



NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

O N L I N E

2020

FEATURING NORTH CAROLINA
EXPATRIATE WRITERS

IN THIS ISSUE

Interviews with Kat Meads, George Hovis, and more ■ Essay by Kerry Madden-Lunsford ■ Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize Winner ■ James Applewhite Poetry Prize Finalists ■ Book Reviews and Literary News

COVER ART

Untitled (watercolor on paper and foam core, 23.5x17.5) by A.R. Ammons, from the Overcash-Wright Literary Collection, A.R. Ammons Papers (Collection # 1096), East Carolina University Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Department, J.Y. Joyner Library; courtesy of John Ammons

A.R. AMMONS has been featured often in *NCLR* since its inception when the native Eastern North Carolinian served as "Staff Poet" in spite of his Ithaca, NY, residence, where he taught at Cornell University. He provided original poems for the first five issues. Read Founding Editor Alex Albright's interview with Ammons in the premiere (1992) issue, essays on the poet in the 1995 and 2006 issues, and a review of *The Complete Poems of A.R. Ammons* in *NCLR Online* 2019.

COVER DESIGNER

NCLR Art Director **DANA EZZELL LOVELACE** is a 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, she designed the Five Expatriates interview in the feature section and the Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize essay in the North Carolina Miscellany section.

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

© COPYRIGHT 2020 **NCLR**



IN THIS ISSUE

6 ■ North Carolina Expatriate Writers

includes poetry, prose, interviews, book reviews, and literary news

Fred Chappell	Mary Robinette Kowal	Susan Laughter Meyers	Tara Powell	De'Shawn Charles Winslow
Jim Coby	Kerry Madden-Lunsford	Monica Carol Miller	Lionel Shriver	Marly Youmans
Paula Gallant Eckard	Armistead Maupin	Robert Morgan	Helen Stead	
Robert Hill	Kat Meads	Michael Parker	Pam Van Dyk	
George Hovis	Priscilla Melchior	Dale Ray Phillips	Eric Walker	

80 ■ Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues

includes poetry, book reviews, and literary news

J.S. Absher	David Clinton	Michael Hill	Al Maginnes	Brenda Rufener
Dale Bailey	James A. Crank	Brianne Holmes	Gina Malone	Susan Schmidt
Cindy Baldwin	Nanette Davidson	Judy Hogan	Anna Jean Mayhew	Krystal A. Smith
Celia Bland	Tyree Daye	Marjorie Hudson	Gillian McDunn	Mark Smith-Soto
Lisa Wenger Bro	David Deutsch	Scott Huler	Anna McFadyen	Shelby Stephenson
Kathryn Stripling Byer	Rebecca Duncan	Jeff Jackson	Joseph Mills	Melinda Thomsen
Cameron Bynum	Georgann Eubanks	Jen Julian	Lenard D. Moore	David C. Tillinghast
Catherine Carter	Therese Anne Fowler	Wayne Johns	Angela Love Moser	Michele Walker
Diane Chamberlain	Philip Gerard	Randall Kenan	Valerie Nieman	Robert M. West
Fred Chappell	Becky Gould Gibson	Kathryn Kirkpatrick	Jon Obermeyer	Charles Dodd White
Kevin Cherry	Jaki Shelton Green	John Lang	Tori Reynolds	De'Shawn Charles
Michael Chitwood	Jim Grimsley	John Lawson	Gary Richards	Winslow
Jim Clark	Christy Alexander Hallberg	Meagan Lucas	David Rigsbee	Marly Youmans
Christie Collins	John Hanley	Kelly Starling Lyons	Lorraine Hale Robinson	Lee Zacharias

146 ■ North Carolina Miscellany

includes poetry, prose, and book reviews

Emily Banks	Mark Cox	Holly Iglesias	Laura Sloan Patterson	Samia Serageldin
Wilton Barnhardt	David Deutsch	James W. Kirkland	Emma Phillips	George Singleton
Anna Lena Phillips Bell	Michael Gaspeny	Mesha Maren	Kevin Rippin	Lee Smith
Barbara Bennett	Jonathan Giles	Joseph Mills	Betty Ritz Rogers	Helen Stead
Belle Boggs	John Frank Haugh	Savannah Paige Murray	Etaf Rum	Hannah Crane Sykes
Barbara Campbell	Faith S. Holsaert	Amy Elsie Parkes	Kathryn Schwillie	Eric Tran
				Maura Way

■ North Carolina Artists in this issue ■

A.R. Ammons	Bongsang Cho	Foozhan Kashkooli	Kenny Nguyen	Taylor O. Thomas
Jonathan Bowling	Carolina Coto	Michael Klauke	Marjorie Pierson	Barbara Tyroler
Jarrett Burch	Carolyn DeMeritt	Jean LeCluyse	Thomas Schmidt	Jan-Ru Wan
Brie Castell	Daniel Essig	Mitchell Lonas	Kirsten Stolle	Angela Franks Wells
Jane Cheek	Charlotte Foust	Chieko Murasugi	Dawn Surratt	

North Carolina Literary Review is published annually in the summer by the University of North Carolina Press. The journal is sponsored by East Carolina University® with additional funding from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. *NCLR Online*, published in the winter, is an open access supplement to the print issue.

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

Address correspondence to

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

252.328.1537 Telephone
252.328.4889 Fax
BauerM@ecu.edu Email
NCLRuser@ecu.edu
NCLRsubmissions@ecu.edu

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

Subscriptions to the print issues of *NCLR* are, for individuals, \$16 (US) for one year or \$27 (US) for two years, or \$27 (US) annually for institutions and foreign subscribers. Libraries and other institutions may purchase subscriptions through subscription agencies. Individuals or institutions may also receive *NCLR* through membership in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. More information on our [website](#).

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

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 #30 (2021) will feature **Healing through Writing**.

Read more about this topic on page 176 of this issue.

Issue #31 (2022) will feature **Moved Here, Made it Home**

Please [email](#) your suggestions for other special feature topics to the editor.

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.

Advertising rates

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

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

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

Advertising discounts available to *NCLR* [vendors](#).

Editor

Margaret D. Bauer

Art Director

Dana Ezzell Lovelace

Poetry Editor

Jeffrey Franklin

Fiction Editor

Liza Wieland

Art Editor

Diane A. Rodman

Founding Editor

Alex Albright

Original Art Director

Eva Roberts

Graphic Designers

Karen Baltimore

Stephanie Whitlock Dicken

Senior Associate Editor

Christy Alexander Hallberg

Assistant Editors

Randall Martocchia

Helen Stead

Managing Editors

Sean Morris

Angela Love Moser

Editorial Assistants

Megan Brown

Max Kilgore

Laura Pittman

Ashten Shope

Mayee Zhu

Interns

Emily Bolton

Matthew Giordana

Lily Johnson

Amber Knox

Devin Raines

EDITORIAL BOARD**William Andrews**

Professor Emeritus, UNC Chapel Hill

Laurence Avery

Professor Emeritus, UNC Chapel Hill

Barbara Bennett

English, North Carolina State University

Jennifer Brandt

Women's Studies, California State University Dominguez Hills

Catherine Carter

English, Western Carolina University

Virginia Cope

English, The Ohio State University

Celestine Davis

English, East Carolina University

Tony Earley

English, Vanderbilt University

Richard Ellis

American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, UK

SallyAnn Ferguson

Professor Emeritus, UNC Greensboro

Anna Froula

English, East Carolina University

Gabrielle Brant Freeman

English, East Carolina University

Giuseppe Getto

English, East Carolina University

Brian Glover

English, East Carolina University

June Guralnick

Writing, Central Carolina Community College

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke

Creative Writing, University of California Riverside

George Hovis

English, SUNY Oneonta

Donna Kain

English, East Carolina University

Anne Mallory

English, East Carolina University

Kat Meads

Red Earth MFA program, Oklahoma City University

Eddie A. Moore

English, East Carolina University

Randon Noble

Creative Writing, American University

Marc Petersen

English, East Carolina University

Kendrick Prewitt

English, University of West Alabama

Angela Raper

English, East Carolina University

Terry Roberts

National Paideia Center

Amber Flora Thomas

English, East Carolina University

Writers without Borders

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

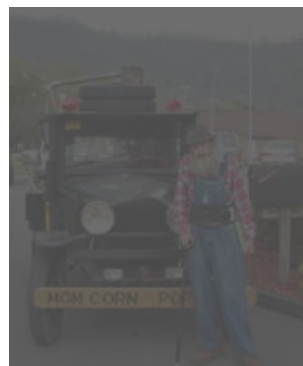
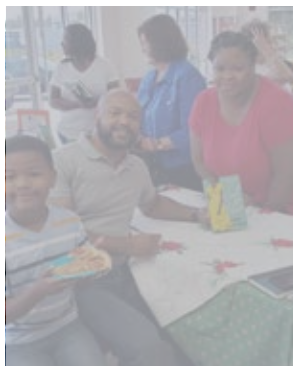
Everyone in the literary community of North Carolina has heard a writer – or editor – quip, “You can’t throw a rock in this state without hitting a writer.” Back in *NCLR* 2001, Warren Rochelle, who wrote an introductory bibliographic essay on the issue’s theme, noted the high possibility that you might hit a writer of speculative fiction. When we were working on the 2006 special feature section on children’s and young adult literature, I realized there was no shortage of such writers here either. Indeed, throughout the years, whatever genre, group, or theme we featured in our pages, we have never had any difficulty filling them (sometimes over-filling, as the forthcoming print issue promises to do).

It turns out that it might be dangerous for North Carolina writers if rocks are thrown anywhere, not just within the state’s borders. The Old North State seems a fertile starting point, even if some writers do not remain. As the reviews and interviews in the feature section of this issue reveal, North Carolina born and/or raised writers are living just across the border in Tennessee (Kerry Madden-Lunsford and Mary Robinette Kowal), Virginia (Priscilla Melchior), and South Carolina (Robert Hill, Tara Powell, and before her untimely passing, Susan Laughter Meyers) and across the country (from Kat Meads and Armistead Maupin in California; Michael Parker recently retired to Texas; to Robert Morgan, Marly Youmans, George Hovis, and De’Shawn Charles Winslow in New York); and beyond, with Lionel Shriver in England. Some of

these writers continue to set their work in North Carolina, others place them elsewhere, but they are all influenced in one way or another by their roots or raising in “the writingest state.”

Thanks to all who conducted interviews for the two 2020 issues, and especially to George Hovis, who not only provided the “Virtual Road Trip” interview with five North Carolina expatriates you’ll find here, but also chaired a panel for *NCLR* at the SAMLA conference to help solicit literary criticism on the theme. George has given so much to *NCLR* over the years – through his critical essays and interviews and his service as reader and reviewer – so I am pleased we have the opportunity to give back here, with Paula Gallant Eckard’s interview with him, in which he talks about his new novel, clearly inspired by his years growing up in Charlotte, NC.

Enjoy the interviews, reviews, and poetry in these pages, and then don’t forget to subscribe or renew to make certain you don’t miss the print issue, which will feature more North Carolina expatriates, reaching back to Harriet Jacobs’s life in Boston after escaping enslavement in Edenton, NC, and Charles Chesnut’s writings about race relations in turn-of-the-century North Carolina from his Ohio home. The print issue will include more interviews with as well as essays about contemporary writers – again, from California (Gwendolyn Parker), through Texas (Ben Fountain), to Pennsylvania (Stephanie Powell Watts), and beyond (Lionel Shriver). ■



NORTH CAROLINA

Expatriate Writers

- 8** *Born Southern [but] Restless: An Interview with Kat Meads*
by Pam Van Dyk
- 18** *A Reconstruction of Logics Past*
a review by Monica Carol Miller
Armistead Maupin, *Logical Family*
- 21** *Circus Gone Off Line: Fade to Black*
a poem by Robert Hill
art by Kirsten Stolle
- 22** *You Are What Owns You: Short Fiction by Lionel Shriver*
a review by Eric C. Walker
Lionel Shriver, *Property*
- 24** *North Carolina Native Mary Robinette Kowal Awarded Trifecta in Speculative Fiction*
by Helen Stead
- 26** *Missing Ernestine, My Mountain Mother*
an essay by Kerry Madden-Lunsford
- 37** *Circumlocution*
a poem by Priscilla Melchior
art by Michael Klauke
- 38** *Melodic Musings*
a review by Fred Chappell
Susan Laughter Meyers, *Self-Portrait in the River of Déjà Vu*
- 40** *To Give Voice to Everything*
a review by Jim Coby
Michael Parker, *Prairie Fever*
- 42** *A New South Morality Tale*
a review by Paula Gallant Eckard
George Hovis, *The Skin Artist*
- 44** *A Conversation with a Southern Writer: An Interview with George Hovis*
by Paula Gallant Eckard
- 55** *The Woman in the Walls*
a poem by Marly Youmans
art by Jan-Ru Wan
- 56** *A Virtual Road-Trip Interview: Conversations with Five Expatriate North Carolina Writers*
by George Hovis



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 80** ■ **Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues**
poetry, book reviews, and literary news
- 176** ■ **North Carolina Miscellany**
poetry, prose, and book reviews

BORN *Southern* [BUT] *Restless:*

An Interview with Kat Meads

BY PAM VAN DYK

notes contributed by the NCLR staff



Kat Meads grew up in Shawboro, North Carolina. This Eastern North Carolina native received her undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her graduate degree in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She moved to California in 1989 and currently lives in the Bay Area. Since 2010, she has been on the faculty of Oklahoma City University's low-residency MFA program. An award-winning author of twenty books and chapbooks of prose and poetry, Meads has received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a California Artist Fellowship, two Silicon Valley artist grants, and artist residencies at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Yaddo, Millay Colony, Dorland, and the Montalvo Center for the Arts. Her short plays have been produced in New York, Los Angeles, Berkeley, and elsewhere. She is a multiple *ForeWord Reviews* Book of the Year finalist, and her essays have been selected as Notables in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Best American Essays* series.

This interview was conducted via email in October 2019. It has been only slightly edited for clarity and style. In our exchange, Kat Meads offers insight into what it means to be an expat North Carolinian and how physical ties to North Carolina (such as her desktop, made from timber from her grandmother's land, and visits to her childhood home over the years) have kept her connected to her roots. Having lived in and written from California for thirty years, Kat describes the experience as an opportunity to understand how our place of origin shapes us and those around us, as evident in her work, in which "ordinary" struggles are a theme. She often sets her writing during the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, a period when Southern identity was challenged, and North Carolina was rapidly changing, all fertile ground for, as Kat describes, turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. Here, we discuss her process, what it's like to write about home, how she came to live and work in California, her literary influences, and what inspired her forthcoming novel, *Dear DeeDee*.

“THE DESKTOP I WRITE ON WAS MADE BY MY UNCLE USING TIMBER FROM MY GRANDMOTHER’S LAND. WHEREVER I GO, IT GOES WITH ME.”



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

“NO MATTER WHERE I START – IN ANY GENRE – MANY, MANY REVISIONS FOLLOW. IF I DIDN’T THINK I’D BE ABLE TO REVISE, I’D NEVER WRITE A WORD.”

PAM VAN DYK: *Describe your ideal writing space.*

KAT MEADS: I don’t think I have one. It’s less a question of space for me than time. Will I, this week, manage to have X hours to work on my projects versus money work? I’m much more particular about my desk. The desktop I write on was made by my uncle using timber from my grandmother’s land. Wherever I go, it goes with me.

Describe your process.

In fiction, the kick-off is usually an image – Thomas Senestre’s apartment, Kitty Duncan’s sun-tanning backyard, Beth Anderson’s house trailer in a cornfield. In the story “Earth, Wind, Water” from *Not Waving*, it was the couple seeing, mid-hurricane, a stranger float past, clinging to debris. For poems, the process is more tied to an emotion or a single line or phrasing that I want to investigate further. But I’ve also written poems based on haunting memories. “No Kin of Mine,” from *Quizzing the Dead*, recreates the morning that a classmate ran down the steps of her house to tell us, her high school carpool, that her father had died.¹

If, in my head, I’m “hearing” some sort of argument or intriguing verbal skirmish between characters, I might see if that kernel can be turned into a readable and performable short play. In my short play *Nevermore*, the skirmish is between Edgar Allan Poe and the raven (who feels ill-used by the author).² Most of my nonfiction has a research element to it, so for that genre I begin by amassing facts and figures and hope, sometime during the accumulation, to sense a narrative pattern emerging.

I had a slightly different experience with what became the essay “Undone: Bessie Wallis of Baltimore” in *2:12 a.m.* I’d originally thought I was doing research for a novel about the young Wallis Simpson, prior to her Duchess of Windsor era, but could never find a way into that fiction that satisfied me. The essay, in recounting my compositional trials and tribulations with the project, salvaged a lot of the research, putting it to other use, which made me feel *slightly* better about the no-go novel. To do the background research for *For You, Madam Lenin* took somewhere in the region of six years and a trip to Russia.³ Willis Brooks, who taught Russian history at UNC, kindly agreed to read the manuscript and corrected some of my interpretations (as well as my misspellings). The book is dedicated to him, not only in thanks for his help with the manuscript but because his Russian history classes were the best. Little did I realize where that introduction to the Russian Revolution would culminate for me.

No matter where I start – in any genre – many, many revisions follow. If I didn’t think I’d be able to revise, I’d never write a word.

ABOVE Meads in St. Petersburg conducting research for *For You, Madam Lenin*

¹ *Not Waving* (Livingston, 2001; reviewed in *NCLR* 2004); *Quizzing the Dead* (Pudding House, 2002).

² *Nevermore* (Santa Cruz County Actors’ Theatre, 2013).

³ Meads’s novel *For You, Madam Lenin* (Livingston, 2012) received an Independent Publishers’ Silver Medal and was shortlisted for the Montaigne Medal for thought-provoking literature. Her essay collection *2:12 a.m.* (Stephen F. Austin State UP, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015) received an Independent Publishers’ Gold Medal.

COURTESY OF KAT MEADS



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS



ABOVE TOP Meads's Mawatuck County novels

ABOVE BOTTOM The author's childhood home

Some people never write about their place of origin; others do almost exclusively. Why do you think that is?

I'm not sure why that is, but I suspect that most writers live with a certain wonder regarding where they began and where they now find themselves, geographically and otherwise. Even so, not every writer feels it necessary to explore that wonder on the page. For many of us who do write about where we come from, I think it's a bid for clarity, to try to better understand the forces that shaped not only ourselves but others who shared our environment. Hometowns and families are complicated subjects. You don't exhaust those subjects, but maybe you put them aside now and again to work on something purely invented – that's been my MO. My Mawatuck County novels are set in a fictionalized version of my home county, Currituck. *Kitty Duncan* takes place between the late 1950s and the 1970s; *When the Dust Finally Settles* is set in 1968, *In This Season of Rage and Melancholy* in 1978.⁴ Between the 1950s and late 1970s, the actual county of Currituck underwent enormous change, social, political, and economic. I wanted to write about those changes because I was interested in the upheavals themselves and also because I lived through them.

Is it easier to write about home from afar?

I haven't found that to be the case for me, or at least I'm not conscious of feeling any restriction in that regard. Also, I was still in North Carolina when I wrote bits and pieces of what eventually became the Mawatuck County novels: *The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan*, *When the Dust Finally Settles*, and *In This Season of Rage and Melancholy Such Irrevocable Acts as These*. Those novels went through many revisions, shapes, and sizes before getting published, of course. (*Rage and Melancholy's* Leeta Porter Scaff actually made her first appearance in my UNCG MFA thesis – sobering thought!) And during those revising years, I wasn't in exile. I came home multiple times a year until my mother's death in 2008, and even thereafter when my brother and I dealt with cleaning out her house and tried to figure out a way to keep our childhood home. Unfortunately, and painfully, we weren't able to do that. So although I had a West Coast address, up until five years ago, I kept current on all the community's doings. It's a rare gift for anyone who has left home to be able to return to the house and community she was raised in, to reconnect with her roots and family in that direct, immediate way. I'm very grateful I had that opportunity.

⁴ *The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan* (Chiasmus, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008); *When the Dust Finally Settles* (Ravenna, 2011); *In This Season of Rage and Melancholy Such Irrevocable Acts as These* (Mongrel Empire, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2018). *NCLR* Editor Margaret D. Bauer included a chapter on Meads's *Kitty Duncan* novel in her book *A Study of Scarletts: Scarlett O'Hara and Her Literary Daughters* (UP of South Carolina, 2014).



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

Why did you choose to move to California? You've been there for a long time now.

I live in the Santa Cruz Mountains, at this moment under a Red Flag fire alert. Growing up in Currituck County, I learned what to expect from hurricanes, but still haven't gotten used to the threat and actuality of wildfires. Terrifying. When I first moved to California, I lived on the Silicon Valley "side of the hill," as they say here. My partner, the painter Philip Rosenthal, and I had received artist fellowships to return to Montalvo Center for the Arts in Saratoga and were all but on the road when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck, and Montalvo had to cancel residencies. In late November of that year, 1989, we opted to make the trip west regardless, and have been here ever since.

