarly edition of *The Lost Colony* (2001). See his essays on Green in *NCLR* 2009 and 2012 and his poetry in *NCLR* 2010 and 2013. His poems have also been published in *Tar River Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *Poetry Southeast*.

Read about North Carolina's current Poet Laureate **SHELBY STEPHENSON** in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame story in this issue.

Many readers will recognize the names of Laurence Avery and Shelby Stephenson, whose verse and critical prose have already graced the pages of *NCLR*. For those who missed their initial offerings, both of these books showcase poets who, though they hail from opposite ends of the state, transcribe the sounds of North Carolina's past as they echo in its present. Because they aim for accuracy, some of these voices are bitter; many speak in dialect; a few, delightfully, aren't even human. All told, they compose a powerful after-image of what Stephenson calls "the world as memory" and a presentiment of what Avery calls, in the words of a dying Cherokee woman, "the bright days ahead."

As this range of tones and times suggests, both *Mountain Gravity* and *The Hunger of Freedom* manage to instruct and to delight. Their careful renderings of some of the most painful scenes from the state's early history – those of Cherokee removal and slavery – remind readers that literature serves, in Kafka's words, as an "axe for the frozen sea within us."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, in lyrics describing the grace of the natural environment and of rural livelihood, Avery and Stephenson suggest that the state's unique beauty endears itself to a microscopic vision.

By integrating their historical narratives with lyric meditations on vitality in the midst of transience, both books manage to appeal to personal and public concerns.

It's the rare book of poetry that demands to be read in the quiet of one's own room and, to use W.B. Yeats's phrase, "among school children,"<sup>2</sup> but it's a testament to Avery and Stephenson's skill that *Mountain Gravity* and *The Hunger of Freedom* succeed as creative textbooks and devotionals.

It is no surprise that **Laurence Avery** has written a book of statewide interest. Before his retirement as Professor of English at UNC Chapel Hill, he devoted a scholarly career to the work of North Carolina's most famous playwright, Paul Green. Although Green is best known for the outdoor drama *The Lost Colony*, which has played continuously at Roanoke Island since 1937, he set most of his plays and stories in a fictional town called "Little Bethel," which resembles the Harnett County of his birth, and he spent decades fighting for civil rights for the state's most vulnerable citizens. When Avery defines his backyard garden and his family history as similar "postage stamps" of ground in ***Mountain Gravity***, the impetus seems to come from Green; so, too, does Avery's recurrent interest in justice, particularly as it pertains to Native American treaties violated by the US government. Rather than merely depict the past, however, *Mountain Gravity* toggles between past injury and the burgeoning life of the present. In this way, Avery recalls words Paul Green wrote in a 1947 letter to James Holly Hanford, which Avery

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Oskar Pollak, 26 Jan. 1904.

<sup>2</sup> W.B. Yeats, "Among School Children," (London: Macmillan, 1928) 55–60.

selected for inclusion in *The Paul Green Reader*: “It is the custom these days to derive matters by way of historical description – a custom which of course is old and hallowed enough to be just that. Deep down I believe in constant and ever-appearing newness . . . essential to and one with the nature of the mind’s awareness.”<sup>3</sup>

Like the geography of the state in which, like Green, Avery sets both microscopic and macroscopic dramas, *Mountain Gravity* descends from the peaks and celebrates its ability to shift altitude. The title poem begins, “Up here at five thousand feet,” but makes use of the vantage point for an imaginative tracing of downward routes; not only has a certain historical gravity led settlers from Connecticut to the Carolinas, but a similar force also leads the speaker to consider the paradox by which a mountain creek must flow “always down . . . to its source in the Gulf.” In “Visitations,” the speaker hikes up a steep incline only to find downfall – a dilapidated guest lodge that nevertheless opens a portal to the culture of tourism in early twentieth-century Appalachia. In tandem with these physical changes, Avery always handles poetic material so as to wend away from absorbed reverie and toward practical knowledge.