Do you consider yourself a Californian or a North Carolinian?

In general, I think of myself as a displaced Southerner and in particular a displaced North Carolinian. But I have, over the years, become quite attached to much of the landscape out here, especially the Anza-Borrego Desert. Artist residencies – a pre-earthquake residency at Montalvo and another at Dorland Mountain Colony – got me to California in the first place. But I've stayed around because of jobs.

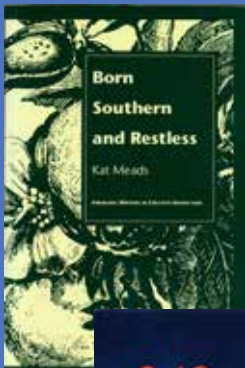
How has your writing changed since you moved to California? Or has it?

I'm not sure the writing itself – meaning my writing style – has changed all that much. But what I've written about has expanded to cover a few things Californian: "What Lies in Closets," a Patty Hearst essay and a piece on the strange and surreal Salton Sea, both collected in *2:12 a.m.* It would have been possible to write a version of those essays through research alone, but would I have been so inclined if I hadn't tramped along the Salton Sea's shoreline of bones or walked the Benvenue Avenue area of Berkeley? Probably not. Actually tramping the terrain turns out to be an important part of my process.

In terms of fiction, the California influence is definitely apparent in *Sleep*, a speculative novel and the first novel I published.⁵ It's a narrative set in the near



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS



COURTESY OF DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY PRESS



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

COURTESY OF KAT MEADS



ABOVE TOP *California #5* by the author's life partner, Philip Rosenthal, whose art appears on the covers of many of her books

ABOVE MIDDLE Kat Meads on her way west, 1989

ABOVE BOTTOM Meads's 1996 memoir, which inspired the title of this interview

RIGHT Meads on the shore of the Salton Sea, 2003

⁵ *Sleep* (Livingston, 2004); performed as a play at the Shee Theatre in San Francisco, 3 June 2004.

“PROF P AND HIS ILK ARE NO LONGER THE BENEFICIARIES OF LIMITLESS QUARRY BECAUSE HOW MANY MISS JANES *STILL* EXIST (IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES, SOUTH ATLANTIC REGION OR ELSEWHERE) TO BE LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY DICKED WITH?”—MISS JANE, *THE LOST YEARS* (39)



future about a society divided into the Valley’s overworked and under-rested citizens and The Retreat’s dreamer cult. Operating in the shadows between those two extremes is a band of (also) sleep-deprived Valley Deserters. There’s a lot of Silicon Valley worker angst in that book as well as a hefty amount of anxiety about a culture of information overload. And that novel was published fifteen years ago! That novel was also, as might be guessed from the title, a manuscript I started working on when I wasn’t sleeping well, the earliest stage of my insomnia.

Sleep was also performed as a play by San Francisco’s Shee Theatre. What was that experience like?

It was a terrific experience, first to last. I worked with Ginny Reed, the director, on the play script, met the actresses, attended rehearsals. I’m keen on rehearsals. Rehearsals zip-zop reveal what is and isn’t working in a play script. No equivocating, no hiding the fact. The *Sleep* play was performed at a few Bay Area bookstores as well as the San Francisco Public Library auditorium, which was a great venue because we could do more there with sound and lights and visuals. Best of all, people seemed to really appreciate a performance by the many as opposed to a “straight” reading by a single author. The cast and I all answered questions during the Q&A session. It’s my dream to present every book in that fashion.

You’ve written under at least two pseudonyms – maybe more? Why write as someone else?

Yes, only two thus far: Lessie Boyt and Z.K. Burrus. (I won’t rule out a third.) Lessie came about when I ventured into writing plays, Z.K. when I wanted to try my hand at a mystery. A different name for a different genre, basically. Fair warning, though: if you plan to appear in public under an alias, be sure to remember your fake name. During rehearsals for *Husbands Found Dead*, I suddenly realized “Lessie” had been called upon to comment – repeatedly called upon, apparently – while I, oblivious, snacked on a cookie.⁶ Although I got with the program after that, suspicion followed me, I must say.

For *Senestre on Vacation*, I was curious if reviewers would automatically assume a writer using initials (despite the example of A.M.

⁶ Kat Meads, *Husbands Found Dead*, *North Carolina Literary Review* 18 (2009): 104–109.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY CARAWAN

Homes and others) was male.⁷ They did. I briefly toyed with the idea of hiring a Z.K. Burrus stand-in to do readings, but didn't, I'm sorry to say, follow through. My editor at Livingston Press, the noble Joe Taylor, was skeptical of the non-Kat Meads credit but went along with it, which I appreciated. *Senestre's* Pantego setting is straight up Manteo, by the way. And *Senestre's* hotel room is room 13 at the Tranquil House Inn. As one of my friends who'd vacationed with me there said, "I think I've been in that hotel room." She had, indeed.

In The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan and Miss Jane: The Lost Years, the characters are so authentic.⁸ Without giving away names, did the characters come to you whole cloth or were they inspired by real people? How do your characters evolve as you progress in the novel?

In both cases, Kitty and Miss Jane are fictitious.⁹ Have I known people who resembled, in one or another aspect, those characters? Sure. And in the case of college gal Miss Jane, regrettably, I've known more than a few and read about scores of others. A female chorus narrates *Miss Jane: The Lost Years*, and that chorus functions as a single-voiced character. To write any character, I need a clear idea of what she or he wants. Kitty Duncan wants out of the female restrictions imposed by her time and place. Miss Jane wants not to embarrass herself in college, intellectually, socially, aspirationally. The chorus in *Miss Jane* wants the reader to understand Miss Jane's plight is far from uncommon: professors can – and some do – manipulate students. The teacher/student relationship can – and



COURTESY OF LIZA WIELAND

ABOVE TOP The Tranquil House Inn in Manteo, NC

ABOVE BOTTOM Kat Meads and NCLR Fiction Editor Liza Wieland traveling in New Mexico for the Georgia O'Keeffe tour, Oct. 2014

⁷ Z.K. Burrus, *Senestre on Vacation* (Livingston, 2011).

⁸ *Miss Jane: The Lost Years* (Livingston, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019).

⁹ The author addressed the non-autobiographical nature of her work, too, in an interview with *NCLR* Editor Margaret D. Bauer and Fiction Editor Liza Wieland, published under the title "I am not Kitty Duncan" in *NCLR* 2009.

sometimes does – become a game of power politics. Mickey Waterman in *Rage and Melancholy* wants revenge – and lots of it. Luce in *Sleep* wants to reunite with her mother. Discovering, during the write out, how the characters get, or attempt to get, what they want is the fun part. Fun, and often surprising.

Your upcoming work, Dear DeeDee, is an epistolary work of creative nonfiction, written as letters home to North Carolina.¹⁰ Can you talk about the structure of Dear DeeDee? Why the epistolary style?

The set-up of *Dear DeeDee* is a twelve-month correspondence, California to North Carolina, from Aunt K (me) to niece DeeDee, in 1996. I chose 1996 to accommodate a college-age niece and to write from the perspective of someone newly arrived in California. I didn't want to structure it as an email correspondence. True, lots of people were communicating by email by then, but some of us still preferred the USPS for personal correspondence, and the more leisurely, ruminative style of snail mail better suited the book's content. Technically, I was interested in the challenge of the epistolary form: addressing one specific recipient but simultaneously trying to have that supposedly private communication be universal enough in reach and content to entertain an unrelated third party. Not sure anyone else would agree with me, but apart from the headings, salutations, and sign-offs, I think the book can be read as a series of flash essays.

What were you trying to convey to readers with this work?

The bonds of family. The character of a particular Eastern North Carolina farming community as it existed during my childhood. The effects of leaving the South in body (if not mind). How both genetics and circumstance conspire to shape us. It's also a book about negotiating life as a female and reading and learning from literature. That sounds like a lot to cover in 150 pages. But those were my intentions.

The Dear DeeDee letters are compact and the language concise. It is reminiscent of Jenny Offill's Department of Speculation and Maggie Nelson's Bluets. But those are my associations. Were there writers' works that inspired Dear DeeDee?



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

ABOVE The author with her father, Dubby, and dog, Shiloh, on Indiantown Creek, 1980

¹⁰ *Dear DeeDee* is forthcoming from Regal House in 2020. In the meantime, read an excerpt, "Dear/Dearest/Darling DeeDee," *Queen Mob's Teahouse* 6 Mar. 2018: [web](#).

“WE CALLED OURSELVES LADIES LIT AND MET OUTSIDE OF CLASS TO DISCUSS AND RIGOROUSLY CRITIQUE WHAT OTHERS DISMISSED AS “WOMEN’S STORIES” – STORIES THAT PRIORITIZED WOMEN CHARACTERS AND SENSIBILITIES.”

Yes, definitely. Fay Weldon’s *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*; Jane Austen’s letters to niece Fanny Knight; Virginia Woolf’s “Reminiscences,” addressed to nephew Julian Bell.

An alternate question: are there writers, past and present, who inspire you?



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

Many! Where to begin, where to begin? I’ve said elsewhere that the first “grown up” book that completely enthralled me was *Wuthering Heights*. In those either/or/pick one Hawthorne or Melville challenges, I choose Hawthorne. Other classmates found *The Scarlet Letter* severe and ghoulish and frightening – not me. Like many of my contemporaries, in college I went gaga over Woolf, Plath, Gertrude Stein, Jean Rhys, Flannery O’Connor. On an annual basis I reread favorite Didion essays as well as her *Book of Common Prayer*. The same goes for Harry Crews’s *A Childhood*, *the Biography of a Place*. I adore Nancy Lemann’s novels

(a devotion that, as you know, gets its own letter in *Dear DeeDee*). Patricia Highsmith, Kelly Link, Janet Malcolm, Jacqueline Rose. The Amis duo, father and son. I recently found my way to Lisa McInerney’s *Glorious Heresies*, which is glorious. Any volume of Alan Dugan’s poetry. I could go on and on and on.

Writers whose work and friendship helped me tremendously in the early going were a group of women writers connected with UNCG’s MFA Program. We called ourselves Ladies Lit and met outside of class to discuss and rigorously critique what others dismissed as “women’s stories” – stories that prioritized women characters and sensibilities. That very inspiring group included, among others, Lynne Barrett, Candy Flynt, and Lee Zacharias. I continue to learn from those women and their work today.

“THERE IS ALWAYS SOME UNNECESSARY SOMETHING IN DIALOGUE THAT THE SCENE COULD DO WITHOUT.”

ABOVE A 2002 reunion of a few of the Ladies Lit: (left to right) Lynne Barrett, Judy Cheatham, Kat Meads, Candace Flynt

Author Kelly Cherry has described your dialogue as “so good we hear it rather than read it.”¹¹ Is it as effortless as you make it seem? Do the voices come to you?

Thanks for the compliment, but, alas, nothing for me is effortless. I do make a habit of reading scenes aloud. And after that agonizing exercise, I start maniacally cutting. There is *always* some unnecessary something in dialogue that the scene could do without – usually several unnecessary somethings. But the tongue will out what the eye considers peachy keen. In settling on the way a character speaks, I’m primarily led by rhythm. But I also spend a considerable amount of time thinking about the unsaid, meaning what a character holds back and why. Beth Anderson in *Rage and Melancholy* withholds quite a lot, as does George Scaff in the same novel. But I’ve also written characters who say everything they think the second they think it; Irene Carter in *When the Dust Finally Settles* falls into that category.

Do you find there are themes that show up repeatedly as through-lines in your work?

I’m probably not the most reliable commentator on that, but if I had to guess I’d say struggle. It’s a matter of amazement to me that people pull themselves out of bed every day to face whatever’s out there, to confront and deal with whatever happens next. I find much “ordinary” behavior to be quite extraordinary, even heroic. In anything I write, very likely that sentiment bleeds through in one or another capacity.

Among your published works, do you have a favorite?

Whatever I last wrote is my favorite, up until I write something else. Probably because the recollection is fresher, and I’ve been down and dirty with that particular narrative most recently. Just now I’m feeling awfully fond of an essay that will be published next month on Estelle Faulkner.¹²

Although I have writer friends who can recite at will long passages from their work, that’s not a talent I possess. No matter how obsessively I worked on a manuscript, once it’s out there, published, I tend to forget it. An example: I’m an inveterate book arranger and re-arranger and, on occasion, during a transfer I’ll stop and open one of my own and read a random paragraph. Invariably I’m shocked. Did I write that? But if I keep reading for another page or so, I slip back into whatever fugue state I was in during the writing and recognize the words as mine. (Weird reaction, but true.)

¹¹ Quoted from the publisher’s press release (Mongrel Empire Press, 2019). ¹² “Charming (to Some) Estelle,” *Full Stop* 15 Jan. 2020: [web](#).

“WHATEVER I LAST WROTE IS MY FAVORITE, UP UNTIL I WRITE SOMETHING ELSE.”

“OCEANS, TOO, ARE RESTLESS. AGITATING BOTTOM WATER MAY TAKE 2,000 YEARS TO REACH THE SURFACE, BUT REACH THE SURFACE IT DOES. THE ATLANTIC, THE PACIFIC, EVERY OCEAN IS AN OCEAN IN MOTION, CEASELESSLY CIRCULATING. WHALES MIGRATE, BIRDS MIGRATE, BUTTERFLIES MIGRATE, MOOSE MIGRATE, BATS MIGRATE. WHY THEN SHOULD HUMANS STAY PUT?”
—KAT MEADS, BORN SOUTHERN AND RESTLESS (2)

There are one or two characters who’ve stuck with me. I’m not sure that means they count as favorites exactly, but they still nag at my conscience somehow. Beth Anderson from *Rage and Melancholy* is one of those. She’s a character who is doing her best to hang on to life but is hanging by a thread, the thread being her friendship with George and Leeta Scaff. When she feels she’s lost that friendship, she feels she lost the last of what she had to lose. A reader once asked me if Beth was a ghost. I’m still thinking about that comment.

How does teaching creative writing influence your own writing? Where do you fall on the “writing can be taught/writing is a talent” continuum?

Since 2010 I’ve taught in Oklahoma City University’s low-residency MFA program. The students know me there as the faculty member who is always squalling, “Remember! Revision is our friend!” In addition to (I sincerely hope) providing helpful feedback to a student,

the process of gathering up my thoughts to comment forces me to think more analytically about craft elements than perhaps I would if I didn’t teach. So that’s a big plus. In the “Can writing be taught?” debate, I side with the great Carolyn Kizer, whom I studied with at Chapel Hill. In her poetry seminar, first day, she announced: “I can’t teach you how to write, but I can save you several years of mistakes.”

On a final note: Words of advice for emerging writers?

Again, I crib from others: practice. ■



COURTESY OF KAT MEADS

JAN 1968

ABOVE Six-year-old Kat’s first typewriter, Shawboro, NC, circa 1957

PAM VAN DYK is a Senior Editor at Regal House Publishing in Raleigh. A selection of her fiction has been anthologized by the *Maine Review*, *Outrider Press*, and *Flying South*. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte and a PhD in Education Research and Policy Analysis from NC State University.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF LOGICS PAST

a review by Monica Carol Miller

Armistead Maupin. *Logical Family: A Memoir*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.

MONICA CAROL MILLER is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Middle Georgia State University. She is President of the Flannery O'Connor Society. Her first book, *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 2017.

ARMISTEAD MAUPIN was born in Washington, DC, but raised in Raleigh. His novel series *Tales of the City* has been adapted into an award-winning television miniseries and won the Best Gay Read Award in 2006. His novel *The Night Listener* (Bantam Press, 2000) became a feature film starring Robin Williams. His honors include the Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Publishing Triangle of New York, the Capital Award from GLADD, the first Barbary Coast Award for his literary contribution to San Francisco, and the Pioneer Award in 2012 for breaking new ground in LGBT literature and publishing.

Armistead Maupin's memoir *Logical Family* opens with the author's memory of his childhood fear of being locked overnight in Raleigh, NC's Oakwood Cemetery, where much of his family was buried. Throughout his story, Maupin emphasizes the importance of escaping the traps of the past, but, even more importantly, that escaping the past is equally about escaping one's birthright genealogy as it is about claiming a new genealogy and identity. As a play on an alternative to a "biological family," Maupin's *Logical Family* tells the story of Maupin's journey from a conservative North Carolina family that revered its Confederate past to working for the arch conservative politician Jesse Helms and his fateful move to San Francisco where he rejected and discarded much of the belief system tied to his North Carolina roots and grew to embrace West Coast liberalism.

Maupin is best known as the author of *Tales of the City*, a series of nine novels that have been adapted into three miniseries, which aired on PBS, Showtime, and Netflix. The novels (the first of which was published in 1978, the most recent one in 2014) originated as a serialized column in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1974; they follow the lives of a core group of friends who first meet as tenants of the fictional 28 Barbary Lane under the maternal care of the eccentric landlady. As a serialized narrative, these stories included characters across a spectrum of sexual and gender identities. As the characters grow, age, and evolve, their bonds also change, reflecting what Maupin will ultimately refer

to as a "logical family": "the one that actually makes sense for us" (3), as opposed to one's biological family, from which both Maupin and his characters feel alienated.

In terms of scholarship, Maupin's work has generally been considered in terms of its role in LGBTQ literature. Not only was his character Jon Fielding among the first fictional characters to die from AIDS in a novel, but his novels deal with themes of transgender identity, gay parenthood, and living with HIV long before these were anywhere near mainstream popular culture. If the novels have been considered as regional literature, they are generally discussed in terms of West Coast, California, and San Francisco literature. And given how important setting is to the novels – San Francisco, its landmarks, weather, geography, and history, all play important roles throughout the series – we should consider *Tales of the City* as an exemplar of San Francisco literature.

However, with *Logical Family*, Maupin's own North Carolina roots call attention to the underrecognized connections that his work has to Southern studies. Maupin's story is a fascinating one, as it goes from his conservative North Carolina childhood, through an early career working for Jesse Helms, a tour in Vietnam, and then Maupin's journalism and writing career in San Francisco, whose bohemian and open culture gave him the opportunity, finally, to live life openly as gay man, what he refers to as "clear[ing] the Etch A Sketch tablet of my make-believe life and start afresh in the city, free

of secrets" (172). *Logical Family* traces Maupin's journey from a conservative, closeted Southern life to one in which his very fame is based on writing freely about the LGBTQ community.

Maupin describes a childhood of creativity, putting on plays in his backyard playhouse and producing mimeographed flyers for advertising. After building the playhouse from spare lumber, Maupin's father painted the message, "SAVE YOUR CONFEDERATE MONEY! THE SOUTH WILL RISE AGAIN" on it, using his wife's red nail polish (13); Maupin recounts the neighborhood drama the motto evoked, when a friend's parent offered to pay him five dollars to erase the slogan and the fury this evoked in his father. In telling this story, as well as others, Maupin's reflections are insightful, especially in his understanding of his father. For example, in remembering that his father was often characterized as "unreconstructed" by other adults, Maupin explains his childhood understanding of the word:

For a long time I didn't understand what that meant, historically speaking, but it sounded like someone who had been taken apart and never put back together. Unreconstructed. Most folks used the word with humor and affection, but sometimes they would inject a disdainful note as if Daddy had somehow gone too far. I figured them to be Yankee sympathizers . . . so I paid no mind to them. Yankees didn't get it. (16–17)

Maupin keeps the motto on his playhouse, and, for quite some time, he keeps his father's

bigotry as well. In another instance, he remembers showing his friends the antique bed his grandmother slept in, which he tells his friends "was made by slaves in our family" (17). In the next line, he explains that description – "slaves in our family" – was "how my father always put it," and then he says, "I had copied his language because I thought it made us sound genteel but compassionate, the sort of kindly slaveholders who embraced their human property as family" (17). He goes on to reflect upon the fact that this family mythology had no credible evidence to support it but was simply accepted without question by his biological family.

Much of Maupin's *bildungsroman* provides important insights into the making of a Vietnam-era young Republican. For example, when in high school he is awarded a civic opportunity to be the Raleigh city manager for a day, he tells a local reporter that "young right-wingers like me would soon be of voting age, and that should serve as fair warning to liberal politicians who wanted big government and socialism." Much of Maupin's young conservative beliefs come from reading, both literature produced by right-wing organizations such as the John Birch Society but also novels such as *1984* and *Brave New World*. Maupin notes that these classics influenced his understanding of left-wing politics: "I thought that's what we were fighting against, a totalitarian regime that wouldn't stop at putting rats on your face" (49).



PHOTOGRAPH © 2019 DAVID CROSBY

Maupin's conservative outlook serves him well as he begins a career in journalism and even through Vietnam. It's when he gets a job back home in Jesse Helms's office that we see his sexual desire becoming a stumbling block for his political ambition. Even on his way to San Francisco, however, he takes a detour to be honored by Nixon for his service in Vietnam, and he starts his journalism career in San Francisco with a photograph of himself and the president proudly displayed on his desk.