In both their content and style, Avery’s poetry resembles another of North Carolina’s writers, A.R. Ammons, whose landscape poems never seek to recover a static natural order, but instead let natural dynamism set the pace for poetic form. *Mountain Gravity*, too, attends to unexpected shifts in the natural world with a pacing that befits revelations. Like unexpected waves, the poems break late, surprising the reader as they transform historical narrative or domestic observation into pithy or profound sentiment. After a careful description of the plant’s slow growth from late spring to early fall, “The Late Display of Yellow Sage,” delays any explanation of the speaker’s personal interest in the process until the final stanza:

November twilight. Against all the browns,  
whorls of yellow flowers  
atop the sage. I tip my cap,  
craving the likes of its late display of powers.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW MOREHEADS, COURTESY OF NCLR

Avery’s poems earn their moments of anthropomorphic revelation – the yellow sage as the honorable representative of renewed strength in age – by submitting all observation to an exacting standard of scientific precision. Even foliage on the poet’s property is referred to by its Latinate scientific name.

Avery’s use of family history in his poetry also bears Ammons’s imprint. Consider Ammons’s “First Carolina Said-Song,” which presents overheard dialect without editorial comment. In the poem, heavy rains delay the extended family’s wagon trip to a relative’s burial (North Carolina not yet having achieved its distinction as the transportation state). Yet the reader who chuckles at the journey’s humorous climax can be caught off-guard by its hairpin turn into mournful meditation:

and them mules a-running  
and him sloshing around in that chairful of water  
till he got scalded  
he said  
and ev

ery  
anch of skin come off his behind

we got there just in time to see her buried  
in an oak grove up  
back of the field

it’s growed over with soapbushes and huckleberries now.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Avery, ed. *A Paul Green Reader* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998) 275.

<sup>4</sup> A.R. Ammons, *The North Carolina Poems*, ed. Alex Albright (Rocky Mount: North Carolina Wesleyan College P, 2010) 60–61.

By allowing a family member's story to memorialize the dead implicitly, Ammons allows the levity of recollection to shade, but not entirely conceal, the gravitas of death. And by concealing an elegy within a found poem, he manages to break with formality without losing the emotional impact the more conventional genre, the formal elegy, often boasts. Avery's "Dealing with It" takes its cues from Ammons's poem in that it, too, veils its mourning in lighthearted, but ultimately transparent comedy. Avery, however, elegantly reverses Ammons's plot. Instead of arriving too late, the speaker has stayed too long after his mother's funeral and has been subjected to "a prolix uncle" delivering a polemic against technology. (Coincidentally, Southern writers since the Fugitives have been acquainted with the theme):

"Used to, I could fix  
damn near anything" -  
.....  
"Nowadays it's a damn sight different.  
Say your washer/dryer breaks,  
you gotta call Des Moines  
to get a number in Atlanta  
for 'em to fax somebody over  
from Santa Fe to fix it.  
You can stay sane living like that,  
even be entertained,  
as long as you appreciate  
how many folks got jobs  
rejuvenatin' the stuff -  
and have a washpot to use  
while you wait."

Read by itself, the last line of the poem takes on a double meaning, such that the speaker, in response to his mother's death, can, in Roland Barthes's words, "do no more than await [his] total, undialectical death."<sup>5</sup> But if Barthes's tone reflects an inconsolable grief, "Dealing With It" presents a speaker who can, after his mother's death, "stay sane" and perhaps "even be entertained" by accepting, in both its literal and figurative senses, the new economy. And it is this, Avery's capacity for seeding ordinary life with insight into the profound, that accounts for both the irresistible force and the utter readability of *Mountain Gravity*.

### Shelby Stephenson's *The Hunger of Freedom*

marks the tenth full-length collection of poems by a writer who, like Avery, recently completed a distinguished career in the University of North Carolina system. As Professor of English at UNC Pembroke, Stephenson published widely and served as editor of the literary journal *Pembroke Magazine* from 1979 to 2010. During his tenure, it featured the work of many of North Carolina's literary giants, alongside internationally recognized writers like Seamus Heaney, Barbara Guest, and Robert Pinsky. In contrast to the journal's international reach, Stephenson's poetry hews close in language and subject matter to the Johnson County homeplace where he still lives. And in contrast to Avery's urbane wit and Latin-inflected diction, Stephenson is resolutely regional, unmistakably Southern.

Much like Thomas McGuane's short stories of the American West, which initiate the unfamiliar reader to a culture as much by lexical as by descriptive means, Stephenson's vocabulary situates *The Hunger of Freedom* in North Carolina. Thus, dogs don't give birth but "find babies," boards are "froed" rather than riven, and older folks chew "the goozle," or windpipe, of a slaughtered hog to suck out its sweet marrow. Rather than isolate the South, however, Stephenson's poems distinguish themselves by the diversity of the approaches they take to the stories they tell and by the strength of their commitment to what Stephenson refers to, in one poem, as the "entanglements" of genealogy.

Stephenson's Bellday Poetry Prize-winning 2008 collection, *Family Matters: Homage to July, the Slave Girl*, considered the genealogical shame of having slaveholding ancestors. In selecting the book for the Bellday Prize, Allen Grossman compared *Family Matters* to the artistic interventions made by such historically invested writers as Susan Howe and James Agee. His citation for the award praises the poems' "strenuous questioning – and exposure – of the fictions of ownership, whether of persons or places, graves or farms."<sup>6</sup> Against a Southern poetic tradition that would defend its territory and customs against all opposition, Stephenson's willingness to remember even the indefensible aspects of family history

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 72.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the [website for Bellday Books](#).



bespeaks the possibility of a regional poetry newly energized by its ethical commitment to the present as well as its loyalty to the ways of the past.

As evidence of this commitment, several poems quote directly from archival sources. “Stealing Ran for Hunger after Freedom” copies out the two-column final page of an 1866 record held at the Johnson County Heritage Center:

ARTICLES	PURCHASER
\$C	
1 C[ross]cut saw	Baldy Sanders
4.75	
...	...
1 Male Mike	Dock Stephenson
132.00	

Poems like this one raise major issues for poetics, about which questions have been raised repeatedly related to time’s ability to adequately represent major historical violence. In this case, the similarity between the columns of the bill of sale and those of a poem on the page speaks, hauntingly, to the risk that poems repeat the crimes they seek to redress. If slavery could be accepted with such unremarked ordinariness in its time and place – if the sale of humans could be accomplished and recorded alongside the sale of a crosscut saw – then poems, whose balanced lines suggest the equality of incomparables, may, in their own way, be less effective for highlighting

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF DAVIS



ABOVE Shelby Stephenson reading Marty Silverthorne’s poem “How We Got Our Names,” which received honorable mention in the 2014 James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition (and is published in this issue), at the North Carolina Writer’s Conference, 26 July 2014

the violence of slavery than for recognizing the injustices inherent in artistic labor itself. It’s to Stephenson’s credit that no editorializing mars the archival excerpts, whose only accompaniment is silence.

Besides poems that consider the role of slavery in Southern history, among Stephenson’s most interesting are his dialect poems, which differ slightly from those of Ammons and Avery. Pairing anthropological precision with a proud intimacy that recalls the Appalachian interviewees of the *Foxfire* books, these poems preserve tales of often impoverished, always self-sustaining rural Southern lives that would otherwise be lost. It’s in one of these poems, “All the Dead Goats,” that Stephenson develops, complete with gospel imagery, one of his most horrifying and illuminating images.

The strength of Stephenson’s lyric voice, however, is most salient in elegy. “My Maternal Grandfather & My Mother or the World as Memory” contrasts the vague recollection of his grandfather’s suicide (“I thought he died way down in winter”) with the painful nearness of his mother’s death, about which he can only say, bluntly: “My mother is dead.” The second part of the poem momentarily recovers her world and closes with an acknowledgement that he owes his poetic vocation, his penchant for song, to her:

And she did not want to grow old cooking squirrel,

And what of the patch of color across the road –  
Where she gardened her lines, bending her knees to dust the  
vegetables,

Gathering them before fall left winter and another set of clothes  
She might live by, wonder at, humming as she said  
How it was time for some singing.