For fans of Maupin's work, *Logical Family* provides wonderful backstories for much of *Tales of the City*. Maupin introduces us to Nancy McDoniel, an actress from Missouri whose friendship formed the basis of the relationship between Michael Tolliver and Mary Ann Singleton: "a naive gay man feigning sophistication with a slightly more naive young straight woman" (159). We meet Steve Beery, whose shared adventures in the catwalk of

Grace Cathedral, Alaskan cruises, and trips to the Isle of Lesbos all eventually made their way into Maupin's novels. We also get the particular details of his relationships with Rock Hudson, whose closeted sexuality Maupin would dramatize in *Further Tales of the City* (1982), as well as his friendships with Ian McKellan and Christopher Isherwood, providing useful insights for scholars. And of particular note for *Tales* readers is his explanation for how the name "Barbary Lane" captures the contradictory essences at the heart of his San Francisco: "I was deliberate in the juxtaposition of those words. *Barbary* to connote the raw-boned frontier wildness of the city; *Lane* to suggest the peace of an English village. Seemingly contradictory, yet anyone could sample both sensations in the course of a twenty-minute stroll down to North Beach" (169). As one would expect, *Logical Family* vividly conveys Maupin's strong attachment to his adopted home.

Maupin's stories of sexual adventures do more than simply paint a scene of the promiscuity of 1970s gay San Francisco, though. Rather, they illuminate the political and nearly spiritual significance Maupin attaches to this time: "if anything delivered me from the privileged white elitism of my youth it was the red-lit cubicles and darkened hallways and even darker mazes of Dave's Baths . . . only afterward, when I lay spent and happy in the arms of a stranger, another tender man-child like me, did I even begin to notice

the secondary matters of race, creed, and national origin. It was a deeply democratizing place" (170–71). Maupin seems to echo fellow North Carolina writer Allan Gurganus's *Plays Well with Others* here, in which the human connections enabled by the liberated sexual mores of New York City allow his young, gay North Carolina native to shed his conservative in exchange for a more expansive, egalitarian understanding of humanity.

I am glad to have the opportunity to review *Logical Family* for *NCLR*, because the Southern roots of Maupin's work have not been fully considered. In *Logical Family*, Maupin draws upon his own trajectory to explain his understanding of the South and social justice: "The South makes social progress, like everywhere else, though it does its level best not to notice it while it's going on. Only later, when it stands a serious risk of looking like a total asshole, does it claim to have always been on the side of decency and justice" (51). Unfortunately, the author's growing appreciation for diversity in spite of his upbringing leads him to make reference to a homogenous South, one that is represented by figures such as Helms and his father. For example, when considering the retrogressive racist politics that have persisted in the South, Maupin explains, "It's hard for the South to get things right from the start, because, ever since the Civil War, it has taught itself to equate righteousness with losing. *We must be on*

the right track, y'all, because everyone else is against us" (51). Maupin conflates "South" with the white, retrogressive community of his upbringing, even while acknowledging that there were other white people in his community who disagreed with his family, and also that there were plenty of people of color who also shared his community.

For the most part, *Logical Family* is an entertaining, anecdotal, personal story. It includes Maupin's own coming out stories, including his official coming out statement to his family, famously captured in his "Letter to Mama," first published as a part of the serial *Tales* in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In most of the memoir, the political is seen nearly exclusively through a personal lens: Maupin's experiences in Vietnam, for example, are primarily focused on his personal relationships there. There is surprisingly little about the AIDS crisis, with the exception of Rock Hudson's death and Maupin's relationship with the actor. These gaps ought to be placed alongside Maupin's fiction to see what is supplemented by the novels and what is still missing.

Logical Family ultimately provides a promising foundation for including Maupin's work within a framework of Southern studies, both in terms of what is addressed as well as what is left out. Maupin's trajectory from supporting Jesse Helms, to mourning Harvey Milk, to grieving the death of his unreconstructed father is an important one for us to understand. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY ROBERT HILL***Circus Gone Off Line: Fade to Black, 2017*

Circle the wagons, draw the spiral inward, then
 spin out, fling the line, uncoil the sparkling lasso
 of actors & animals, hoist red wagons onto cars
 on tracks out of town, burgs, barns, and fields.

Straight away into the distance. It's over. Ring up
 the three-ring circus, clang that five-alarm fire, toll
 its own knell. No Circus Maximus, spurious mercies,
 bloody chariots, hooligans galore, cliques, and conspiracies,

no children's spontaneous awe, gleeful gasps at flight
 & the frisson of falling, catastrophes averted or delayed
 (what about next time? or the last time, when the whole
 flying family fell as one?). So take a deep breath, hold,

watch if you dare the orange-flame spectacle of men,
 rotund in marble halls, slithering between the pillars
 of justice and mercy, carting away our land, water,
 mucking the wind, sooting all the rarest monuments.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Speculative Animals (collage, graphite powder, ink, glitter on paper, 47x60.5) by Kirsten Stolle

ROBERT HILL was born in Anniston, AL, and raised in Charlotte, NC. A four-time Applewhite Prize finalist, he has published poems in *NCLR* 2015, 2016, and 2017, as well as numerous other venues, such as *Appalachian Journal*, *Broad River Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Shenandoah*, *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Southern Review*. He is also the co-author with Richard J. Calhoun of *James Dickey* (Twayne, 1983).

KIRSTEN STOLLE lives in Asheville, NC. Her work has been exhibited at the San José Museum of Art in California; the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City; and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, and Tracey Morgan Gallery in North Carolina. Her art has also been published in *Photograph* and *New American Paintings*. She is a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant recipient and has been awarded residencies at the Millay Colony and Ballinglen Arts Foundation, among others. The artist writes of the series this work is in, "Speculative Animals portends a near future where animals are inter-breeding in response to accelerated ecological disruptions. To survive extreme habitat loss, declining biodiversity, and limited resources of food and water, hybrid species evolve into stronger and more resilient animals." See more of her art on her [website](#).

COURTESY OF THE RALEIGH-DURHAM AIRPORT AUTHORITY



YOU ARE WHAT OWNS YOU: SHORT FICTION BY LIONEL SHRIVER

a review by Eric C. Walker

Lionel Shriver. *Property: Stories Between Two Novellas*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

ERIC C. WALKER, a North Carolina native, is Professor of English Emeritus at Florida State University. A specialist in eighteenth and nineteenth-century British literature. His current research focuses on adoption studies for a book on Romanticism and adoption. His book *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen after War* (Stanford University Press, 2009) was awarded the 2009 SAMLA Studies Book Award.

LIONEL SHRIVER is an American journalist and author who lives in the United Kingdom. Her novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Counterpoint, 2003) won the Orange Prize for Fiction and was adapted into the 2011 film of the same name. Read more about her in an essay on her body of work by Eric Walker in the 2020 print issue.

On the heels of twelve published novels, including the award-winning *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Lionel Shriver, Gastonia-born and Raleigh-bred, has published her first collection of short fiction. The twelve stories in *Property*, five of which are new to this volume, together take their coloring from an epigraph by E.M. Forster, who ponders the effects of buying a piece of land, “the first property that I have owned. . . . What is the effect of property upon the character?” *Property* takes many material forms in the stories, including the predictable – houses, apartments, bank accounts – but also the quirky and offbeat: a stick of lip balm, a back-garden sycamore, an eccentric wedding-gift sculpture. At its strongest, the book also aims at immaterial forms of property that not only own and control us but also sustain us in our relentless human disappointments: memories, stories, hopes, fears, regrets.

As she did her birth name, Margaret, Shriver jettisoned the South for good when she made it to New York for college, and she now divides her time between Brooklyn and London.

Only one of the twelve previous novels, the Raleigh-based *A Perfectly Good Family* (1996), is set in North Carolina. In one story in *Property*, “The ChapStick,” the protagonist prepares to board a plane in New York for Raleigh-Durham, where his dying father is a famous kidney expert in the Research Triangle, but he misses the flight and never gets there. Brooding in the airport security line about his siblings and his father, he loses his temper when he and his ChapStick are subject to *The Search*, which allows Shriver to unload, hilariously, on TSA protocols: “Foolishly, Peter had committed the one unforgiveable crime in the world of air travel – which wasn’t, of course, holding a box cutter to a flight attendant’s throat, but *having a bad attitude*, for which he had to be made an example, lest other fliers come to imagine that they were within their rights to be annoyed” (196). One story, “Domestic Terrorism,” is set in suburban Atlanta, where Shriver endured high school. The opening story, “The Standing Chandelier,” is set in Lexington, VA, in the precincts of Washington and Lee University, where one character has done “a stint leading

tours at the Stonewall Jackson House” (3). But that’s it for the South. Almost all the other stories are set in and around New York (mostly Brooklyn) or in the UK (mostly London). Even one haunting story that is set primarily in Kenya, “Kilifi Creek,” has its violent denouement on a Manhattan rooftop.

The property in “Kilifi Creek” is not an object but a story the protagonist has never told for fourteen years, about nearly drowning in Kenya. The point of the airport ChapStick as material object is not outrage at TSA bullies but its Proustian smell as Peter is forced to cool his heels in *The Room*, flooded with memories of his dying father. One of my favorite pieces in the book is the brief and lighter tale “The Royal Male,” which runs with an irresistible setup: what does a post carrier who hoards undelivered mail do with such stolen property? Shriver’s lonely post carrier impersonates a male in a purloined correspondence and, lo and behold, the woman on the other end shows up, likes the prospect, and, as the curtain

falls, these lovebirds are ready to keep the criminal gig going. Who cares about the property, the stolen mail? *Amor vincit omnia!*

In recent novels – such as *So Much for That* (2010), about the bloated and failing US healthcare system, and the dystopian *The Mandibles* (2016), in which not far down the road we all have a supervisory microchip embedded at the base of our skulls – Shriver delights in ripping Big Government, attracting fans on the political right, such as the columnist George Will, who recently suggested that Shriver might be just the right “acidic” stylist to write his biography.* In *Property*, her famous libertarian streak is more muted. The titles of several stories – “Exchange Rates,” “Repossession,” “Negative Equity” – seem to promise more of her inner Ayn Rand, but the stories instead supply surprisingly sympathetic accounts of human disappointments, with endings that often risk the sentimental. In “Negative Equity,” for example, a UK couple under financial stress decide to divorce, but both remain in their beloved

house where the story leaves them sharing a quiet Christmas dinner. In “The Self-Seeding Sycamore,” a suburban London widow risks an arboreal skirmish with her back-garden neighbor, a divorced grump, but the two soon wind up happily bedded.

But readers who are fond of Shriver’s other famous attitude, her pugnaciously contrarian streak, should not worry that her style has suddenly gone diabetic. Even as they risk the sentimental, the stories also channel Shriver’s inner Dorothy Parker (Parker, allegedly: “The first thing I do in the morning is brush my teeth and sharpen my tongue”). Shriver the misanthropic satirist peppers almost every paragraph. For example, a character in the opening story, “The Standing Chandelier,” “wonder[s] if you couldn’t describe just about anyone in terms that were both accurate and lacerating. You could probably savage the personality of everyone on the planet if you wanted to, though there remained the question of why you would want to” (39). The “savage indignation” of Jonathan Swift bequeathed to us not only Gulliver but the alarmingly human portrait of the repugnant Yahoo. Shriver’s fictional battlefields pile up wounded Yahoos large and small, those many beasts who often seem to litter every encounter every day.

Several stories in *Property* revisit in miniature territories previously surveyed in Shriver’s novels. “Domestic Terrorism,” for example, about a recalcitrant son of thirty-two who, Bartleby-like, refuses to move out of his parents’ house, frames a smaller snapshot of the abyss between



COURTESY OF THE RALEIGH-DURHAM AIRPORT AUTHORITY

*“By the Book,” *New York Times Book Review* 2 June 2019: 7.

parents and children explored most hauntingly in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. The slightest piece in the book, "Paradise to Perdition" (originally published in the trade rag *Raffles Hotels & Resort Magazine*), which is about a New Jersey embezzler who escapes with the cash to a luxury resort in the Indian Ocean (and finds it boring and disappointing), replays the retirement fantasy of the protagonist of the healthcare-system novel *So Much for That* (2010). The final story in *Property*, "The Subletter," is set in Belfast, where Shriver lived for nearly a decade and which is the setting of her very fine early novel *Ordinary Decent Criminals* (1990; originally titled *The*

Bleeding Heart in the UK). Sara Mosely, an American who has worked as a journalist in Belfast for a decade, decides impulsively to relocate to Thailand and sublets her scroungy flat to a young American woman who embodies everything Sara hates about ugly American tourists, ignorant of Irish history and politics. But travel schedules overlap and the two women are forced to share Sara's flat for several weeks. The skirmishes that break out will be familiar to anyone who has endured Roommate War. Sara's fierce attachment to her ratty rental property unsettles her so much that she backs out of the deal and breaks the news to her tenant: "I just can't. Can't

bring myself. I'm too attached. To Belfast'" (310). The places to which we think we have property claims – nations, cities, houses, flats – instead own us, sometimes shelter us, and ultimately disappoint us. When Sara regains her dumpy flat alone, there is no victory: "Sara tidied the flat, having anticipated this moment as one of triumphant reclamation. Yet her mood was unaccountably doleful" (316). Both the libertarian and the satirist animate the final sentences of the story and the book: "But with Emer Branagh off to down *piroshki* and caviar with shots of frozen vodka, Sara felt swindled. Sure, any old bog could seem priceless so long as some other patsy was willing to fight you for it" (317). ■

NORTH CAROLINA NATIVE MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL AWARDED TRIFECTA IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

by Helen Stead



The science fiction powerhouse Mary Robinette Kowal, a novelist, voice actor, professional puppeteer, and President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America received three prestigious awards in 2019 for her novel *The Calculating Stars* (Tor, 2018) – the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Novel and the Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel. Other Science Fiction and Fantasy trifecta award winners from previous years include Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves* (1972), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Frederik Pohl's *Gateway* (1977), and Connie Willis's *Blackout/All Clear* (2010). Together, these awards represent nominations from readers and those writing and working in the science fiction field, making winning all three of these awards an impressive accomplishment.

Kowal, a North Carolina native living in Tennessee, studied art, theater, and speech at East Carolina University. It was there she discovered professional puppetry while acting in *Little Shop of Horrors* at the

Read more about NCLR Assistant Editor HELEN STEAD with a book review in the Flashbacks section and more about Mary Robinette Kowal in Helen's interview with her in the 2020 print issue of NCLR.

university, and as a result, she later interned at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, GA. Kowal has over twenty years of puppetry experience, including performing for Jim Henson Pictures, CrazyTown (CBS) and the Center for Puppetry Arts. She has not only received the highest honors as a puppeteer, but has also won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2008, and previously earned Hugo awards for Best Short Story (2011), Best Related Work (2013) and Best Novelette (2014).

The Calculating Stars is the first novel in Kowal's Lady Astronaut series; its sequel, *The Fated Sky*, was also published in 2018. The trifecta-winning novel introduces WASP pilot and savant physicist Dr. Elma

York is dubbed Lady Astronaut as she advocates for the launch of female pilots in space. Elma doesn't just fly airplanes; she breaks through a male-littered university and workplace, all the while, hiding her extreme anxiety of being put on show. The novel observes gender, racial, and religious discrimination in an alternate postwar 1950s space race, making the systemic inequalities today seem not so far removed. Kowal not only recons social issues in space colonization but also outflows invigorating technical details of piloting and space flight, allowing readers to sit right there with the aviatrix, the reverberations of rocket propulsion jostling thighs and starlit skies whispering dreams of "slipp[ing] beyond the surly bonds of earth."* ■

* Quoted from the poem "High Flight" (1941) by John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

Call for Submissions for *NCLR* 30 (2021)

**NORTH
CAROLINA
LITERARY
REVIEW**

FEATURING HEALING THROUGH WRITING

Submit interviews with and critical analyses of North Carolina writers living here or elsewhere.

DEADLINE AUGUST 31, 2020*

Submit poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction through our three competitions.

DEADLINES VARY BY GENRE*

* For more information, writers' guidelines, and submission instructions, go to:

www.nclr.ecu.edu/submissions



Missing Ernestine, MY MOUNTAIN MOTHER

by Kerry Madden-Lunsford

In the fall of 2009, my mountain friend, Ernestine Edwards Upchurch, wanted to show me the grave of her late ex-boyfriend, Popcorn Sutton, a moonshiner. The grave was located at the bend in the river at Harmon Den, but the interstate, I-40, was closed due to a huge rock slide. As we pulled up to the orange roadblock of barrels on that sunny November afternoon, Ernestine said, “Just move the barricade out of the way, honey, and we’ll drive west on I-40 East. There’s no debris between Maggie Valley and Harmon Den.”



Twelve years of Catholic school rules pounded into me, I panicked and said, “Ernestine, I’m so sorry, but I can’t drive the wrong way on a closed freeway – I just can’t! What if somebody is coming the other way?”

She was unimpressed. “Do you meant to tell me that two brave mountain women like ourselves can’t move a little barricade out of the way to get to where we need to go?”

I was flattered she called me a mountain woman. Was that really how she saw me? Sometimes, I felt like such an interloper in the Smoky Mountains, trying to claim them as my own. In reality, I was an itinerant former football coach’s daughter, who’d grown up moving every few years and had spent the last twenty years raising a family in Los Angeles.

But somehow my longing for the mountains paved the way for me to meet Ernestine.

All photographs and illustrations courtesy of the author

ABOVE Kerry Madden-Lunsford at her booklaunch for *Ernestine’s Milky Way*, Vroman’s Bookstore, Pasadena, CA, 9 Mar. 2019

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE from *Ernestine’s Milky Way* by Kerry Madden-Lunsford, with illustrations by Emily Sutton (Penguin Random House, 2019)

KERRY MADDEN-LUNSFORD is the author of the Appalachian Maggie Valley Trilogy: *Gentle’s Holler* (Viking, 2005), *Louisiana’s Song* (Viking, 2007), and *Jessie’s Mountain* (Viking, 2008). Her other books include *Offsides* (William Morrow, 1996), a 1997 New York Public Library Books for the teen selection, *Writing Smarts* (Pleasant, 2002), which helps children craft their own stories and poetry, and *Nothing Fancy about Kathryn & Charlie*

(Mockingbird, 2013), about a Selma, AL, friendship between a storyteller and a folk artist. The author is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Alabama Birmingham and also teaches at Antioch University in Los Angeles and at the Sewanee Young Writers Conference in Tennessee. The mother of three grown children, she divides her time between Birmingham and Los Angeles. Read an interview with her in *NCLR* 2008.

*“Do you mean to tell me that **two brave mountain women like ourselves** can’t move a little barricade out of the way to get to where we need to go?”*

I did not meet Ernestine the first time I came to Maggie Valley in April of 2005 as she was out of town helping her daughter Libby with the grandchildren. It was a balmy night, and I’d been invited to read from my new children’s novel, *Gentle’s Holler*, at the Old Rock Schoolhouse. The Town Council was also meeting in a nearby room. There was to be an ice cream social after the reading.

I looked out into the audience of sixty or so people and saw two nuns and behind them, a man I knew to be Popcorn Sutton, a local celebrity in Maggie. I had done some school visits earlier that day, and the librarian had taken me to meet him during lunch to buy his moonshine cherries steeped in mason jars. As a children’s author who has done thousands of school visits over the years, I can promise you that was the only one where I got to buy moonshine. I had also learned that Popcorn was Ernestine’s boyfriend.

The sun was setting on the Smokies outside the window as I began to read, channeling my eleven-year-old narrator, Livy Two Weems. It felt surreal to be standing in the school the Weems children would have attended had they been real people. Instead, they were inspirations of my husband, Kiffen Lunsford’s family of thirteen children, the grand-nieces and nephews of the Appalachian



songcatcher, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, and the children of Frances Stroup of Grassy Branch and of Jim Lunsford, who played fiddle with Reno & Smiley and the Smoky Mountain Boys.

But I suppose I had my own North Carolina roots too. It was the first home I remembered as a child when my father coached at Wake Forest in the 1960s during the Brian Piccolo years.

I’d set the story in Maggie Valley because I’d discovered the town in 1994 on a road-trip with our two older children. That day, our three-year-old, Lucy, threw a screaming tantrum on the porch of Thomas Wolfe’s home, and honestly who



ABOVE TOP The author with Popcorn Sutton and Lori Special, a librarian at the Haywood County Public Library, Waynesville, NC, 2005

ABOVE RIGHT The 2005 reading in Maggie Valley

But gradually I let the fear go while Ernestine rode shotgun, telling stories.

could blame her? We were asking for it, bringing a three- and five-year-old to see a dead writer's house, so we whisked Lucy and her big brother, Flannery, away and in desperation got out a map to find the backroads to the mountains.

I saw the name "Maggie Valley" and thought it sounded lovely. We discovered the amusement park "Ghost Town in the Sky" and Joey's Pancake House and then made our way over to Cades Cove for a few days of playing and exploring the mountains. Years later, I picked Maggie Valley as the setting for the novel.