In *Bright Lights, Big City*, a book as different from Avery’s and Stephenson’s as can be imagined, Jay McInerney writes of the “republic of voices” that fills the narrator’s unbalanced, intoxicated mind.<sup>7</sup> It’s with sanguine and sober, but similarly plural, voices that *Mountain Gravity* and *The Hunger of Freedom* sing their own native republic. In so doing, Avery and Stephenson gift North Carolina readers with songbooks as varied in texture and as singular in tone as the state in which they’ve found sanctuary. ■

<sup>7</sup> Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (New York: Random House, 1984) 6.

## HONORABLE MENTION, 2014 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE

BY MARTY SILVERTHORNE

*How We Got Our Names*

Our names came out of the radio. Marty for Marty Robbins, Lynn for Loretta. Gene for Gene Autry, Hank for half a dozen Hanks who sank into bourbon. When the windows were raised in spring, crickets chimed in like Byrd's steel backing up Ernest Tubb. Grandma swore if Ernest ever stepped out of the TV set she'd waltz across Texas with him, but she was stretching the wool because she'd never leave Jasper who couldn't hit a flat note with a good hammer.

You can shimmy up this family tree and find a dozen Earls and Lesters, Kitty or Norma Jean singing you into a honkytonk heaven. Who hadn't rather *drink muddy water and sleep in a hollow log*, or be blind as Ray Charles and ate up with music? Faron and Ray Price, smooth as good bootleg. Aunt Patsy couldn't hit a note if it was her ticket to heaven; she was crazy and Willie's "Walls" couldn't hold her. Uncle Johnny was J.R. Cash; he looked all over Doodle Hill for one of Mother Maybelle's daughters, but he took up with one of the Hill girls in a tater-ridge necklace and cockroach stockings.

There won't no blue suede shoes or Buddy Holly rock-a-billy, just Doodle Hill Stomp, Sears and Roebuck mail order flat top guitars, Uncle Fred's cigar box full of juice harps. It was porch sitting, moonshine sipping, roll calling the Opry, wanting the glitter of Porter's suits, pistols off Webb's Pontiac. These comers and goers were named for the greats weeping out of the Saturday night radio.

COURTESY OF LEE HANSLEY GALLERY



*Return Trip Home* (mixed media collage on panel, 11.5x6.5) by Richard Kinnaid

**MARTY SILVERTHORNE** lives in Greenville, NC. He received his BA from St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, NC, and his MS from ECU. He has published four chapbooks, and his poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including *NCLR* 2008, 2009, and 2011, as well as *Tar River Poetry*, and *Pembroke Magazine*. He has received several North Carolina Arts Regional Grants to support his work, and in 1993, he received the Sam Ragan Fine Arts Award. [Listen](#) to the current North Carolina Poet Laureate, Shelby Stephenson, read this poem at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference.

**RICHARD KINNAID** (1931–2013) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He received his undergraduate degree from Carlton College in Northfield, MN, in 1954. He served for two years in the Air Force before receiving his MFA in 1957 at the University of Illinois-Urbana. He began his career as a member of the art faculty at Auburn University in Alabama in 1960 and subsequently accepted a faculty position at UNC Chapel Hill in 1964, where he remained until he retired in 2004. He was the recipient of many awards throughout his career, including a first place award in the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Artists Exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art in 1977. His art has been exhibited widely in the US and is in the permanent collections of such museums as the Museum of Modern Art in Seattle and the Ackland Art Museum at UNC Chapel Hill. See more of his work at [Lee Hansley Gallery](#).