When I finished reading that night, the librarian, Lori Special, appeared apprehensive and asked me to read another chapter. This was odd, but I went ahead and read chapter two, and when I finished, she called out, "How about chapter three! Who wants to hear chapter three, y'all?" The polite audience applauded, but now I was forty-five minutes into reading, which was bizarre. How long were they reasonably expected to listen to the saga of the Weems family?

I waved her over and whispered, "What's going on?"

She whispered back into my ear, "The town council is meeting next door and they're having a huge fight over the re-opening of 'Ghost Town.' Guns are out, and there are police at each of the four doors. We don't want the kids to see, so please just keep reading!"

I read on with more enthusiasm than ever, and at some point, the fight must have broken up because a flustered mayor came over to give me a bright yellow key to the city and said, "Congratulations, *Cathy Madden*" and proclaimed April 19, 2005 "Gentle's Holler Day." Part of the proclamation read: "Whereas the characters in *Gentle's Holler* make you fall in love with their outlook and way of life."



Then I signed some books, and Popcorn Sutton came up to the table and said, "I want one of them books for Ernestine." I signed him a book and he allowed me to take a picture of him holding the book next to his 1920-something black Model T Truck that said, "Mom Corn/Pop Corn." Then he drove off, and we had the ice cream social.

The following August, I returned to North Carolina to do more research and meet Ernestine for the first time. *Gentle's Holler* had done well, so miraculously my publisher had bought two more Maggie Valley novels, and I had a lot of work to do.

I was so nervous about meeting Ernestine because she was the real deal, born and raised in the mountains. I was a novelist who imagined the mountains after falling in love with the book *Christy* by Catherine Marshall as a teenager in Knoxville. By then, my dad was coaching at Tennessee, my eighth state by age fifteen. I didn't know where to call home.

But the name Ernestine struck a note of authenticity. She wasn't Tammy or Lisa or Pat from the mountains. She was Ernestine. We met at Joey's Pancake House, and right away, we ordered our pancakes and coffee, and then Ernestine asked, "Honey, did you base your book on the Connor family that lives over on Fie Top Road? He had a bunch of kids the way the family in your book does too."

I said, "I don't know the Connor family. What did the father do?"

"Absolutely nothing. He begat children."

I started laughing and that's how our friendship began. We talked for three hours, and if a person can be drunk on stories, that's what it felt like emerging into that sunny parking lot after talking to Ernestine. We drove up to look at "Ghost Town in the Sky," which was still shuttered, and the road was so twisty and winding, Ernestine said, "This is one of those roads where you meet yourself coming, but we have some roads around here a goat wouldn't go up."

She also insisted that I get to know Shirley Fairchild, the wife of the late banjo player Raymond Fairchild, so I could understand what it was like to grow up on Dirty Britches Mountain, and I wound up becoming friends with Shirley too.

By the end of that first day, Ernestine said to me, "Your California family is going to have to learn to spare you if you're going to write about our mountains."

Back at the orange barricade that Sunday afternoon on the closed interstate, I argued, "I'm sorry, Ernestine, but I told you I just can't. What if we get stopped?"

"I'll handle it. I know everybody around here. Now get out of the car and move the barricade, honey."

"But Ernestine."

"Now, honey. Do it! We will be fine."

I obeyed, feeling like a reckless lawbreaker. Heart in throat as I drove us west on I-40 East to Harmon Den, I could see the exits on my left, although I couldn't read the names as we were going the wrong way, and it made me lightheaded with fear. But gradually I let the fear go while



Ernestine rode shotgun, telling stories. I hugged the right lane and drove slowly through the mountains, thinking what I would say when the blue lights flashed to arrest me. I then decided to imagine it was the 1940s or '50s on this old empty highway, and we were taking a leisurely Sunday drive running a load of likker to the next holler over.

When we arrived at Harmon Den we drove over a skinny bridge, parked, and made our way to the tiny cemetery. Ernestine told me the stories of



ABOVE TOP Popcorn Sutton (left) selling moonshine cherries

ABOVE BOTTOM Ernestine next to her muddy car during the 2009 trip to the graveyard with the author



how the late moonshiner Lethie Hicks had taught Popcorn how to make moonshine as a teenager and how Lethie had also shot her mean husband's thumb off and wouldn't allow him to be buried in the family plot.

My mind swirled with thoughts of Lethie Hicks and young Popcorn as Ernestine pointed out the different graves. We came to Popcorn's grave, which Ernestine explained was empty, but it had a new headstone bearing his name. Ernestine said, "His body isn't here. The new wife had him dug up and took his headstone back with her back to East Tennessee, but I replaced the headstone and told the man what to put on it. It was only sixty or seventy dollars, and Popcorn deserved to have a headstone where he wanted to be buried near his mama and daddy."

I once asked Ernestine why she never left her home of Maggie Valley, and she said, "I bloomed where I was planted." But she did leave for a while. She went to Berea College as an undergraduate, where she met her husband, Cecil Upchurch, and then on to the University of Tennessee, where she received her master's degree in social work.

She proudly told me, "I played Queen Nefertiti in college."

She also square-danced with the heralded Soco Gap Square Dancers who, years before, had performed for the Queen of England and the Roosevelts in 1939 at the White House. She was the big sister of twin brothers, one of whom, Kyle, has owned Maggie Valley's 3g Ground for

decades, a large dance hall for musicians and cloggers. The late banjo player Raymond Fairchild's funeral was recently held at the Stomping Ground.

Ernestine understood dreamers and took them into her heart and home. I would not know the work of storyteller and novelist Sheila Kay Adams if not for Ernestine. I also

wouldn't know the storytellers Kathryn Tucker Windham or Donald Davis, because Ernestine insisted that we travel together to the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. We listened to Kathryn and Donald tell stories under a rainy tent by the railroad tracks.

I remember Donald Davis said that the quickest way to kill Grandma was to quit telling her stories to the new generations. That day, I never dreamed I would later end up writing a book about Kathryn that my daughter Lucy would illustrate. I loved putting that book into Ernestine's hands years later and describing to her how we traveled to rural Alabama libraries to get kids to make trees out of yarn, buttons, popsicle sticks, and shells, and tell stories too.





*She loved people.
She wanted people to do well.*

Before we left for the National Storytelling Festival that dark October morning, Ernestine suggested we go early to Joey's Pancake House to fortify ourselves. As we were heading away from Ernestine's house, I saw Popcorn drive past us out of the swirling mountain fog in his truck with several more trucks following along behind him.

Over pancakes, Ernestine said, "Did you see the CEO himself leading his employees over the mountain at the crack of dawn?"

Ernestine helped Popcorn write his book, *Me And My Likker*, which he dedicated to her. They self-published it and printed the book at midnight in the local Board of Education office in Waynesville because Ernestine had a key.

The dedication read: "I give credit to this woman, Ernestine Edwards Upchurch, for helping me write my book. This, to me, is the most important picture in my book, simply because if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have the damn book to start with."

Ernestine's late husband, Cecil, had been an educator for years in the mountains, both a teacher and a principal before he got sick. They'd raised two children, Evan and Libby. Ernestine described visiting her husband's relatives in Alabama as a young bride. At the gathering, an older woman had asked her, "Tell me something, can those mountain children even learn? Are they capable of it?" Ernestine said she put on the biggest smile she could muster and said, "Yes, those mountain children can learn. Why, children are children the world over." Then she excused herself and found someone else to talk to.

Ernestine was a social worker, a historian, who introduced herself to me as the one in charge of literary affairs in the mountains. Her house was full of books and she championed new authors. "Have you read the playwright Gary Carden?" she once asked me. "What about John Ehle? Do you know about poor Nance Dude? Have you seen the film *Mountain Talk* by Neal Hutcheson?"

Sometimes, it was hard to keep up, but I read everything she recommended. She loved mountain stories and history. She loved children most of all and wanted them educated, reading, and telling stories too.

In the 1960s as a social worker, Ernestine used to travel into the mountain hollers to talk to women about birth control. With the growth of the hotel industry in Maggie Valley, sanitation became critically important, so she helped to bring city water to the valley. Because of her years in social work, she knew all the back roads and traveled all over Haywood County to meet with families to discuss the need for residents to switch to city water from well or creek water.

Ernestine explained it this way: "I knew those hollers and when the daddies came home from



work too. Brenda and Shirley knew the hotel and restaurant owners and made inroads with them. We each did our part to bring city water to the town of Maggie.”

She also introduced the visiting writer John Ehle when he spoke at the library in Waynesville in 1981, and she helped Father Michael Murphy get St. Margaret’s built, the only Catholic church in Maggie Valley, even though she wasn’t a Catholic but a proud Methodist.

One time, we were talking of religion over a sad salad near Cherokee, and I was asking her the main differences between the Methodists and the Baptists, and Ernestine said, “I would say the Methodists are more ecumenical than the Baptists.”

Although her children were raised Methodist, they played angels at Midnight Mass at St. Margaret’s every Christmas for Father Murphy, who became ordained at the age of eighty and lived to be ninety-eight.

That day in Harmon Den by Popcorn’s original grave, Ernestine was still in mourning. They had broken up a few years earlier, and he had gone off and married out of spite, but the night I arrived to visit her, Ernestine had shown me recent letters he’d written saying he was coming home and how much he missed her. She showed me the three sets of china he’d given her over the years. She also played a long rambling voice message from him declaring his love for her that she’d saved on her flip phone.

His letters were handwritten, a mix of print and cursive and heartbreak. He and Ernestine had been together eleven years. A complicated man, Ernestine said Popcorn had had eight children with different women but he didn’t raise them or claim them.

I asked how they got together, and Ernestine said, “He just started courting me one day. I knew him all my life. His store was where my mama’s store used to be. Mama sold moonshine out



the back window of her store in a brown sack. Anyway, Popcorn kept showing up a few years after Cecil died, and we started keeping company. Now why did that funny little man think I needed three sets of china? He said that was what a lady needed. China.”

Ernestine took Popcorn on trips to meet professors who taught about mountain culture so these professors could meet the real deal. She and Popcorn would have picnics on fine china in the woods, and he also told Ernestine that she was the “finest woman to shit between two tennis shoes.”

He built her a cabin when she was in Scotland in the summer of 2001, studying the history of the whiskey trade from Scotland to the Smokies. He constructed the cabin with his friends at the top of Johnson Gap and fashioned an adjacent quilting house so the ladies would have a place to make their quilts. He even made sure there was an indoor “shitter.” He eventually moved the generator deeper into the woods so people could have conversations without having to yell over the motor.

Once he and Ernestine went aboard Willie Nelson’s tour bus, as Willie liked Popcorn’s moonshine, and Ernestine asked, “What’s that funny smell?”

Popcorn replied, “Oh, that’s one of them left-handed cigarettes.”



LEFT Popcorn Sutton

ABOVE TOP Popcorn's store



While I was working on my novels, Ernestine invited me to stay at the cabin that Popcorn built for her, and it's where I wrote bits of *Louisiana's Song* and the whole premise for *Jessie's Mountain*. I took our youngest child, Norah, with me on one trip. Norah was seven when we drove up to Ernestine's house on an early August evening.



When we got out of the car, Ernestine looked at Norah from her chair where she was waiting and said, "Why you're a real

living princess. Would you give me a hug?" Norah walked right into her arms for a squeeze.

During that summer in the cabin, I kept a journal:

There is an old wood stove in the cabin and a gas stove too. There are lace curtains in the window and a wide front porch with a wasp's nest above it. The generator is about thirty yards from the house. Norah won't go with me to turn it on since Popcorn told us, "You ever hear the high-pitched sound of a woman screaming at night. It's a panther," only he pronounced it "painter." Norah won't budge from the bed at night now. Popcorn bought Ernestine six Amish chairs for the cabin that are incredibly comfortable. A groundhog lives under the porch, and Popcorn is going to get it out for us, but Ernestine wants us to watch out for it anyway. I think a groundhog should absolutely move in under the Weems' front porch in the third book. . . . The mist is so thick and pearly white. Norah won't quit singing the song, "Five Pound Possum in My Headlights

Tonight!" that she learned at the Maggie Valley Opry House run by Shirley and Raymond Fairchild, who is the cross-eyed banjo player. I saw these signs when we were out exploring today.

1. "IF YOU LIKE OUR SERVICE, THE WAITRES IS ALLOWED TO EXCEPT YER TIPS."
2. "OLD CARS ARE LIKE PRETTY WOMEN. DON'T TUCH IF THEY DON'T BELONG TO YOU."
3. "PLEASE PAY INSIDE . . . TOO MANY DRIVE OFFS. WE ARE SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE."
4. "IF GOD FEELS FAR AWAY GUESS WHO MOVED?"
5. "GOD READS KNEE-MAIL."
6. "WORRY IS LIKE THE DARK ROOM IN WHICH THE NEGATIVES CAN DEVELOP."

Today the forest behind the cabin is like a fairyland with mist rising in the rays of sun falling down through the trees. Popcorn told Norah, "No finer pet than a groundhog." Then he built her a fire. Norah drew a picture of Popcorn and Ernestine jumping on a trampoline under a yellow sun. Norah asked me this question before she went to sleep tonight, "How come mountain water feels like there's a big giant ice cube in it?"

That afternoon in the graveyard, I asked Ernestine about Popcorn's death and she explained how he had been able to make his moonshine avoiding trouble for years, but one federal agent got interested and started tailing him. Then a fire in his barn in East Tennessee led to a discovery of five hundred gallons of moonshine, which ultimately resulted in a prison sentence.



But instead of going to jail, Popcorn, who had cancer by then, killed himself a few days before he was supposed to turn himself in. He drove his car into the barn and hooked a hose to the exhaust pipe.

Popcorn had first been buried in Harmon Den, but Ernestine described how his new wife had had “his poor little bones dug up” on a rainy day to bring him back to East Tennessee. The relatives of the late Lethie Hicks had watched the digging from the porch across the creek. It took eight men and all day. The wife then brought back Popcorn’s coffin back to the grave she had dug in her front yard in Cocke County, but the grave was too small, so Popcorn’s mason coffin sat above ground for a month until the day of the memorial where he was transported for fifteen miles around town on a horse-drawn carriage for a fancy send-off.

Ernestine paused with the sun shining through the pines and said, “I’ll tell you this. It was nothing more than a dog and pony show, and Popcorn hated the smell of horse poop.”

After the funeral procession, they brought him back again to the too-small grave, which I guess they got around to making bigger and buried him. But all of this went terribly against Popcorn’s final wishes, Ernestine explained, as she had shown me in his letter to her. He’d made it clear in writing that he wanted to be buried by his parents at the bend in the river at Harmon Den without a fuss – no flowers and no prayers.

He wrote: “Just bury my ass and destroy any flower on my grave.”

After Ernestine died, I found a letter she had sent me in 2011. I had given her an “I remember” writing spark to tell me about her first job. She was wanting to write her stories, but her life was so busy as she was in demand in the mountains, beloved and working on the rights of senior citizens and serving on different councils. Still, she wrote about her first job as a little girl and sent me the following:

I remember my first actual responsibility which I am calling my first job. I remember we were living in my grandparents’ house on Soco Mountain and I was five years old. I remember that Mama sold milk to the neighbor, Mattie Ramsey. I remember at that time farmers sold

raw milk to neighbors who did not have a milk cow. I remember that the fresh milk was strained and kept in sterile glass half gallon jars and were kept in the spring box through which cold pure water spring water flowed as primitive refrigeration. I remember the milk had to be delivered on a daily basis because it was a necessity for the Ramsey family of four. I remember feeling the sense of responsibility because this was my first role as a productive family member and that I was helping my mother. I remember Daddy worked at Oak Ridge away from home and the radio carried news every night about the War overseas and my neighbor, Jim Mehaffey had gone off to the war. I remember the sounds and the silence in the family as news of the war filled the kitchen. I remember the smell of the frosty air in November and seeing the branch of clear water as it rushed through the pasture making its way to join Jonathan’s Creek. I remember walking through the pasture, seeing the dirt and rocky path beneath my feet and fearing that the cold, wet jar would fall from my grasp and be broken, spilled and wasted. I remember a feeling of success in arriving safely after crawling through the wire fence twice to get to their wooden frame home. I remember the face of Mattie when I arrived with the milk and I remember Mama’s look of confidence. She believed in me.

When Ernestine first told me that story of carrying milk through the mountains, I walked outside of her house and looked up at a sky of stars in the Milky Way and thought of how Ernestine had her own “milky way.” My husband, Kiffen, told me it would make a beautiful picture book. I agreed, but picture books were hard. You had to tell the story in five hundred words or less. *Where the Wild Things Are* is 337 words. But over the years, the title kept poking at me, and finally, I asked Ernestine if it would be okay if I tried to write a picture book about a little girl who was brave enough to carry milk through the mountains and she said, “Yes.”

I interviewed her about her rock house, her cow named, “Ole Peg,” and what a spring box was like. I looked up plants of the great Smoky Mountains and found “dog hobble” and “devil’s walking stick.” I knew Ernestine didn’t drop her jar of milk, but I knew my little Ernestine needed to drop her jar to give it more of a story. I called it

Ernestine's Milky Way, and it came out in March of 2019, fourteen years after I'd first met Ernestine. Two days after Popcorn's horse-drawn funeral procession, the mountain caved in right by the exit to Harmon Den, shutting the Interstate down for months. Ernestine absolutely believed Popcorn brought the mountain down, causing the biggest rockslide in history on that road. Then she said, "It's hard to aim from Heaven, but I hope his little bones get up in the night and rattle around and scare that woman to death, digging him up the way she did!"

I shivered as we stood by the empty grave with the new headstone. I thought about my conversation with Popcorn the summer I was staying in the cabin with Norah. I was helping him put jugs of water onto his truck. He was so frail, and I could tell he might be sick.

He looked at me and said, "Don't tell nobody where my still is."

I had no idea where his still was, but I just said, "I won't. Thank you for making a fire for Norah, Popcorn." Then I asked him about how he came to make moonshine.

"I quit school about tenth grade around the same time I discovered sugar and corn. A lady, Lethie, taught me."

I wanted to ask him more, but he was in a hurry, and quite honestly, he made me nervous, so I thanked him again for making the fire.

He nodded and said, "I'm sick as a dog. Sick as a dog."

When Ernestine and I left the cemetery after hours wandering around Harmon Den that afternoon, we drove east on I-40 (that part of the interstate had just reopened after the rockslide). Merging onto the road with the traffic and Ernestine beside me was like driving back into real time.

While Ernestine was in hospice in 2017, I sent a message to the illustrator of *Ernestine's Milky Way*,

in England, Emily Sutton. She was, of course, no relation to Popcorn Sutton, but when I first told Ernestine her name, she said, "That's Popcorn having fun in heaven again."

I realized Ernestine would not live to see the book published, so I asked Emily if she had any art that I could show to Ernestine because she was so sick. The next morning, Emily, who resembles a Yorkshire Anne of Green Gables, sent me four illustrations, three water color and one black and white sketch that Libby shared with Ernestine a few days before she died.

One painting was of Ernestine as a little girl with pigtails, another was Ernestine eating cornbread, and in another she was milking Ole Peg with her mother. There was also a black and white sketch of Ernestine having breakfast with Mattie Ramsey's family. I sent them to Libby, who wrote



*I kissed Ernestine and told her that I loved her, but I didn't tell her goodbye.
I walked outside and breathed in the smell of the Smoky Mountains on that
cool late August evening in the soft rain.*



back and said, “Tell Emily Mama loves them. They brought a rare beautiful smile to her face.”

Since its publication, I’ve been reading *Ernestine’s Milky Way* to children everywhere. I went back to Maggie Valley in the spring where I signed books at Joey’s Pancake House, and Ernestine’s granddaughter Katharine, who looks just like a young Ernestine, showed up to buy the book inspired by her grandmother. Both Katharine and her sister, Lauren, are college

students studying medicine in the mountains. Libby, a nurse practitioner in Maggie Valley, wrote to me and said, “Ernestine was your mountain mother, but now you have a mountain sister.”

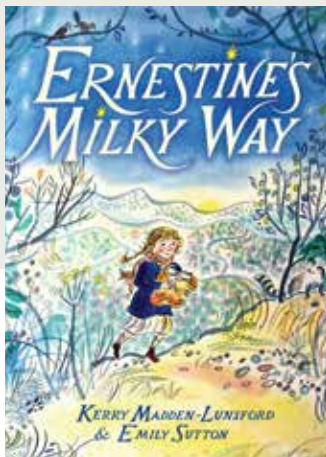
The day before Ernestine died at the age of eighty, I got to sit with her and hold her hand and play her mountain music. I played her the ballads of Sheila Kay Adams and I played her my sister-in-law Tomi Lunsford’s songs like “Alabama Darling,” “Bryson City,” and “Taking Care of Dreamers.”

Ernestine took care of dreamers. She loved her children and her grandchildren more than anything. She loved her husband, Cecil. She loved Popcorn. She loved people. She wanted people to do well. When the copyright for *Me and My Likker* appeared to be up for grabs after Popcorn’s death, Ernestine did her best to make sure the copyright went to his eldest daughter. I don’t know if that happened, but she said she tried, even though, in the new version, Ernestine’s name and dedication had been removed entirely.