## THE EVER-CHANGING FIELD

*a review by Sarah Huener*

**Becky Gould Gibson. *Heading Home*.  
Charlotte, NC: Main Street Rag,  
2014.**

**SARAH HUENER** is a writer and musician from North Carolina. She studied poetry as an undergraduate at UNC Chapel Hill and recently received her MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She has also traveled in Croatia and Israel as a Robert Pinsky Global Fellow. Her honors include being a finalist for the 2014 Pocatigo Poetry Contest and a Pushcart Prize nomination. Her poems have been published in *Four Way Review* and *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, and are forthcoming in *The Southern Poetry Anthology's* North Carolina volume (Texas Review Press).

With a PhD from UNC Chapel Hill, **BECKY GOULD GIBSON** taught literature, writing, and Women's Studies, mostly at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC, where she was a member of the faculty for twenty years before retiring in 2008. She has since served two terms as Gilbert Chappell Distinguished Poet for the Central District (2009–2011) and is a member of the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission. She has published two prize-winning chapbooks of poetry and three full-length collections, including the X.J. Kennedy Prize-winning book *Aphrodite's Daughter* (Texas Review Press, 2008; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008). *Heading Home* won the inaugural Lena M. Shull Book Contest in 2013, after the collection's title poem won the 2012 William Matthews Prize from the *Asheville Poetry Review*.

Becky Gould Gibson's latest book, *Heading Home*, is a varied and fresh collection by a veteran North Carolina poet who handles memory delicately by representing internal and external landscapes. Gibson's language is carefully wrought, her poems paced to effectively enact experiences of childhood, family, and love. Her nature poems are not like nature poems you've read before. Nature is often the occasion for a poem, but Gibson pushes beyond mere description, mining her imaginative material for deeper, unexpected resonances, as in "Summer Solstice in Pastels": "Field of cows, field of the painting. / Can we ever see anything as it is with the field always changing?"

In Gibson's processing of human experience, past and future blur and overlap. In the standout poem "Scuppernongs," the speaker remembers "all those summers, / you in another county, nearly a decade before we would meet" and feels all too acutely the inevitable separation of death: "To be alone as I was that distant August, / memory plucking the fruit of you, scuppernong ripe in my mouth." This poem displays the mastery of line and image present in the author's best poems, its natural images acting as the shuttle that weaves between internal and external, past, present, and future, carrying the thread of our attention along with it. Pleasure is central to the poems in this book, and the mélange of intellectual and physical satisfaction leaves the reader unsure which is more enjoyable: the sensations themselves, or Gibson's descriptions of them.

*Heading Home* is intelligently structured, with the more pastoral, reflective poems found in the first and last sections, bookending the

more fanciful middle sections. In the heart of the book, Gibson enacts various dialogues with the past, including figures from Plato and Socrates to Churchill and Christiane Amanpour, Saint Augustine and Saint Paul to Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. At times the heavily populated middle poems can seem capricious; one wonders why these particular figures were chosen, and sometimes the formal homages fall short of the success of Gibson's personal narrative poems. However, the imaginative action is impressive, and the poems in the central sections bring a tonal range to the book.

The final section of the book returns to the arena of nature and memory from the opening poems, but with an added air of familiarity and expectation. The poem "Sycamore, Late November" begins, "At last – I've waited. At last – you're naked, / of green divested, rid of leaves, large-veined." The intimacy of language and content shows the speaker as herself rooted but aware of and at peace with the changes taking place. This movement from patience to identification and discovery recalibrates our ear after the middle two sections, placing us once more in Gibson's more contemplative vein. Seasonally marked poems progress sequentially; the book embraces a cyclical movement on both a large scale and, ultimately, a smaller scale with the sequence that closes the final section.

*Heading Home* finishes with a remarkable royal crown of sonnets, a sequence of Gibson's own invention. The sonnets follow the growth of a fetus, each taking its first line from the last line of the previous sonnet, with the last sonnet bringing closed the crown by taking one line from each of

the previous sonnets. Clearly conceived and well executed, the sequence veers at times into the sentimental (“Some say the world is fallen. Here you’re safe”), at others into the sublime (“your face a mask of polished gold / for masquerade or funeral”). The most intimate moments are unassuming and lovely: “we know you’re a girl, will be a woman. / Will hook a bra without looking.” These instances echo poets like Alan Shapiro observing his young daughter look at herself in the mirror after a shower, foreshadowing womanhood:

She holds her breath to keep

the belly flat as she can get it  
before she breathes  
out as her self again, and laughs.<sup>1</sup>

The temporality shown by trees, reeds, and flowers in earlier poems is in Gibson’s collection present in a very specific human future. In the strongest moments of her book, Gibson successfully captures the strange duality of observing the cyclical decline and renewal of nature, finding change as a truth about humanity. Her light touch and careful balance are reminiscent of Michael Chitwood, another North Carolina poet writing with a keen ear to natural seasons as ways of expressing human experience:

everyone going  
about their business

as if seed  
and seedtime

were not  
swarming.<sup>2</sup>

The closing sonnets of *Heading Home* are a fitting bridge between the natural and human:

Marrow’s busy fashioning  
blood – to become rivers, tributaries,  
streams, stream-lets, creeks, brooks, branches, on the map  
of your body’s landscape.

Physiologically accurate and formally committed, the sonnets don’t falter. Their framing is appropriate and generative. Momentum builds with the echoing lines, morphing and adding to what came before, just as the fetus grows and changes over time. The



PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD MCGEE (RBMCGEEPHOTOGRAPHS.COM)

end poem of the sequence wisely relaxes formal requirements to allow a coherent, graceful moment of closure. Leaving these sonnets for the end of the book renews interest with the close examination of a subject only touched on earlier in the collection.

*Heading Home* projects the graceful assuredness of a mature writer dealing with the challenging landscapes of life. Versatile and intelligently conceived, these poems feel familiar in the best sense, comfortable without crossing into sheer anecdote. Gibson’s writing shows an intimate, reflexively illustrative relationship with nature, and this successful third book solidifies her place as an active figure in North Carolina’s literary scene. Keenly felt, yet compassionate and sometimes humorous, her work is unassuming and smart. *Heading Home* is a strong effort from a writer who understands the ebb and flow of life and appreciates the creative and philosophical potential of the written word. At times clever and funny, at other times quietly observant, Gibson is on par with some of our state’s best writers, and her latest effort is a journey to a place simultaneously past and present, looking toward future possibilities, calmly at home with the passage of time. ■

<sup>1</sup> Alan Shapiro, “Instruction,” *Tantalus in Love* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) 32.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Chitwood, “Moses,” *Poor Mouth Jubilee* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2010) 74.

# A GREAT DAY FOR POETRY IN NORTH CAROLINA: FOUR “GLOBAL NORTH CAROLINA” POETS INDUCTED INTO THE NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY HALL OF FAME

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

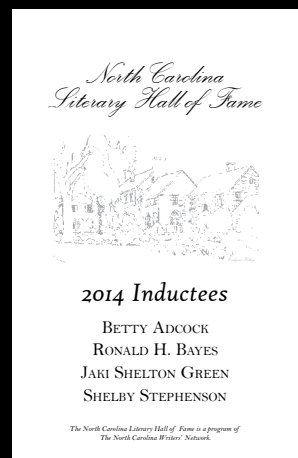
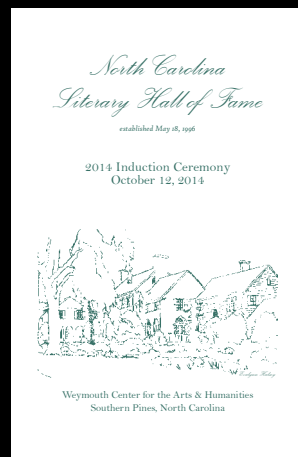
All four of the 2014 inductees into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame are poets, and all four are, by the definition that *NCLR* is using for this issue’s special feature section, “global” North Carolina writers. Two have, like so many of the writers in this issue (and the editor), moved to North Carolina from other states and made it their (our) home. The other two were born here, but have lived and traveled beyond the state’s borders. We are glad they decided that one can, indeed, come home again.