I kissed Ernestine and told her that I loved her, but I didn’t tell her goodbye. I walked outside and breathed in the smell of the Smoky Mountains on that cool late August evening in the soft rain.

Ernestine said once that the Cherokee Indians didn’t have a word for “goodbye.” Instead they have a word that means, “Until we meet again, my friend.”

That summer when Norah was a child, Ernestine took her to see the Cherokee Indian Reservation just over the mountain from Maggie Valley. I went along too, but that trip was meant for Norah. As I looked at old photographs and read through the letters, I knew I couldn’t ever say goodbye to her, so I followed the example of the Cherokee in thinking “donadagohvi”: “until we meet again.” ■



Ernestine said once that the Cherokee Indians didn't have a word for "goodbye." Instead they have a word that means, "Until we meet again, my friend."

ABOVE Madden-Lunsford at her *Ernestine’s Milky Way* book launch with her husband Kiffen Lunsford and Ernestine’s daughter Libby and granddaughters Lauren and Katharine

STEPHANIE WHITLOCK DICKEN, who designed this essay, has worked with NCLR since 2001, including serving as Art Director from 2002 to 2008. She can be reached at StephanieWDicken@gmail.com for freelance design work.

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY PRISCILLA MELCHIOR***Circumlocution*

I'm no student of Latin
 but I am sure that, buried deep
 in the tombs of that dead tongue,
 are heretofore unknown classifications
 of words that make onomatopoeia
 shut its vowel mouth to jingle,
 boom, and clang no more.

Consider, for instance, those that contain
 the seeds of what they actually mean,
 like benign, which sprouted its own curling,
 silent tumor, the g, for no medically etymological
 reason – or aggressive, which attacks
 with double-barrel consonants proving
 that Mr. G is not really harmless at all.

Then there are words that look like
 what they are, a visual category,
 if you will: parallel or (Avert your eyes!)
 boob. Even church. I was told as a child
 that the word is what it is: u.r. in church.
 See the steeples on either end?

I lie in bed at night and think of these things,
 linguistic lullabies, misdirections from words
 I want to forget: Cancer. Death. War.
 I search for dreams in darkness,
 escape into the melody of language.
 Anaphora, anaphora, anaphora.
 Amen.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Circumlocution, 1993 (acrylic on canvas, 40x40) by Michael Klauke

PRISCILLA MELCHIOR is originally from Wilson, NC. She is now a three-time finalist for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize, and her poems have appeared in *NCLR* 2017 and 2018. Throughout her career, she worked at various newspapers in the eastern part of North Carolina, including *The Daily Reflector*. She retired to Highland County, VA, in 2011.

MICHAEL KLAUKE earned his BFA from UNC Chapel Hill. His artistic focus is Language as Art, in which he creates art using words, often done in the form of "Textual Pointillism," a medium he first explored after the attacks of September 11. The words in his art relate to the image and message that the piece creates. He has received two Artist Fellowships from the NC Arts Council and has exhibited solo at the Mint Museum of Art, the National Humanities Center, and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art. See more of his work on his [website](#).

MELODIC MUSINGS

a review by Fred Chappell

Susan Laughter Meyers.
*Self-Portrait in the River of
Déjà Vu*. Press 53, 2019.

Read about FRED CHAPPELL with his poetry published in the Flashback section of this issue.

SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS (1945–2017) was the author of two collections of poems: *Keep and Give Away* (University of South Carolina Press, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007), which received the South Carolina Poetry Book Prize, the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA) Book Award for Poetry, and the Brockman-Campbell Book Award, and *My Dear, Dear Stagger Grass* (Cider Press Review, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR* 2014), the inaugural winner of the Cider Press Review Editors' Prize. Her chapbook *Lessons in Leaving* (Press 53, 1998) won the Persephone Press Book Award. Her poetry has been published in numerous journals, including *NCLR*, *Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Crazyhorse*, and *jubilat*, as well as *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and Ted Kooser's "American Life in Poetry" column. A long-time writing instructor with an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, Meyers taught poetry workshops and classes in community programs. She was a past president of the Poetry Society of South Carolina and the North Carolina Poetry Society. Her awards included fellowships from the South Carolina Academy of Authors and The Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) and the 2013 James Applewhite Poetry Prize, her poem selected for the prize by Fred Chappell.

Because *Self-Portrait in the River of Déjà Vu* is a posthumous collection and very complexly organized, I wondered if the poet, Susan Laughter Meyers, had assembled it. Kevin Morgan Watson, her editor-publisher, informs me that the *whole* of it is her work, except for a few very minor changes. So now we receive this volume as the poet intended it to be: a series of interrelated pieces, lyrical, elegiac, and melancholic, all bound together with threads delicate as those of spider webs and strong as steel wire.

The motive for composition was a single puzzling incident, the disappearance of her aunt Mary Alice after whom she was named. (Meyers's given name was Susan Mary Alice.) The aunt's shoes were found on the bank of the James River, but no trace of the woman was ever discovered. This mystery seems, on the witness of this volume, to have tinged the whole of Meyers's life with the color of absence. Absence results in an emotional disturbance different from that of the loss of a person because, in this case at least, there can be no resolution. From the poet's earliest years, Meyers knew that her aunt had gone missing, and the feeling evolved that some part of her own private identity would always be missing too.

Yet the search for lost aspects of the poet's own life occupies few lines of the poems. Absence is a more metaphysical state than loss and its influence is more pervasive because there is no fixed focal point. What happened?

... I don't know half the answer.
No one does, no one did. No one

answer. What made us think
there was one question?

These phrases from "Finding Her Huck Embroidery Folded in a Drawer" present the unknowable in a manner characteristic of the collection as a whole. The puns on "know" and "no" are more than a forlorn jest; they echo each other not only in negative repetition but musically as well.

Musical analogy is one of the constant organizational devices for the collection, as are literary allusion, artwork, metaphors for different kinds of sewing, poetic forms, deliberate confusions of personae and verbal play, not only puns and echoes but anagrams and other types of code. This list of usages would seem to imply diversity instead of unity, but Meyers intertwines them so thoroughly that the volume becomes an almost indivisible experience.

For example, "Obbligato: Her Faithless Muse" is arranged around a fantasy conceit, that her aunt "could have been a glass harmonicist / in a rain forest of quick, bright birds." These birds, "long feathered and ethereal," are embodiments of the musical notes of the glass harmonica, holding "like deep reverberations," "humming" from her "clavicle." "Clavicle" is, of course, a pun on "clavichord," so that Aunt Mary Alice has become her own musical instrument, as her fingered notes have

become birds. But then the use of echo changes the key: *"Could have been, a sour lingering."* This first line of the fourth stanza repeats the phrase from the first line, but now the notes go "sour," "diminished to rough-weathered half notes." The harmonica notes are no longer birds; they have transformed to plants, "orchids, bromeliads." The serenade has "gone brickle-mad." (Here "brickle" means "changeable.") The speaker's happy fantasy-image of her aunt is no longer a "glad-edged serenade." The realization of her absence has returned to spoil it.

"Aunt Mary Alice Teaches Me to Tat" suggests a musical form different from an obligato composition. In this poem the repetitions and the legato phrasing ("With a ring of thread lacing her fingers, / She pulls the shuttle through and tugs"), make the sound fugal, even though the slow fugue is arranged so as to come apart in the final stanza:

I slide a tangle. Soon she has a double stitch,
and I have nothing. She is abuzz, moving on
to double stitch and picot, a ring of them.
Not for me, this finger work! She sings
Her fancy song of double stitch and picot.
My lesson, a snarl of string untatted.

In "Mary Alice Alarm" the fugato form is taken to its briefest limit, as the twenty-six words that make up the poem are all formed from the name, Mary Alice. It begins with a demand by the aunt that she be punished for her faults: "Mama, call me / a lame liar. / Rail me." It ends with a description of her present state of being or non-being: "I am a relic / Mercy, mercy, / a clay miracle."

A number of poems employ or adduce a different form of code. In "Train Headed South" the whistle "sounds / the indecipherable code/ all passersby have tried to crack." Mary Alice believes she has deciphered it: "Sorrow is a long, fading whistle." In "Lately She Falls to Dreaming" she hears "the moths / at her window screen tapping in code." The companion poems, "The Art of Beginning" and "Detective Notes," present the problem in traditional mystery-story form, disjointed by time-lapse. The last three stanzas of the latter consist of unanswered questions, such as

"conditn of old drivewy?" given in the detective's abbreviations. "Postcard from Paris, a Deciphering" begins with a question: "It could be from her. She's alive?" But the erratic handwriting on the unsigned postcard makes the words uncertain. *"Welcome. . . or, Will come. I White, my moon. . . or, Write me soon."* The final line is utterly baffling: *"Paradise – am I here?"*

But the clues and hints – the abandoned shoes, the detective's notes, the postcard – lead both the questing persona and the reader into a labyrinth that twists upon itself so intensely that it becomes a clenched core of frustrated sorrow which does not allow grieving and leaves only thinly hopeful speculation as a memorial. Maybe the speaker's brother was wrong to believe that Aunt Mary Alice was murdered by her husband and buried under the newly paved driveway. Maybe Aunt Estelle is correct in believing that the postcard from Paris is an actual message.

Maybe.

A difficult problem for the poet in dealing with such a theme is imagery. If the central concept is absence, how can it be visualized in the lines? Meyers powerfully addresses the difficulty by choosing specific scenes from sometimes unallocated past episodes and setting down vivid details. The first stanza of "Weave Such Days to a Whole" presents a house where Aunt Mary Alice used to employ her loom. The blue door is open; dried



PHOTOGRAPH BY ISHMAEL 'BLUE'
MEYERS; COURTESY OF KEVIN
MORGAN WATSON, PRESS 53



RIGHT TOP Susan Laughter Meyers

(Press 53 of Winston-Salem is donating proceeds from this posthumous collection to the Susan Laughter Meyers Fellowship from the NC Poetry Society.)

goldenrod hangs on the wall: "what could be simpler than flowers, / a window, a door in the face of morning?" Then an interpolated line from Sappho destroys the calm mood and days arrive "When sunlight is not enough," and "the heart / is blue as a heavy door." Is there no one "Who can thread / the loom to weave such days to a whole?"

There are other poems here wherein images are posted in the early lines and either abstracted or distorted, sometimes grotesquely, as the stanzas progress. Sometimes the images are offered with such little context that the poem seems a deliberate riddle. "Anniversary Song" is one example, although it is possible that the small house described is the same as the one in "Weave Such Days," seen at a later time as ruin takes it:

A door, it's only a door
of old wood. Paint peels

in streaks of turquoise
coppered by sunlight.

The top brace (one end
rot-chewed) shoulders

wide boards, all four.
No latch, a knotted rope

worming through the key-
hole half-hitches a nail.

If Susan Laughter Meyers's long sojourn with absence endured until her own death, the poems it drew from her will endure long afterward from now. *Self-Portrait in the River of Déjà Vu*, a cantata devoted to what is not present, will be with us for many years. The poet has departed, but she did not take her absence with her. ■

TO GIVE VOICE TO EVERYTHING

a review by Jim Coby

Michael Parker. *Prairie Fever: A Novel*. Algonquin Books, 2019.

JIM COBY received his PhD in English with a focus on Southern Literature from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University-Kokomo. He is a regular *NCLR* book reviewer and also interviewed Matthew Griffin for *NCLR* 2017. His scholarship has been published or is forthcoming in the *Ellen Glasgow Journal of Southern Women Writers*, *Teaching American Literature*, *Pennsylvania English*, *South Central Review*, and *The Explicator*.

MICHAEL PARKER is a retired Professor of creative writing at UNC Greensboro. He is a native of North Carolina but has moved from his home state to Austin, TX. Over the years, *NCLR* has published several of his essays and an interview with him in 2005. Read more about Parker in the story about one of his most recent honors, the R. Hunt Parker Award, in *NCLR Online* 2012 and find more of his work in *NCLR Online* 2015. Parker was also the honoree of the 2015 North Carolina Writers Conference in Washington, NC.

OPPOSITE Michael Parker and *NCLR* Fiction Editor Liza Wieland reading from their new novels at the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival, 19 May 2019

Michael Parker is a master at forming engaging, thought-provoking, and all around remarkable characters. The type of characters that, were they real people, would likely prompt the desire to hover within their orbit, to experience some of their charms in real time. This mastery of character was true in *The Watery Part of the World* (Algonquin Books, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012) and *All That I have in This World* (Algonquin Books, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015) and is no less true in his newest novel, *Prairie Fever*.

Enter Lorena and Elise Stewart, a pair of precocious sisters who live in the rural community of Lone Wolf, OK. Their story begins wrapped tightly under a blanket on the back of a horse named Sandy as the sisters ride to school through the near Arctic temperatures of a Midwestern winter morning. Upon their arrival, they are greeted by their North Carolina-born, but newly Midwestern-settled teacher, Gus McQueen. Over the course of the next several chapters, Gus evolves from educator to friend to paramour as the trio form a tempestuous, but deeply respectful relationship based on each one's appreciation of knowledge and language. Following a series of events consequential to each one of them, Sandy included, the trio of humans eventually find means of reconnecting, learning to trust and love one another, and plundering their collective memories to learn what special kinship unites them all.

Over the course of his novel, Parker crafts characters with so



COURTESY OF LIZA WIELAND

strong and unique a voice that readers may well forget they are reading something written and not lived. That is, when Lorena writes to her once and always classroom rival Edith Gotswegan midway through the text, the missives read like genuine artifacts plundered from some relative's attic-bound antique chest. And when Lorena begins her epistle with "I write from Wyoming, as you might have deduced from the postmark, if you are the type to read postmarks. But of course you are not, which is why I am writing to you in the first place" (211), all of Lorena's acerbic wit and personality rush forth so strongly that readers are apt to be swept along in the current of language. This detailed attention to language is another hallmark of *Prairie Fever*.

Parker has long had a penchant for wordplay in his novels – puns, double-entendres, and

bits of meta-humor – so it's no surprise that the characters in this novel quite literally play with their words. Parker notes that the Stewart sisters "warm themselves with words" (4) recited from their perusal of newspapers during the coldest days of the Oklahoma winters. (Fascinating side note: the stories the sisters read come from actual turn-of-the-century Midwestern newspapers; Parker's research knows no bounds.) Beyond a love of the printed word is the sisters' razor-sharp and rapid-fire banter between themselves. All of which amounts to attention to the craft of character, dialogue, and presentation that bring to mind the psychological explorations of Henry James or Edith Wharton.

Another area in which Parker clearly revels is in considering and expressing his consternation with the field of teaching, voiced largely through the

characters of Lorena and Gus. Anyone who has taught for any period of time understands both the frustrations and pleasures that come with attentive and (sometimes overly) engaged students, but Parker here reminds readers of the other side of the coin in his descriptions of Lorena's constant challenges to Gus's pedagogy. For example, after an unsatisfactory reply to one of her insights, Lorena muses, "To this [Gus] said only, 'Hmmm,' as if to remind me he was my teacher, for this is the sound teachers make when they want you to know you have said something ignorant but have not the courage or energy to tell you so" (60).

Parker's novel is aggressively readable, but at the same time deeply contemplative, both encouraging a quick initial read-through while also rewarding repeated, measured readings. Atmospheric and contemplative as it is, the novel moves at a swift clip until its final act when it becomes a more intense consideration of the roles of parenthood, loneliness, and familial bonds. As the sisters prepare for their first reunion in several years, Parker presents the excitement, but also anxiety that can potentially mar such vents. Throughout *Prairie Fever*, Parker continues to solidify his position as a master of observational and creative prowess, forging characters at once wholly fantastic while at the same time completely true to life. It's a pleasure to spend time with these characters, and one hopes that Parker continues to craft more like them for a long time yet. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL COSTON

A NEW SOUTH MORALITY TALE

a review by Paula Gallant Eckard

George Hovis. *The Skin Artist*. SFK Press, 2019.

PAULA GALLANT ECKARD is Professor of English at UNC Charlotte, where she has served as the Director of American Studies and has recently been appointed Chair of English. She is the author of *Thomas Wolfe and Lost Children in Southern Literature* (University of Tennessee Press, 2016) and *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (University of Missouri Press, 2002) and the editor of *The Thomas Wolfe Review*.

GEORGE HOVIS is a native of Gaston County, NC. Before becoming a writer and teacher, he worked as a process chemist at several ink factories in Charlotte. His stories and essays have appeared widely, most recently in *Carolina Quarterly* and *The Fourth River*, and he is a regular contributor to *NCLR's* pages. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he earned a PhD from UNC Chapel Hill and has attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Read more about him in the interview that follows.

Like many Southern writers, including expatriate writers who have left the South for new homes, George Hovis creates a strong sense of place that reverberates throughout his characters' lives and fortunes. In *The Skin Artist*, protagonist Bill Becker finds himself cast adrift against the New South cityscape of Charlotte, NC, a place transformed from its genteel roots by big banking and forces of capitalist forces. Hypnotic and sexy, Hovis's provocative first novel takes place during the summer of 1998, a year that saw NationsBank's dizzying rise to new heights in the Queen City and a popular Southern president's fall from grace and eventual impeachment. These events provide the backdrop for the changes that come into Becker's life. In quick succession, he loses his wife, job, and comfortable middle-class existence and is plunged into dark, seductive places.

As the name "Bill" suggests, Becker is a New South Everyman. A graduate of the University of North Carolina and an "aging party boy," he has lost touch with his rural upbringing and with what Hovis calls "waste-not, want-not values."* As things fall apart, Bill takes up with a stripper named Lucy and wakes one morning to find himself with new skin: an extraordinary butterfly tattoo etched on his chest. With the heavily-tattooed Lucy, who represents a surreal, modern-day Beatrice, Bill ventures into Charlotte's underworld lurking in the shadows of NationsBank, an edifice that looms phallic-

like over the city and Bill's life. Much of the action takes place at night, and images of skylines, stars, moons, and darkness, along with an epigraph from the *Inferno*, frame Bill's night world journey. At its fundamental level, *The Skin Artist* is a prodigal tale about the temptations of the big city and about losing connection with one's roots, family, and, ultimately, oneself. In his attempt to find self and home, Bill's journey evolves into a New South morality tale and a harrowing descent into eroticism and desire.

The Skin Artist traverses a variety of landscapes – sexual, psychological, and geographic – that reveal a postmodern sensibility and daring that give the novel its power. Sex and the body are rendered explicitly, but not gratuitously. Obsession, addiction, and trauma are shown for the human problems they are and the suffering they cause. Urban and rural places are juxtaposed with careful consideration, with both environments proving significant during Bill's journey. Despite the darkness that overshadows much of the novel, redemption and hope surface, making the reader pull for Bill, his family, and his friends as their worlds collide and then realign.

There is much to like about *The Skin Artist*, including crisp prose, startling images, and intense renderings of people and scenes. It also contains literary allusions and references that add intertextual dimensions to the storytelling. Dante, Edgar Allan Poe, and Thomas Wolfe will come to mind for readers.

The novel's depiction of place, a real strength in Hovis's writing, reflects his experience of living near and later working in Charlotte. A resident of upstate New York for some years now, Hovis grew up in Stanley, NC, a small Gaston County mill village less than an hour away from uptown Charlotte. He also worked for Charlotte ink factories after college and during a few summers of graduate school. As Hovis explains, the city always held a fascination for him: "In my mind, there was a dichotomy between country and town. . . . Charlotte was the big city that we didn't get to very often when I was growing up." His portrayal of Charlotte's boom times, which saw the arrival of national corporations, professional sports teams, and diverse newcomers, captures perfectly the city's zeitgeist of the late 1990s. His characters visit such landmarks as the Cajun Queen (a trendy restaurant near uptown Charlotte) and the Double Door Inn (a popular music venue). Hovis also mentions colorful local personalities, including millionaire George Shinn, who owned the Charlotte Hornets basketball team, and professional wrestler "Nature Boy" Ric Flair. "The Jackpot," where Lucy works, is based on Charlotte's oldest strip club, The Paper Doll Lounge, an establishment Hovis claims not to have visited but knew about from working in Charlotte. Streets, highways, neighborhoods, and recreational places, such as Lake Norman, are also described with familiarity and detail.

Hovis convincingly portrays the urban-rural divide that has developed in the South over time and that he understood as a boy. Bill's character exempli-

fies this split and the sense of dislocation that many Southerners have experienced after leaving their small hometowns and rural roots for more urban places. Social class deepens the divide further and drives many of the interpersonal conflicts in the novel. Hovis distinguishes between "plain folk," yeoman types such as Bill's mother, father, and brother who work the family farm not far from Charlotte's gleaming skyscrapers, and poor white families such as Lucy's, who live as tenants or renters, often violently, on someone else's land. Hovis's perceptive treatment of class no doubt grows out of his research for his book *Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction* (U of South Carolina P, 2007). In this scholarly work, he analyzes the lives of rural people, black and white, who identify with the small yeoman farm rather than the plantation and who appear often in North Carolina fiction. Bill's family epitomizes the yeoman identity and becomes both a centering and contrarian force as he struggles to find his way.