Expressing her pleasure with being “inducted into this group of incredible North Carolina writers,” Betty Adcock reminded the induction ceremony audience, “You know I’m from Texas,” but quickly added, “originally. I’m pretty much pure Tar Heel now.”\* This Texas native married Donald Adcock and moved to his native state, North Carolina, in 1957. “It looked enough like home to be very, very comfortable,” she told her audience. “I have found my place here, and I thank everyone in this state for what it has done for me,

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN G. HENSLEY



this ‘goodliest land.’” The induction ceremony took place outside of Weymouth Center where, Adcock noted, she had been one of “the first three writers ever to have a residency” (in 1979). She also remarked upon being mentored by Guy Owen and supported by the North Carolina editors who published her work, including *Tar River Poetry* Founding Editor Peter Makuck and fellow inductees Ronald Bayes and Shelby Stephenson. In the years since Adcock’s first poetry collection, *Walking Out* (Louisiana State UP, 1975), was published, she has taught in several North Carolina colleges and universities, including Meredith College and North Carolina State University in Raleigh, Duke University in Durham, Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, and Warren Wilson College in Asheville. Her awards include two Pushcart Prizes, the North Carolina Award for Literature, the Hanes Award for Poetry from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, the Roanoke-Chowan Award, the Sam Ragan Fine Arts Award, the Raleigh Fine Arts Award, a Fellowship in Poetry from the National



\* Quotations are from remarks made at the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame induction ceremony, Southern Pines, NC, 12 Oct. 2014. Watch this ceremony online and read more about these and the earlier inductees on the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame [website](#).

ABOVE New inductee Betty Adcock at the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame induction ceremony, Southern Pines, NC, 12 Oct. 2014

Louisiana native MARGARET D. BAUER moved to North Carolina in 1996 and has been editor of *NCLR* since 1997. Her latest books are *A Study of Scarletts: Scarlett O'Hara and Her Literary Daughters* (University of South Carolina Press, 2014), which includes chapters on North Carolina novels *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier and *The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan* by Kat Meads, and Paul Green's *The House of Connelly: A Critical Edition* (McFarland, 2014).

**“North Carolina is a strange place. We have been reading in New York and Philadelphia and elsewhere on our tour. And when we got to North Carolina, writers were always saying what wonderful writers they knew and we must meet them. We didn’t hear that anywhere else. It was always sort of a closed corporation, and we know two or three fine writers, and we’re it. And in North Carolina, a willingness to share these other talents was preeminent. Who could be in a finer place than North Carolina?”—Ron Bayes**

Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Individual Artist’s Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She has published six books of poetry, including *Slantwise: Poems* (Louisiana State UP 2008; reviewed in *NCLR* 2009). Read more about Adcock and her poetry in James Smith’s interview with her in *NCLR* 2009.

Introducing the next inductee, Ronald H. Bayes former North Carolina Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti asserted that Bayes “exemplifie[s] . . . what I have come to know as the soul of the North Carolina literary community – graciousness, generosity, courage, and the vested belief that writing is the province of all, regardless of stature.” Bayes was born in Oregon but has lived in North Carolina since 1968, when he was hired to teach at St. Andrews Presbyterian College (now St. Andrews University) in Laurinburg, where he founded and directed St. Andrews College Press, *St. Andrews Review*, *Cairn: The New St. Andrews Review*, *Gravity Hill*, and the Ronald H. Bayes Writers’ Forum. “He has given his life to the state of North Carolina, to all of us,” Bathanti commented, remarking upon how many other poetry careers this poet/professor has helped to launch. Bayes is the author of numerous books of poetry, including *The Casketmaker*, which won the Roanoke-Chowan Award in 1973. Bathanti is currently editing *The Complete Poems of Ronald H. Bayes*, to be published by St. Andrews College Press in 2015. Among Bayes’s previous honors and awards are a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship in American Literature, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship for creative writing, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and the 2002 North Carolina Writers’ Network’s inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature, which was also named in his honor. Bathanti called Bayes “our Whitman, who time again in his own

dazzling poems has taught us what it is to be a writer and a statesman who peers so deeply, so unflinchingly into the heart of things.”