The Skin Artist features believable characters who could be one's brother, sister, or cousin beset by upheaval and change. Their humanity is real and, at times, wrenching. Hovis creates dialogue that is true to the people and places that he writes about. Whether it is casual bar talk between friends, a strained conversation between husband and wife, or a mother's chastisement of a son who's been away from home too long, he captures nuances of speech and feeling that befit his characters and their circumstances. Male friendships and varied aspects of Southern

masculinity are also treated thoughtfully. Bill's relationship with his brother Wesley and with best friend Kent show that loyalty, caring, and brotherhood between men can be deep and lifelong. Other characters are drawn vividly, sometimes with dark humor. These include Niall the tattooist, who is an odd mixture of shaman, huckster, and philosopher, and Bill's friend Duane, who hosts a Fourth of July "Pork 'n' Porn" celebration, featuring barbecue and homemade porn videos that belong to his wife's ex-husband.

Bill's estranged wife, Maddie, and his lover, Lucy, are given depth and potential for growth. Lucy's character is especially riveting. Although she starts off as Bill's sexual obsession, she becomes more than that by the novel's end. During the completion of *The Skin Artist*, the #MeToo Movement was unfolding in the national media, which Hovis reports prompted him to reimagine aspects of Lucy's story. As a result, he ended up giving her a more complicated past and an astute, if not painful, self-awareness. Lucy knows how others must judge her appearance and lifestyle. She can also sense immediately whether there is any chance for authentic connection with another person: "She didn't know if it was the tattoos or maybe something different. Something failed and broken" (294). Her journey proves as transformational as Bill's, and perhaps more surprising. In the end, *The Skin Artist* moves well beyond its New South setting into deeper regions of human experience and moral understanding. It is a book that offers a rare combination of literary and guilty pleasures. ■

Sex, Tattoos, AND THE New South:

By Paula Gallant Eckard

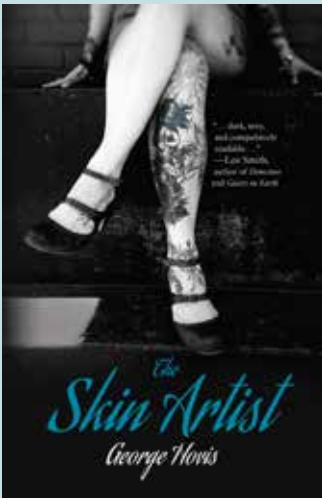
An Interview with Southern Writer George Hovis

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX GRICHENKO

PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH HOVIS



COURTESY OF SFK



George Hovis knows the South and his home state of North Carolina as well as any writer who has come from these places. I first met him through the Thomas Wolfe Society at its 2008 meeting in St. Louis, Missouri. Our mutual interest in Wolfe, Southern literature, and our North Carolina roots gave us much to talk about. Eventually, we would serve together as president and vice-president of the society, organizing conferences in Wolfe's hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and in far-flung Boise, Idaho, where Wolfe visited during his famous Western Journey.

A resident of upstate New York for over ten years, Hovis is a Professor of English at SUNY Oneonta. He is a regular contributor to *NCLR* and has published stories and essays widely, including *Carolina Quarterly* and *The Fourth River*. A graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, Hovis has attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference and is a Pushcart Prize nominee. His monograph *Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction*, which was published in 2007 by University of South Carolina Press, examines the lives of rural people, black and white, who appear throughout North Carolina literature. As in his fiction, it shows a nuanced understanding of people and place.

Over the years, I have known Hovis best for his Southern literary scholarship, including *Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction*, which has informed my own research and writing. With the publication of *The Skin Artist* in 2019 by SFK Press, I discovered his considerable talent as a fiction writer. This debut novel is set in my own backyard of Charlotte, North Carolina. I recognized many of the streets, neighborhoods, and establishments depicted in *The Skin Artist*. But there were also people and places that I did not know and would have been too afraid to encounter in real life. As a lifelong resident of Charlotte, I was enthralled by the novel's provocative portrayal of the city.

“*The Skin Artist* is the complex saga of a young man’s search for his own identity on the dark side of the New South – it’s hard to believe this is a first novel. Hovis has created an old-fashioned morality tale set against some of the most garish manifestations of the Sunbelt.”—Lee Smith

“Hovis displays a world we know and try to turn our gaze from. But the story is too powerful . . . and we readers watch, hypnotized, as the descent gathers friends, lovers, and family into its vortex. Can such dark passages lead to hope?”

—Fred Chappell

To learn more about the backstory behind *The Skin Artist*, I conducted a two-hour telephone interview with Hovis on August 6, 2019. I paid an online service to type up our conversation, which resulted in forty-five pages of transcript. I noticed that some of the words failed to transcribe, no doubt the result of our Southern accents. Other passages, we concluded, shouldn’t be in the published interview – too personal, too political. The most salient parts of our discussion are included here, including the author’s choice of setting, characters, and plot, as well as his identity as a Southern writer. We also spent much time talking about tattoos and sex in the novel.

A native of Gaston County, North Carolina, Hovis grew up in the small mill village of Stanley less than an hour from uptown Charlotte. Living in a rural community close to the Queen City’s bright lights and skyscrapers provided him with an early sense of the urban and rural divide. In the interview that follows, Hovis states, “In my mind, there was a dichotomy between country and town. . . . Charlotte was the big city that we didn’t get to very often when I was growing up.” Before becoming a writer and teacher, he worked as a process chemist at several ink factories in Charlotte. *The Skin Artist* draws on these experiences of place, of “county and town,” with an intense realism indicative of his lifelong fascination with Charlotte and familiarity with the surrounding region. In *The Skin Artist*, Hovis crafts a New South morality tale that takes the reader into Charlotte’s underworld and into many facets of complex human relationships. The book focuses on the upheavals that middle-aged Bill Becker faces when he loses his wife, job, and comfortable middle-class existence during the summer of 1998. His affair with a heavily-tattooed stripper named Lucy takes him into dark, seductive places involving body and mind. Obsession, addiction, and trauma are shown for the human problems they are and the suffering they cause. Bill’s journey also involves coming to terms with himself, his abandoned rural roots, and the idea of home. *The Skin Artist* calls to mind the works of Dante, Edgar Allan Poe, and Thomas Wolfe. This riveting novel reflects a postmodern sensibility mixed with Southern Gothic.

PAULA GALLANT ECKARD: *Until quite recently, I did not know you wrote fiction. Your writing on Thomas Wolfe, Fred Chappell, and other North Carolina writers has been very helpful to me as a Southern literature scholar. Is writing fiction something fairly new for you?*



PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN G. HENSLEY

GEORGE HOVIS: In recent years I have come to devote myself primarily to writing fiction, but I have always worked as both a scholar and a fiction writer. I published a number of stories before placing *The Skin Artist*. Even when I was in the PhD program in English at UNC Chapel Hill, I spent as much time working on fiction as on the essays for my classes and later for academic journals. I was fortunate to attend a program where creative writing as an extracurricular activity was not only tolerated but encouraged. To be surrounded by so many excellent writers on the faculty and in the community helped make this dual focus possible. Like me, lots of my fellow graduate students had a foot in both worlds. And these many years later, we still do. One main reason for this hybridity, I believe, was *The Carolina Quarterly*. It's very common – in fact the norm – for MFA programs to staff literary magazines with graduate students. However, it's quite rare for a PhD program in English to do so. For many of us at UNC, *The Carolina Quarterly* became a literary club, as well as a sanctuary from the abstractions of theory, and, finally, a practical internship in writing and publishing. When you spend a weekend reading through a slush pile of forty or fifty unsolicited manuscripts of short fiction, you start to figure out what makes one story stand out from the rest. I suppose the same holds true for poetry. But it's a long, slow process of learning.

Can you talk more about your experience with The Carolina Quarterly and how that influenced you as a student and a writer?

When I was a first-year MA student and a fledgling fiction reader for *CQ*, our fiction editor, a fellow graduate student named Brenda Thiessen, arranged for her staff to read through a pile of several hundred stories and systematically winnow the pile down, through a democratic process, to a lucky six stories that would find a place in the upcoming issue. We met multiple times and engaged in lengthy civil debate about the merits and demerits of several dozen finalists, until eventually, as a staff, we had chosen the six stories to fill the allotted space.

Well, then we all patiently waited for the issue to arrive from the printer, and when finally the boxes appeared in the *CQ* office on the top floor of Greenlaw Hall and I stopped by to pick up my copy, I was shocked to find that none of the six stories we had chosen appeared in the issue. Instead, only a single story, one I had never even heard of, graced the pages of our magazine. It was a story called “Nicodemus Bluff,” by some guy named Barry Hannah.¹ I gathered from another staff member that, subsequent to our many meetings, our fiction editor had discovered this story in the fresh slush pile. Like all the other stories we'd read, it had come in unsolicited, “over the transom.” But, unlike me, Brenda knew who Barry Hannah was. And she recognized genius and hard-won achievement when she

¹ Barry Hannah, “Nicodemus Bluff,” *Carolina Quarterly* 45.1 (1992): 5–25.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE HOWIS



read it. She decided this one time to exercise executive privilege and override her staff's democratic process because she felt that none of the six stories we had selected deserved to share space in the issue with Barry Hannah.

"Nicodemus Bluff" went on to be chosen for that year's *Best American Short Stories* anthology. At the time, I didn't understand what was so special about Hannah's story. After several more years of graduate study and reading through several hundred more story manuscripts in the *CQ* slush-pile, and after I started to pay more careful attention to contemporary fiction published in other magazines and anthologies, I did finally come to understand what was so special about "Nicodemus Bluff." The next time I read it, it seemed like a completely different piece of writing.

"I am one hundred percent a Southern writer and a North Carolina writer."

Do you see yourself as a Southern writer? Or, as someone who writes about the South?

I am one hundred percent a Southern writer and a North Carolina writer. You know it causes me some distress to think that just because I've lived outside North Carolina, somehow that undermines my identity as a North Carolinian. I am in no way a New York writer, except that I live there and am part of the upstate New York writing community. I have very good writer friends who live in central New York and are very important to me. But I would not attempt to write about New York or New Yorkers. I wouldn't have the confidence to do that, even though I've been there for thirteen years now.

When you moved up north, did you feel displaced? Do you have trouble shifting worlds or voices when you go back and forth between New York and North Carolina?

I still feel displaced, and I think that's a part of my psyche. I mean, I love my new home and I love my new friends there, but displacement is just a fundamental part of my sense of self. For my neighbors, my Southernness makes me a bit exotic, and I am fine with that. I feel certain political differences when I come to North Carolina, but in all other respects, it feels like a real home to me. The geography, the people, my family, it all feels so natural and welcoming. It's only with the politics that I often notice differences. Maybe what that says is, where I live now I lead a more politically segregated life than I did when I lived in North Carolina.

COURTESY OF GEORGE HOWIS



ABOVE TOP View of the author's workplace, SUNY Oneonta, from the trail that leads into the college campus

ABOVE BOTTOM The writer with his family at home in Cooperstown, NY, Dec. 2018

What do you miss most about the South?

When we lived in Kentucky while I was teaching at Murray State, my wife Kim, who is from upstate New York, would sometimes complain about people being “fake nice.” And when we moved north and had been there a while, she said, “You know, I kind of miss fake nice.” I know it’s dangerous to over-generalize, and I don’t feel that people are nicer anywhere I’ve been. People are people. But there are certain ways of interacting that grease the machinery, especially among strangers. I noticed it going into Walmart in Murray. You would come in the store and they’d say, “How are you *doing* today?” and hand you a little smiley sticker. And they *seemed* to really care. Such gestures remind me of home and aspects of the South I hope never change.

*Although you’ve been away for many years, you seem to retain affection for the South and its inherent friendliness. Why exactly did you choose Charlotte for the primary setting in *The Skin Artist*? Why not some other Southern city? You also juxtapose city and country. What influenced these choices?*

I grew up forty minutes from Charlotte in Gaston County, about two miles outside a little mill village called Stanley. Most of my friends lived in town. Some of them lived in the country. I was legitimately country. In my mind, as a kid, there was a dichotomy between country and town. Charlotte was most definitely the big city that we didn’t get to very often when I was growing up. So, as I got older, Charlotte became increasingly alluring. Just as New York and Boston are for Thomas Wolfe’s protagonists “shining cities,” Charlotte always was that for me. In the novel, I also keep Gaston County, which during the early twentieth century boasted more textile spindles than any comparable acreage in the world. It was a huge textile center.

Like your main character, Bill, you worked for a Charlotte ink manufacturer. What was that job like?

After I graduated from North Carolina State University with degrees in English and Chemistry and a minor in German, I rightly observed that a BS in chemistry would get me a better-paying job than English would. I took a job as a process chemist for a packaging inks manufacturer, BASF, a German corporation that later sold the division to Sun Chemical.

My parents put up a little mobile home – a solitary trailer – on their land in Gaston County. I lived there for five years and drove forty



COURTESY OF GEORGE HOVIS

minutes to work every day in an old gas guzzler that had belonged to my grandparents. My father helped me paint it pink.

I loved my job in that I loved the people I worked with. It was a diverse workplace. That's not to say Charlotte was without discrimination, but it was a period of significant progress. Charlotte's first black mayor, Harvey Gantt, had just completed two terms and was running for the United States Senate against Jesse Helms. Everyone I worked with was excited about it. I was devastated when Gantt didn't win.

It was also the height of Charlotte's successful desegregation of public schools following the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1971. When Boston was having a protracted busing crisis, Charlotte boasted how successful it had been and told the people of Boston, "Come down to Charlotte and see how we figured it out." A Reagan appointee reversed the decision in 1999, and so Charlotte schools are back to being segregated again.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX GRICHENKO

You set your novel in the late 1990s. In 1998, to be precise. Did you see the changes that came to Charlotte with the banking industry and its becoming a financial center during that era?

Yes, I was working in Charlotte around that time. While I was in graduate school at Chapel Hill, I worked summers for another ink manufacturer that made coatings for fiber optics. Whereas I had been a process chemist at Sun Chemical, I was now a grunt laborer. I also did some quality control. Anyhow, I wanted to capture that time period. I didn't want it to just dissipate.

The NationsBank tower is a central landmark in the novel. And it was for me, working in Charlotte. I was mesmerized by the tower. That building is still the tallest in the Carolinas: sixty stories. In the '80s and '90s, Charlotte, which had been a boom town for a hundred years, raised the boom to a whole nother level. It was coming into its own and announcing itself as a world-class city, a global banking superpower.

The sports franchises that the city had been yearning for finally became a reality with the Hornets and the Panthers. A big part of it was building the football stadium. I was also working in Charlotte when they built what is now the "old" Charlotte Coliseum. Then nineteen years later, they imploded it and built another coliseum with swanker skyboxes. That still blows my mind. I'm from country people who believe in "waste not, want not." Here's this perfectly good twenty-four thousand-seat arena, and you're gonna destroy it?

COURTESY OF GEORGE HOWIS



Your connection to Charlotte seems to have set the stage for key aspects of your novel, including your unusual characters. I noticed that Bill and Lucy sport impressive tattoos, which take on a prominent role in the novel. Do their tattoos relate to your employment in Charlotte ink factories?

Part of it was that I worked in inks, so ink was in my subconscious. The other part was, when I worked and played in Charlotte, there was this rockabilly band from my area called the Belmont Playboys. They were kids from my high school, and they'd made it big in Charlotte and in the rockabilly world beyond. The first

time I saw them was at a high school talent show. Back then they were basically a Ramones and Sex Pistols cover band, but then they transformed themselves from punk to rockabilly. Reinvention is such a theme in my novel, too. The rockabilly band in *The Skin Artist* reminds me of the Belmont Playboys.

This was at a time when I never saw tattoos except on veterans and Harley Davidson aficionados. I started being a groupie for the Belmont Playboys and wanted to go out and hear them every time they played, often at the Double Door Inn. I watched them as they acquired tattoo after tattoo. I remember my shock when the lead singer, the guitarist Mike Hendrix, who's a really talented songwriter and musician, had a new tattoo on the side of his neck, and that just messed with me. So, of course, Bill gets one on his neck in the novel.

When I went to Chapel Hill, I saw tattoos more frequently. Your local barista might have a tattoo, or the people working at Weaver Street Market. The bohemian aspects of Chapel Hill, which I found very liberating, also found their way into the novel. It's a story about Bill, who has left home, lost connection with his roots, lost his way, and then reconnects. But I didn't want to tell a prodigal tale that merely preaches against the evils of big cities, you know, Sodom and Gomorrah. I wanted to show how the big city is full of all kinds of temptations that are quite delicious. Bill's problem is one of proportion, one of excess.

My fascination with tattoos began at a time when I was seeing them for the first time. Now, they are so common. Even Disney has embraced tattoos, which figure prominently

COURTESY OF PAULA GALLANT ECKARD



ABOVE TOP Charlotte's Belmont Playboys on tour in the early 1990s, pictured here in New York with Carl Perkins (center), for whom they opened at the Lone Star Road House and Saloon; left to right, Charlton Baker, Mike Hendrix, Perkins, Mark Painter, Jeff Hendrix

ABOVE BOTTOM The author with the Belmont Playboys, who attended his reading at Park Road Books, Charlotte, NC, 25 Sept. 2019

in its recent animated film *Moana*. But in the 1990s tattoos were just beginning to enter mainstream culture, at least where I lived. And, so in *The Skin Artist*, I try to chronicle the collision of Charlotte's boom and the emergence of modern tattoo culture.

In the novel, you mention how Lucy's many tattoos signified a lifetime of endurance. What do Bill's tattoos represent? His are so fresh and painful.

That's a good question. Maybe, in a way they make visible the taint that was invisible. And, in seeing it, Bill is able to deal with it. We haven't talked about religion at all, but I think in a lot of ways *The Skin Artist* is a religious novel. A dichotomy I wrestle with is the contest between original sin and the enlightenment idea of the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate, the notion that we are entirely what our lives and education make us. Is that true? Or are we born, in the Puritan sense, with these limits and the inclination toward sin and self-interest? I don't believe in original sin in a literal theological sense, but I think it's in some ways an accurate reading of human nature. Bill comes to terms with his own inclination toward selfishness and self-indulgence, and the tattoos are a way for him to contemplate that inclination. Then again, the tattoo is a part of you because it's on your flesh, but it is *not* you. It remains other, and maybe that's what gives it power.

There is no single idea behind my use of tattoos in the novel. I hope that they suggest multiple meanings, just as there are multiple skin artists in the book, Lucy and Niall, but also Bill, who thinks of himself as a skin artist in taking on the new skin of the urbanite over his rural core. His tattoos are a literal manifestation of his transformation from country mouse to city mouse.

Do you have any tattoos?

I got my first tattoo a couple of months ago, a week after I published the novel. Before I got the tattoo, I was deep in my head about the metaphysical implications of marking the flesh. Then, immediately after I got it, I looked down at the ink on my shoulder and thought, you know, it's just a frickin' tattoo.

After I sent off the final manuscript, I thought about what tattoo I wanted. I originally went for a tree of fire, which is what I ended up getting. It's about four inches in diameter and placed on my shoulder, which my department secretary says is where everybody starts. I toyed for a while with the idea of the Southern cross, the tattoo Bill gets in homage to his lost buddy Kent. The Southern cross isn't a constellation but, I think the term is *asterism*, a group of stars. My wife said, "Well, isn't that some kind of Confederate

"Then again, the tattoo is a part of you because it's on your flesh, but it is *not* you. It remains other, and maybe that's what gives it power."

“Out of America’s age of information, image, tattoo, and Adam and Eve eroticism comes a tightly written novel about addiction, family, and religion. *The Skin Artist* is at once both smooth-deep literary and fast-eddy suspenseful. Hovis’s first novel – it never slows down one iota – is an extraordinary debut.”—Clyde Edgerton

thing?” And I thought, “What? They can’t have the stars, too!” But the seed of doubt had been planted. I felt safer with a tree of fire.

Sex is a big part of Bill’s journey in your novel. Have you written erotica before? How did you learn to write about sex and the body?

When I was in graduate school, even though I was working on a PhD in literature, I was fortunate to have a couple of mentors in creative writing who were very generous with their time. Clyde Edgerton was a very important mentor to me when I was at Chapel Hill and has remained so throughout the years. I’ve dedicated the book to him.² Another important mentor was Max Steele. I was writing short stories in grad school, and Max read a story of mine that was erotic. He said, “There’s your subject matter. Why don’t you write more about that?” I said to myself, “Well, okay.” It was one of those moments when a teacher looks and sees something you are doing that feels true and, hopefully, important. So, that’s when I started writing in that direction. A number of my stories deal with erotic content. It’s such a fundamental part of human experience.

It is gut wrenching, in the process of revision, to decide how much explicit mention of the body to leave on the page. I heard a writer say that sex should be about human relationships, not their body parts. Not appendages and orifices and all that. And yet, the body is the site of that kind of intimacy. It’s a hard thing for me to decide how much to leave in and how much to take out, how much just to suggest. I tried to strike a balance I was comfortable with.

*When Bill gets into a drunken discussion with a nightclub bouncer, he asks whether sex is the machine or the garden. What does he mean by that? Were you, by chance, channeling Leo Marx’s work *The Machine in the Garden*?*

Dang, that must have entered my subconscious. I would not have deliberately made that connection at all.

Given that this scene takes place in the shadow of NationsBank, are you saying capitalism is the machine in the garden?

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIM JASTREKSMKI



² Read Hovis’s interview with Clyde Edgerton in *NCLR* 26 (2017): 74–88.

“Yes, discourse shapes our responses, but nature is still a pretty darn potent force. I think it is the convergence of the two that manifests in our lives.”



COURTESY OF PAULA GALLANT ECKARD

You’ve got this strip bar where money changes hands, and Lucy becomes involved in a kind of freelance sex work. I think one of the questions of our age, maybe a perennial question, is to what extent are our behaviors, ideas, and assumptions about sex the product of our discourse and of the capital exchange? To what extent are we at the mercy of those forces? And to what extent is sex tied to biology?

I think in some postmodern circles, they lean toward the machine. They think it’s all discourse, you know, everything is the product of discourse. I don’t go quite that far. Yes, discourse shapes our responses, but nature is still a pretty darn potent force. I think it is the convergence of the two that manifests in our lives.

Lucy’s character has a complexity that is fascinating. What was it like to write about her?

I am a hundred percent on Lucy’s side. One of the things I was most anxious about was that I not in any way judge or vilify her. The novel had been germinating for a long time. I had a rough version stuck in a drawer and left there for some years. I pulled it out again about two months after Harvey Weinstein’s crimes had been made public. I thought, “Gee whiz, do I really want to be dealing with this story at this particular moment?” And then I thought, “Okay, here goes.” I wanted to be sensitive to the #MeToo Movement, and even before that I already knew that Lucy was a rape survivor. A big part of her story is finding an ally, finding someone she can trust enough to tell her story. I didn’t understand fully before #MeToo how much a part of everybody else’s journey that is, as well, especially for Bill. A major part of the novel’s suspense, for me, depends on whether he can successfully navigate the transition from being an aging party boy to being an ally of a rape survivor. In order to love her, he must overcome his obsession with her. I won’t say here whether or not he succeeds.

*I know that public readings of *The Skin Artist* have taken up much time. Can you comment on the response you’ve gotten from readers and those who attend your public readings? What has been especially memorable about doing those?*

Most of my readings have been scattered across North Carolina and in upstate New York. I’ve felt tremendously supported by both communities. It has been especially gratifying to give readings in cities all across North Carolina, from Asheville to Wilmington, to visit with lots of old friends and meet new ones too. Charlotte was a high point, reading at Park Road Books and having people tell me I got the Queen City right, having the Belmont Playboys show up.

I’ve long known that North Carolina is blessed with an abundance of very important writers. Now I realize how fortunate we are to have so many wonderful independent bookstores to support those writers.

And let's not forget the weather. Spending the last week of September driving along I-40 with the windows lowered and the ninety-degree wind whipping through my hair, knowing that back in New York it was already down in the fifties, that was pretty satisfying.

What is your next project? Have you had time to think about it or do any work? I think it would be exciting to give NCLR readers a glimmer of what is to come.

The novel I'm working on, I'm calling it *Black Light*, as in those black light bulbs and posters from the 1970s. The story takes place in 1976 in a little North Carolina mill town and centers around two teenagers, a white girl named Ivy and a black boy named Barry, whose friendship develops into a taboo romance. This is a mere decade after *Loving v. Virginia*, a decade after public schools in Piedmont North Carolina were desegregated. Ivy comes from a poor mill family, who are, by and large, deeply racist. They are also afraid that the textile mill is about to pack up and move to Mexico. Ivy's mother became pregnant with her when she was a teen and worries that Ivy will follow suit.

Barry has just moved to town from Charlotte with his mother. They've moved into the family homeplace with his grandmother and uncle. In the eyes of this city kid, they've moved to a cultural desert, populated only by white folks and old people. Barry's relocation follows the recent death of his grandfather, who was the most important black man in this segregated community, principal of the black school before desegregation, and also a prosperous farmer and entrepreneur. Barry struggles to reconcile how he is both descended from Brahmins (now in decline) and simultaneously either reviled or condescended to by whites, even poor whites like his girlfriend's family.

The question the story poses is whether this community can change. The '70s pop culture that inundates the characters' lives suggests that their world is in flux: mood rings, funk music, and especially the ubiquitous black light posters and black light bulbs, which alter perception with the flick of a switch. But, beneath the surface, there remains a traditional culture with deep roots in white supremacy. When the two cultures collide, it's hard to say which might prevail. ■

COURTESY OF PAULA GALLANT ECKARD



ABOVE The author with his interviewer, Paula Gallant Eckard, Park Road Books, Charlotte, NC, 25 Sept. 2019

PAULA GALLANT ECKARD is the former Director of the American Studies Program and current Chair of English at UNC Charlotte. She is the author of *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (University of Missouri Press, 2002) and *Thomas Wolfe and Lost Children in Southern Literature* (University of Tennessee Press, 2016).

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY MARLY YOUMANS***The Woman in the Walls*

One summer's day the children spied
 The dry-stone mason at his work
 And begged to stop, to sit in grass,
 To ask and ask, as children must.
How does a brook make pebbles run?
Do those gray stones come from the moon?
Why is a boulder? How can stone
Be rough or glassy, flow like streams?
 And once the mason gave a rock
 – Embedded there, a trilobite –
 That made them stare and think of time,
 How big it was, and more than clocks.
 So she was pleased, oh, well enough,
 To lean in sun and leaf-shade, watch
 The mason puzzle over stones,
 To let her children ask and ask,
 Their hours gliding like a dream.
 Drowsy and warm, she never feared
 How high the walls were mounting, how
 Shadows thickened between the stems,
 Or how children, chasing pulses
 Of lightning bugs, blurred into night.
 Yet now she stands alone, straining
 To hear beyond the insect noise,
 Fearing the wind that shivers leaves.
How am I to get out, she wonders,
 The walls so dark and steep, the stones
 Locked together skillfully



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The Efforts of Preserving Oneself: Dancing with Blades 2017
 (printed silk organza, stitched with metal and filled with razor
 bladed, rusted afterward, 43"x 63") by Jan-Ru Wan

MARLY YOUMANS is the author of thirteen books of poetry and fiction, most recently, a collection of poetry, *The Book of the Red King* (Phoenicia Publishing of Montreal, 2019). The author was born in South Carolina, grew up in North Carolina, among other places, and now lives in Cooperstown, NY. She is a frequent *NCLR* contributor, with both her own poetry and writing reviews of others' books, and she was the subject of an interview in *NCLR* 2004. Read more about her in the interview that follows, featuring several North Carolina expatriate writers.

JAN-RU WAN is Emeritus Professor at NCSU in Raleigh and Visiting Professor at Wuhan Textile University in Wuhan, China. Her award-winning art has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions, both national and international. In 2006, she was recognized by the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, with the Graduate of the Last Decade (GOLD) Award. She was the recipient of a 2008 North Carolina Visual Artist Fellowship and has been awarded artist residencies in Morocco, Belgium, and the Netherlands. See more of her work on her [website](#).

A VIRTUAL ROAD-TRIP

INTERVIEW:

CONVERSATIONS WITH FIVE EXPATRIATE NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS

BY GEORGE HOVIS

NOTES CONTRIBUTED BY THE NCLR STAFF

When I first entertained the notion of a roving interview with expatriate North Carolina writers, I imagined hopping in a car and driving across the eastern IS, visiting with a few such writers in their adopted spaces. When that plan became impractical, I opted for email conversations that would simulate such a journey. In the following exchanges, five North Carolina writers meditate on themes of expatriation and its impact on their writing and on the continuities and disruptions they have observed between their Carolina origins and their new homes.¹

My first challenge in planning a virtual road trip was limiting the number of destinations, considering the many important North Carolina writers living outside the state. The choice of five visits – with familiar and emerging writers – felt organic. As with the best road trips, it just happened that way. In the spirit of the road trip, I have decided to chart a course that would be doable in the real world. Thus, we will begin in western Kentucky, from there travel eastward, then northward. In Murray, Kentucky, Dale Ray

Phillips talks of rivers, Southern foods, and the ways that his life as a writer has wended through various Southern locales. Next, in Columbia, South Carolina, Tara Powell reflects on her Waldensian ancestors and their expatriation from Europe to Valdese, North Carolina. Powell also seeks to clarify North Carolina's intellectual and culinary signatures.

Up North, in the Empire State, we will chat with three North Carolina writers. In East Harlem, De'Shawn Charles Winslow discusses the literary and real-life sources of his debut novel *In West Mills*. Then in Cooperstown, situated in the heart of Leatherstocking Country, Marly Youmans discusses regional differences of social class and history and life in James Fenimore Cooper's town. Finally, just like Homer's epic voyager, we will end our journey in Ithaca, New York, where Robert Morgan has made his home for nearly five decades. Morgan reflects on the continuities he finds between Southern and Northern Appalachia and how leaving home helped him discover his subject matter.

¹ These email interviews were conducted summer and fall 2019. They have been only minimally edited for style and clarity, remaining true to the voices of the speakers.

GEORGE HOVIS is a North Carolina native who lives in Upstate New York, where he is a Professor of English at State University of New York at Oneonta. He earned his PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction* (University of South Carolina Press, 2007). He writes frequently for NCLR, including essays, interviews, and book reviews. Read an interview with him and a review of his first novel, also in this issue.

**“THE CURSE OF THE EXPATRIATE IS ALSO ITS GREATEST GIFT:
WHILE YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN, HOME BECOMES WHEREVER
YOU ARE. YOU LEARN TO DWELL. DISTANCE PROVIDES THE BEST SPOT
TO PEEPING-TOM ON HOME. ALL HONEST SOUTHERNERS
HAVE A LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOUTH.”**

—Dale Ray Phillips



COURTESY OF DALE RAY PHILLIPS

DALE RAY PHILLIPS

Dale Ray Phillips grew up in Haw River, North Carolina, where in the summers he worked at the local textile mill. He received an MFA from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where he held the Lily Peters Fellowship in Fiction. He also received an MA from Hollins College (now University, where he won the James Andrew Purdy Award for Fiction. He held the Randall Jarrell Fellowship from UNC Greensboro and earned degrees in English and Anthropology from UNC Chapel Hill. He has taught writing at several universities, including the University of Arkansas, Clemson University, and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, and is currently on the faculty of Murray State University, where he has held the Watkins Endowed Chair of Creative Writing. He lives in Murray, Kentucky.

Phillip’s short stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Oxford American*, *Harper’s*, *Ploughshares*, *Zoetrope*, and elsewhere. They have been collected in *Best American Short Stories* and *New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best*. His 1999 story collection *My People’s Waltz*, published by W.W. Norton, won the Discover Great New Writers Award and was an Editor’s Choice Pick from *The New York Times*. His stories are frequently celebrated for their combined lyricism and grit. He has professed confusion at the term “Rough South,” says he finds the phrase “dysfunctional family” to be “redundant,” and believes that “our hearts beat the same rhythms in most any environment and inside any chest.”²

**“IF MY STORIES MOVE A
READER, IT’S BECAUSE
OUR HEARTS BEAT THE
SAME RHYTHMS IN MOST
ANY ENVIRONMENT AND
INSIDE ANY CHEST.”**

—Dale Ray Phillips

GEORGE HOVIS: *You left North Carolina initially to further your education. Would you say a bit about that decision and what you learned in each of the graduate programs in which you studied?*

DALE RAY PHILLIPS: I quit the MFA program in Greensboro in 1980 and moved to New York for around six months, working at Whaledent International, “manufacturers of fine dental equipment,” according to their letterhead. A warehouse worker, I offloaded trucks and kept the sweatshop-style assembly line supplied with tiny gold rods they cut to be used in root canals and implants. This was so long

“ALL MORNING I HAD BEEN WORKING ON A BOOK SET IN AN IMAGINED NORTH CAROLINA THAT I CARRIED AROUND IN MY HEAD, AND I WONDERED, WHY AM I UP HERE WRITING ABOUT DOWN THERE?”

—Dale Ray Phillips

ago that Tribeca, where I babysat a loft with a sculptor friend, was considered part of SoHo. I forget the exact plot of the terrible novel I was working on, but the day I decided to leave unfolded like this: half drunk and done writing that Saturday, I found a bar near our loft that was open at 1:00 p.m. There were three of us, counting the bartender, who chatted us up for tips. The other customer, when asked, said he was employed as a temp worker in an office, but claimed he was really a playwright working on cutting edge-theater – plays with no dialogue. The bartender admitted he just slung drinks to pay the rent; he was really an actor, and he listed his minor roles in some off-off-off Broadway plays. “How about you, little fellow?” he asked me. I thought, if I went outside and pitched a rock into Saturday sidewalk traffic that hit five people on their heads, six would be Artistes. All morning I had been working on a book set in an imagined North Carolina that I carried around in my head, and I wondered, why am I up here writing about down there? The whole city seemed populated by souls waiting for their other lives to begin. By midnight, I was on the Crescent Express, a train that went from New York to New Orleans. I spent much of the journey back to Greensboro in the smoking car, passing around bottles of rye and Thunderbird with other travelers who wished to stall Time. What I remember most is how one fellow started a story: “I disremember where we were going on that particular trip,” he said. “But I do remember we were making damned good time.”

Four lean years in Alamance and Guilford counties followed. I did all the shitty jobs writers put in their bios to establish their street credentials. I drank in epic and heroic proportions, fell in love monthly, and broke up as quickly.

I was twenty-nine in 1984, when I went to Hollins, Virginia, to get a master’s; I lived in a garage apartment on Tinker Creek, which isn’t as big as Annie Dillard indicated. A fellow can pee across it, trust me. Graduate “Assistance-ships” – at UNC Greensboro, Hollins, and later, Arkansas – functioned as writing fellowships, plus Arts Council grants: they paid the rent. I’d learned in the cotton mill and on painting crews that eight or twelve hours of manual labor isn’t good for writing; that’s a myth, because you’re too physically exhausted to write after, say, working ten-hour days painting the gas storage tanks outside Charlotte. At Hollins College, I wrote two hundred pages of yet another shitty novel and took the best class I’ll ever have with Jeanne Larsen. Hollins had much money, and their English Department got more quarterlies than any university’s library I’ve ever taught at. I read like an addict, and each Friday I’d talk an hour with Jeanne about the five or six stories I’d culled from the thirty I’d read. That’s when I began to have inklings of story-ness, whatever that is.

**"AT GREENSBORO,
I LEARNED WHAT I
WOULD WRITE ABOUT;
AT HOLLINS, I LEARNED
STORY-NESS; AT
ARKANSAS, I LEARNED
HOW TO WRITE."**

—Dale Ray Phillips

In 1985, I boarded a Greyhound with a typewriter in one suitcase and some clothes in another, bound for the MFA program in Fayetteville, Arkansas, carrying so many mini-bottles that I clanked.

At Greensboro, I learned what I would write about; at Hollins, I learned story-ness; at Arkansas, I learned how to write.

You and I first met in Murray, Kentucky, where you have been teaching for how many years now? Are there other places that have made a special impact on you? How have your multiple residences affected your writerly vision?

I've been here at Murray State for sixteen years. Previously, I've taught in Alamance County (Burlington Writer's Club), University of Arkansas, University of Houston-Downtown, Elon College, Clemson, Georgia State and College, and the University of Illinois at Carbondale. All of these places are considered Southern, so in a sense, while I've left North Carolina, I've never really left the South. These multiple residencies add up to one piece of knowledge, summed up neatly by an old anthology published years ago by *Esquire: All Our Secrets Are the Same*.³

Bodies of water, and fishing on them, has proven a recurrent theme in your life and your writing. In what ways does this interest go back to your childhood on the Haw River in North Carolina?

The Haw River I've made up doesn't exist; it's more of a creek than a real river, and I've never fished it, just pitched rocks in it when I worked at Cone Mills, from the stoop of the Dye House that was about fifty feet above the high-water mark. When I fish, I bore everyone on the boat with stories and dirty jokes. College taught me that rivers are big in American literature, so I stuck one in. Fishing – much like running or golf or gardening – is a way of understanding the world through muscular process. In short, anything you like to do and you do reasonably well, put it in your work, and it will be an organic metaphor. Consider Updike's golf in the Rabbit series, painting in Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* trilogy, drinking in Carver, or running in Alan Sillito's "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner."

When she was still a young teenager, my daughter charmed you into divulging your famous barbecue sauce recipe (a classic Eastern North Carolina style), which contained an impossible number of ingredients. Have you encountered any tastes in your travels that have altered your recipe? Are there other cuisines you've taken up cooking?



COURTESY OF DALE RAY PHILLIPS

"YOU KNOW YOU'RE STILL PROBABLY A TAR HEEL WHEN PEOPLE ASK YOU WHERE YOU'RE FROM AND YOU SAY YOU'RE LIVING IN KENTUCKY BUT ARE FROM NORTH CAROLINA. THAT PARSING IS WHAT FEELS LIKE BEING AN EXPAT."

—Dale Ray Phillips

In Texas, I learned to pick blue crabs and to actually like the yellow goo of sucked crayfish heads. In Arkansas, I learned to appreciate something called a Frito Pie and to dip trout and bream filets in mustard before the egg wash and cornmeal battering. In Georgia, I learned to cook quail and re-established my love affair with collards. South Carolina hooked me on peach daiquiris and boiled peanuts, and Carbondale, Illinois, had the best deer summer sausage and Bloody Marys I'll ever probably enjoy. Their trick is cheap Smuck's tomato juice and Old Bay seasoning. In Murray, Kentucky, I learned not to drink.

Are there other reflections on the expatriate experience you wish to share?

Some random pontifications: The curse of the expatriate is also its greatest gift: while you can't go home again, home becomes wherever you are. You learn to dwell. Distance provides the best spot to peeping-tom on home. All honest Southerners have a love/hate relationship with the South. You know you're still probably a Tar Heel when people ask you where you're from and you say you're living in Kentucky but are from North Carolina. That parsing is what feels like being an expat.

TARA POWELL

Tara Powell grew up in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, on a river between the swamps and beaches, but has been living, teaching, and writing in Columbia, South Carolina, since 2005. She is the mother of three small children and many poems and essays about the people and landscapes she loves. Through her mother's side of the family, Powell is descended from Waldensians who in the late nineteenth century immigrated to America and established a community in Valdese, North Carolina, a subject Powell has explored in her poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Hard Lines: Rough South Poetry*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *South Atlantic Review*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology: North Carolina*, *storySouth*, and elsewhere. She is also the author of *Physical Science* (2010), a chapbook of poems from Finishing Line Press, and a book of literary scholarship called *The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* (2012), published by Louisiana State University Press. She co-edited with David A. Davis *Writing in the Kitchen: Essays on Southern Literature and Foodways* (2014) published by the University Press of Mississippi. After receiving a PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill, she joined the faculty at the University of South Carolina, where she teaches courses in Southern literature and poetry. She has also served on the executive committees of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, Society for the Study of Southern Literature, South Atlantic Modern Language Association, and American Waldensian Society.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOON POWELL



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL MARESKA

HOVIS: *You've been in Columbia for a decade and a half. In your view, how are the two Carolinas similar? How different?*

TARA POWELL: When I was preparing to move to South Carolina and start work at USC, I had only the vaguest notion the other Carolina was down there somewhere, a nice enough place with fine peaches and moonshine, if a bit confused about barbecue. A South Carolina-born novelist I knew stood in a corner with me at a party not long before I left Chapel Hill for good, and she advised me that the main thing was to understand that I was not at home, that I would feel pretty okay with food and talk and weather and the way people lived and such and get too comfortable, and that I should never forget for a minute that no one in South Carolina ever meant exactly what they said. "You are not at home," she said darkly. "Never forget that." Exact words. I can still see the steel in her smile and feel the elbows brushing past that corner where we stood and talked before I got in my car and fell off the edge of the known world. It seemed like a dire warning, especially with my mind full of Thomas Wolfe and the magical place I'd spent my coming of age.

In general, I have found the peaches as expected and the home I've made here comfortable enough as long as I don't mess with the barbecue. I have found it wise to heed my friend's advice not to set my foot down anywhere before I figure out where the bodies are buried, not so much because no one means precisely what they say, but because I don't always know enough about what I'm in the middle of to understand when they do and don't, and there's a history under everything here that I don't share in some key ways. Better as a writer and a transplant to listen and watch.