A native of North Carolina, Jaki Shelton Green was born in Alamance County and grew up in Orange County, but she was educated outside of North Carolina. And she has traveled extensively, holding workshops and readings in the US, Europe, the Caribbean Islands, and Central and South Americas. Listen to her talk about her sense of being a “global” writer at the 2014 North Carolina Writers Conference. Green’s other honors include Piedmont Laureate, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and the Sam Ragan Fine Arts Award. She has published six books of poetry, including *breath of the song: New and Selected Poems* (Carolina Wren Press, 2005; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007), and her remarks at the ceremony included expressing her gratitude to Judy Hogan, the Founding Editor of Carolina Wren Press, and all the editors who followed who believed in and published her poetry, as well as the other writers – like Paul Green, who “invited me to lunch when I was in my twenties to sit at the table with John Hope Franklin because he had heard about me.” This 2014 inductee also expressed her appreciation of her “writer friends and colleagues and peers and mentors all across the state [who] have helped me to lift and expand my voice in ways that are extraordinary. . . . This is who we are in North Carolina: we are a rich, strong community of writers that never stop giving.”

“I know of few poets who embody the words North Carolina in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame more fully or more vividly than Shelby Stephenson,” said Ed Wilson (Provost Emeritus of Wake Forest University) during his remarks about the fourth 2014 inductee.

Stephenson is another native North Carolinian, but fellow Johnston County writer Margaret Maron reports in her introduction to him for the induction ceremony's printed program that an early "job with AT&T sent him traveling through seven northeastern states," after which he enrolled in some classes at the University of Pittsburg and then in the PhD program at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Stephenson certainly did "come home again," to North Carolina, with his wife Linda (Nin), "his best editor," according to Maron and Wilson. After a long career at UNC Pembroke where Stephenson edited *Pembroke Magazine*, he retired to his family's homeplace near Benson, where he continues to write and publish his poetry. His latest collection, *The Hunger of Freedom* (Red Dashboard, 2014), is reviewed in this issue. Stephenson's honors include the North Carolina Award in Literature, as well as the Oscar Arnold Young Award, the Zoe Kincaid-Brockman Award, and the Brockman-Campbell Award. And in 2014, he was named Poet Laureate of North Carolina.

"Poets and writers, yeah!" Shelby Stephenson said, upon stepping up to the podium. "What a place this is, and what a special state we live in." Indeed. The theme of the day at the 2014 induction ceremony was the generosity of the North Carolina writing community, as evidenced by the support writers give each other in, to use 2004 Inductee Doris Betts's term, "the writingest state." Both the poets who introduced the latest inductees and the inductees themselves remarked upon each other's generosity of time with and support of each other's work. For example, new inductee Ron Bayes reported to the Weymouth audience how many of the writers visiting North Carolina have told him that "North Carolina is a strange place. We have been reading in New York and Philadelphia and elsewhere on our tour. And when we got to North Carolina, writers were always saying what wonderful writers they knew and we must meet them. We didn't hear that anywhere else. It was always sort of a closed corporation, and we know two or three fine writers, and we're it. And in North



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Carolina, a willingness to share these other talents was preminent. Who could be in a finer place than North Carolina?" Certainly not the editor of a publication like this one. I am always heartened by the support of each other that I witness when I attend literary events in my adopted state. The mutual affection between writers (and editors) in North Carolina has, in fact, inspired next year's special feature topic for *NCLR's* 25<sup>th</sup> issue: North Carolina's nurturing writing community. ■

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