Columbia is a beautiful modern mid-sized city built back in a basin where three rivers meet on top of the ruins of one that went up in smoke in the Civil War – very "NuNu South" as George Singleton might say. I was in the throng of thousands that saw the Confederate flag come down from the statehouse grounds a few years ago; I would not have thought it was possible based on anything I had ever heard or experienced. But there I was in a sea of tucked elbows and chins tipped up to blue sky, my eyes and mouth open so wide that old rag might have dropped right in them, and I felt as much at home in South Carolina as I expect ever to be anywhere.

You are currently working on a collection of poems exploring the late-nineteenth century colony of Waldensians in Valdese, North Carolina. Like many expatriate Europeans who settled New England, the Waldensians came to the American South for largely religious reasons. What have you learned about their experience – including their inner lives – by chronicling them in poetry?

**"BETTER AS
A WRITER AND
A TRANSPLANT
TO LISTEN
AND WATCH."**

—Tara Powell



PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER WOOD.
COURTESY OF OLD COLONY PLAYERS.

Actually, although the Waldensians were persecuted in Europe for nearly seven hundred years, the pogroms and other government- and church-sponsored atrocities they suffered had ended by the mid-nineteenth century when they were formally granted civil liberties and the ability to live and worship freely in the French-Italian valleys their communities had defended for centuries. Despite being in many ways second-class citizens and often terribly poor, they were at last free, and among the important consequences of that was the mobility to move their families in search of a better life elsewhere. The colonies they sent to South America and the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century moved largely for economic opportunity

—though of course their common need of those opportunities was rooted in the historical experience of the persecutions.

Eleven Waldensian families came to western North Carolina in the spring of 1893 to settle what would become the town of Valdese. They suffered terribly from privation, discrimination, and isolation, in those early years, but they were hard-working, talented, faithful, and fiercely determined. They persevered, and built what their children would see become a thriving industrial community. As more people joined them, Valdese became the largest settlement of Waldensians outside of Italy. With that success, along with the loss of communication to communities in the old country during the world wars, the Waldensians settled in, learned English, raised their children as Americans, and created a new, hybrid cultural identity, with one foot in the old ways and one in the new.

Today, the community's beginnings are commemorated in a variety of ways that Waldensian families have used to try to maintain their and their children's sense of the connection to the faith tradition that bound them and still ties them to the Waldensian diaspora on three continents. There's a museum there, a long-running outdoor historical drama, several books, a Waldensian Presbyterian Church, a heritage winery, a social club, annual celebrations related to Waldensian history, and so on. Also, the American Waldensian Society is currently based there. I could go on because there's a lot — lots of old Waldensian names and families still there, the history under every stone. But that's not precisely what you asked me.

My mother grew up in Valdese as part of the third generation; she learned only English, but her grandparents spoke primarily the patois. For her, the Waldensian martyrs and guerrillas were heroes, their legacy to her included their courage and conviction in the face of suffering, and her responsibility to them was to somehow make good in a way that made it worth what they gave up. I am steeped in these stories, too, from my many pilgrimages to Valdese, and, later, trips to the Waldensian valleys in the Alps and Colonia Valdese

**"I AM STEEPED IN THESE
STORIES, TOO, FROM
MY MANY PILGRIMAGES
TO VALDESE, . . ."**

—Tara Powell



COURTESY OF TARA POWELL

in Uruguay, a search for meaning in what link the stories and blood I carry gives me to the Waldensian diaspora. I have visited many churches and interviewed dozens of people in my search, as well as become active in the American Waldensian Society, and, as I have created and tightened my ties to the Waldensian story, there have been surprises. For many in Valdese, the Waldensian connection is about cultural heritage – dancing the courinta, making the sautisso, telling of the persecutions and migration, celebrating the tenacity of the Waldensian spirit and the community’s American dream.

On the other hand, in Italy and South America, the Waldensian church is still very much a living church, and the younger generations often are not so interested in the old stories, except insofar as that experience of persecution and migration might inform today’s church’s commitment to social justice and other ways of living in the world before us. Waldensian, then, means something different to its heirs in Valdese than it does in Uruguay. Which is a long-winded way of coming around to saying that the poems I’ve been working on for the past decade have been an effort to work through what this history has, if anything, to do with me or my children’s lives in 2019, in South Carolina. Initially I wanted to write about the persecutions, but the deeper I got into it, the more foreign the Waldensian martyrs seemed to me.

I have one series of poems from the point of view of the ghost of the founder of the Waldensian movement, Peter Waldo, but I again and again found myself meditating on the details we know of his personal life as opposed to his singular faith, a conviction that consumed everything he had in the world. In most of my poems, I’ve ended up working backwards from my interviews with people in the present instead of forward from those beginnings, which remain shrouded in a kind of fanatical mystery and profound suffering beyond my comprehension. I have talked to people who would just as soon forget any connection at all to the martyrs, who find the whole search ridiculous, but far more often it seems like knowledge of connection to the Waldensian diaspora and its story manifests in one way or the other as a bedrock of some key life choices. An American scholar who studies collective trauma talks about what it was like to hear about the persecutions from her grandparents as a child; a computer engineer in Uruguay gives me a tour of a shopping mall converted from an old prison and tells me how he got caught up in the protests during the dictatorship in Uruguay and ended up disappearing in this building for six long years; the last postman in my great-grandmother’s now-empty village gestures toward the stone building where my grandmother was born and brightens when I say my grandmother’s name. I realize none of us who hiked up the mountain that day expecting to encounter only ghosts will understand that postman or what he has to say to us. I mean that literally. He is

**“IN MOST OF MY
POEMS, I’VE ENDED
UP WORKING
BACKWARDS FROM
MY INTERVIEWS
WITH PEOPLE IN THE
PRESENT INSTEAD
OF FORWARD FROM
THOSE BEGINNINGS,
WHICH REMAIN
SHROUDED IN A
KIND OF FANATICAL
MYSTERY AND
PROFOUND
SUFFERING BEYOND
MY COMPREHENSION.”**

—Tara Powell



COURTESY OF TARA POWELL

the only person I will ever meet in my life who speaks only the old patois. I can't be the steward of his story, but I can say that my poems inspired by these interviews will be the story I tell my children.⁴

One of my favorite pieces is "Freedom Fire," a poem I wrote for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War burning of the city where I now live. My poem plays on the similarity of the nature of the fractured symbolism of fire for natives of Columbia for whom the city's burning alternately invokes a cultural memory of terrorism or freedom and the symbolism of fire for those of Waldensian descent for whom fire recalls not only the horror of the persecutions but the annual celebration of the end of that reign of terror with the lighting of ceremonial bonfires on three continents. "Descend," the Waldensian hymn implores, "Descend, and baptize us in fire."

In your book The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature, you study texts from North Carolina and elsewhere in the South. Is there some quality about the intellectual production or ideological assumptions and commitments of Tar Heel writers that distinguishes them from other Southern intellectuals?

That's a great question, which often is a cue that someone is starting to answer a question they don't quite know the answer to but hope to work out by the end rather than admit they don't know. That is partly true here, but it's also true that it's still a great question and one I keep on asking. A majority of the writers I feature in my book have some connection with North Carolina, and, while I may have started the project having the most familiarity with them because of where I'm from and where I went to school, that certainly wasn't the limits of my knowledge when I was done, which I hope is evident from the various excursions I make to other parts of the South in other parts of the book. Indeed, the book's opening chapters ultimately were grounded in the deeper South.

That said, as it moves into the present, Carolina writers took it over, and I don't think that is all to be laid at the door of the limits of my own provincial imagination. For one thing, the entry of creative writing into the academy, as well as the study of Southern literature, took a particular shape in North Carolina, and certain personalities located at Duke, Greensboro, and Chapel Hill, were especially formative in that. You can trace the influence of their network of students and friends in some of the works I consider, and I don't think it's an accident of nature that some of the most serious contributions to the college novel genre, like *Look Homeward Angel* and *Pictures from an Institution*, emerged from the collision of writers whose experience of "Southern" and "academic" were peculiarly, if not uniquely, Carolinian, or that their students and friends two generations later are still working those things out in a Carolina

ABOVE Bonfire in Valdese, NC, Feb. 2005, celebrating the 1848 Edict of Emancipation, which, among other things, granted civil rights to the Waldensians in Italy

⁴ Read two of Powell's Waldensian poems: "Mission" in *Fall Lines: A Literary Convergence* (2014) and "Untitled" in *Art from the Ashes* (2015), both books edited by Cynthia Boiter, the second one also by Ed Madden, published by Muddy Ford Press of Chapin, SC.

**"MY BOOK EXPLORES
THE MOMENT FROM
OUR LITTLE POPSTAGE
STAMP OF PLACE
AND TIME WITHOUT,
BY ANY STRETCH,
CLAIMING TO
EXHAUST IT."**

—Tara Powell

landscape.⁵ William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, all great writers about the Southern intellectual, held court for one reason or another from their desks and front porches more than the classroom podium; Louis Rubin, Jr. and Doris Betts, very different legacies.

North Carolina writers on the intellectual trying to find a magical place that is both academic and distinctively Southern have a community and a number of concerns and are usefully read together. Your own book, *Vale of Humility*, about Carolina's writers dealing with the yeoman figure, was helpful to me in thinking about the uneasy transition from agricultural to intellectual labor that's highlighted in the imaginative writing of so many of the mid- to late twentieth-century North Carolina writers who shape our literary landscape. Certainly there are important networks of writers dealing with these topics in other places where academia was part of what bound and inspired them, but nothing I've discovered quite like the particular constellation we have of people coming together at that particular historical moment with those particular concerns in North Carolina. So perhaps it's not something unique, but surely it's distinctively generative as a place to start looking at this topic. And that's what my book tries to do: provide a framework for understanding why and how these concerns emerge in regional literature at the moment they do. My book explores the moment from our little postage stamp of place and time without, by any stretch, claiming to exhaust it.

It is often said that we see home – the place, the people – more clearly only after leaving it. I wonder if the same might be said for the food. Is there a particular dish that best expresses one of the North Carolina homes you recall?

Thanks to Vivian Howard, I can marinate in nostalgia for the foods I grew up on in Eastern North Carolina anytime. Watching her show and listening to that familiar voice describe so many tastes I know down deep in my bones, sometimes has been almost better than tasting them the first time around.⁶ I've mentioned that I miss barbecue living below the line, but I probably even more just miss the things that came from the gardens and local farms and rivers straight to the table and don't taste right anymore, anywhere. I can find remarkable super sweet corn varieties where I am, perfectly credible butterbeans, and very occasionally, decent honeydew melons or freshwater fish, but it somehow doesn't taste like the memory of what just came off the vine or out of the water on a summer's day. Where are those tomatoes now? The ones we dredged in a bit of salt and ate so carelessly, as if there would always be more. The heaping bowls of muscadines from the neighbor's yard? Or the basic

⁵ *Pictures from an Institution* is a 1954 novel, set in academia, by North Carolina poet Randall Jarrell.

⁶ Read more about Vivian Howard's show *A Chef's Life* (PBS, 2013–17) in Sally Lawrence's interview with her, "Collard-Kraut and Blueberry BBQ: Discovering Vivian Howard's Corner of the South," *NCLR* 27 (2018): 89–99.

**"I CAN REPRODUCE
THE DISHES. I JUST
CAN'T REPRODUCE
WHAT WENT INTO
THEM OR THE PEOPLE I
SHARED THEM WITH."**

—Tara Powell

dishes so ubiquitous we actually complained about them, but now can no more find than fly to the moon? Try finding some Dixie Lee field peas at the store or even a farmer's market; just try. Try pulling bream with my daddy out of the river in between bouts of blue-green algae and fry them up and eat them gone even before the shimmering scales left on the dock have turned gray and dusky. See whether the butterbeans from the farmer's market, or even my own yard, taste right not shelled with my grandmother as the junebugs gin the porch screens at sundown. It's the ingredients more than any one dish – because I can reproduce the dishes. I just can't reproduce what went into them or the people I shared them with.

DE'SHAWN CHARLES WINSLOW

De'Shawn Charles Winslow was born and raised in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and in 2003 moved to Brooklyn, New York. He currently lives in East Harlem. He is a 2017 graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop and holds a BFA in creative writing and an MA in English literature from Brooklyn College. He has received scholarships from the Napa Valley Writers' Conference and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Winslow's debut novel, *In West Mills*, published in 2019 by Bloomsbury, won the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. It is set in the titular African American community, situated in Eastern North Carolina. The story spans half a century in the life of the community outcast Azalea "Knot" Centre, who thumbs her nose at propriety, drinks too much, and takes lovers when she has a mind to do so. The keeping and telling of her secrets structure the novel. Though the events of the novel are limited primarily to West Mills, they connect to the larger history that surrounds the village, such as the return of African American soldiers after World War II and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and '70s. As novelist Garth Greenwell notes in one of the cover blurbs, "The scope of this slim novel astonishes me: it encompasses an entire world."

HOVIS: *How old were you when you moved from your childhood home of Elizabeth City to Brooklyn in 2003? What prompted the move? Did you find the move dislocating? Or were you moving to a familiar place?*

DE'SHAWN CHARLES WINSLOW: Between Elizabeth City and Brooklyn, I lived in Durham, North Carolina, for just under five years. I was twenty-three when I moved to Brooklyn. Things didn't seem to be going anywhere for me in Durham and I wanted a big change. The move felt like a great adventure. I have to be honest, I didn't feel homesick for many years.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIE R. HERESZTES, COURTESY OF BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING



"ORAL TRADITION IS A BIG PART OF MY FAMILY GATHERINGS. HEARING THE STORIES HAS HAD AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN MY WRITING. I TRY TO MAKE MY NARRATORS SOUND AS THOUGH THEY ARE PERSONS, SITTING ON A PORCH, SPEAKING TO THEIR CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN, OR THEIR NEIGHBORS."

—De'Shawn Charles Winslow

Do you still have family ties in North Carolina? If so, how have they continued to inform your writing?

My mother, siblings, and extended family members are in North Carolina. Oral tradition is a big part of my family gatherings. Hearing the stories has had an important role in my writing. I try to make my narrators sound as though they are persons, sitting on a porch, speaking to their children, grandchildren, or their neighbors.

Knot reminds me of Toni Morrison's Sula, who is also a defiant outcast in her community. You have named Morrison as an important influence. Did Sula inform the character of Knot? Are there other sources you might share?

Sula is certainly a favorite of mine. The character "Knot" was inspired by a woman I knew when I was a child. Her nickname was Knot. The real Knot was adored by almost everyone in the community. Her drinking was almost the only thing that set her apart. She died when I was ten, so I knew very little of her. I had to create her pretty much from scratch. The character Knot and the character *Sula* are both independent. They do exactly what they want.

Another influence you credit is Zora Neale Hurston. As in much of Morrison's and Hurston's fiction, In West Mills focuses primarily on the community dynamics within this African American section of their town. We do occasionally get glimpses of white oppression, but they usually happen on the periphery of West Mills, for example, when Brock Manning's general store "up-bridge" is vandalized. Otis Lee Loving fears that the sit-ins being organized in Greensboro will come to his community. He recalls that the last time he was "called a nigger to his face" was when he was "a teenager living in Brooklyn, New York."⁷ In this same episode, Otis Lee feels compelled to call out his white boss Riley Pennington when Pennington makes a casually racist remark concerning Brock Manning. In your view of the history chronicled in the novel, in what similar or different ways has racism expressed itself in the urban North and in the rural South?



ABOVE De'Shawn Charles Winslow reading at the Camden County Public Library, Camden, NC, 28 Sept. 2019

⁷ De'Shawn Charles Winslowe, *In West Mills* (Bloomsbury, 2019) 121.

"WHAT LIVING IN NEW YORK AND IOWA HAS TAUGHT ME IS THAT WHILE NORTH CAROLINA, FOR NOW, ISN'T WHERE I WANT TO LIVE, I HAVE A LOVE FOR IT THAT WILL NEVER GO AWAY. I KNOW THAT BECAUSE THOUGH I MOVED AWAY SO MANY YEARS AGO, IT'S THE ONLY PLACE I WANT TO WRITE ABOUT."

—De'Shawn Charles Winslow

I've certainly witnessed and experienced micro-aggressions in North Carolina (and in Iowa). Not nearly as much as my parents and grandparents have, of course. Many of the experiences take the form of situations like the one portrayed in the scene you mentioned. I've been followed around in stores and asked by landlords to pay higher deposits, even when the minimum credit score and income requirements were met.

One of the most ambitious aspects of the novel is its temporal scope. It begins in 1941 and moves forward in time to the year 1987. What kind of research was required to tell the story of this community evolving over so many years, through so many historical moments?

Before I decided to set the novel in a fictional town, I'd done some research on my mother's hometown of South Mills, North Carolina. But I found that I wouldn't use much of that information, and I wanted to play with street names, etc. In terms of US history, I relied heavily on Google.

In what other ways has the experience of living in Harlem (and Iowa) while writing about North Carolina informed your work?

What living in New York and Iowa has taught me is that while North Carolina, for now, isn't where I want to live, I have a love for it that will never go away. I know that because though I moved away so many years ago, it's the only place I want to write about.



COURTESY OF MARLY YOUNMANS

MARLY YOUNMANS

Marly Youmans grew up in Cullowhee, North Carolina, as well as Louisiana and elsewhere. She currently lives in the village of Cooperstown, New York. She graduated from Hollins College (now University), Brown University, and UNC Chapel Hill.

Youmans has been awarded many "book of the year" and "best of the year" citations by magazines, newspapers, and organizations. She is the winner of The Michael Shaara Award for Excellence in Civil War Fiction for her 2001 novel, *The Wolf Pit*, which was also on the short list for The Southern Book Award. She is a two-time winner of the Theodore Hoepfner Award for the short story and the winner of the New Writers Award given by New York's *Capital Magazine*, also for the short story. Her latest awards are The Ferrol Sam's Award for Fiction and the Book of the Year Award from *Foreword* for her

**"BUT THERE'S
SOMETHING
WONDERFUL ABOUT
WRITING IN WINTER,
SNUG INSIDE THE
HOUSE. FALLING SNOW
IS LOVELY, ESPECIALLY
AT TWILIGHT WHEN
THE WORLD TURNS
BLUE. AT HOME
WITH MY MOTHER IN
CULLOWHEE, I MIGHT
WANT TO HIKE IN THE
MOUNTAINS OR GO
FOR SOME SUNNY
FROLIC. IN WINTER
IN COOPERSTOWN,
I TEND TO STAY HOME
MORE. AND WHEN
I STAY HOME,
I ALSO TEND
TO WRITE MORE."**

—Marly Youmans

2012 novel *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage*.⁸ She has held fellowships from Yaddo, New York State, and elsewhere and served as a judge of the 2012 National Book Awards.

Youmans is the author of fifteen books, including, most recently, the 2019 poetry collection *The Book of the Red King* and the 2020 novel *Charis in the World of Wonders*.⁹ Her books frequently incorporate elements of magic and fantasy but tend to be grounded in lives lived close to nature and make frequent reference to the flora of Appalachia, which, as she notes, serves to connect her Northern home to her youth in the Carolina mountains.

HOVIS: *Can you say a little about your time in and away from North Carolina? How has living away from North Carolina and the South impacted your writing?*

MARLY YOUMANS: I've had a fifty-three-year connection with North Carolina and still spend a lot of time there. This year I will have spent ten weeks in the state, mostly in Cullowhee with a quick trip to the Triangle. I've moved to Chapel Hill/Carrboro three times in my life, and the last time thought that I might manage to stay there. But as we learn, life is tricky. When my children were small and we were living in Greenville, South Carolina (having moved there from Carrboro), my husband asked me where I would be willing to settle next. Some years earlier we had lived in Cooperstown, New York, for a year during his internship, and so I said, "I would never live north of Cooperstown." This blithe, careless response is the sort of thing a person should never say because mischievous fairies will hear and laugh.

So, living for the last twenty-one years in Cooperstown has been a peculiar boon to my writing because I am not and never shall be a rabid snow bunny or adore being cold. But there's something wonderful about writing in winter, snug inside the house. Falling snow is lovely, especially at twilight when the world turns blue. At home with my mother in Cullowhee, I might want to hike in the mountains or go for some sunny frolic. In winter in Cooperstown, I tend to stay home more. And when I stay home, I also tend to write more.

My books ramble about the country, though they're often set on the East Coast. Perhaps I'm flighty or easily bored with staying in one fictional kingdom, though it's easy to tell that going South (or being forced North) is a kind of motif in the novels, and also in some of the poems. For example, *Catherwood* sends settlers who mean to go South across the ocean, but they end up west of Albany, New York.¹⁰ I wrote that book during the internship year in Cooperstown as a kind of a souvenir of motherhood and a place I thought

⁸ *The Wolf Pit* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001); *Death at White Camellia Orphanage* (Mercer UP, 2012).

⁹ *Charis in the World of Wonders* (Ignatius, 2020). The covers of and illustrations from her books within this interview feature art by Welsh artist Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

¹⁰ *Catherwood* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996).

"LIVING IN MANY PLACES MUST HAVE STRETCHED MY SENSE OF WHERE I COULD SET A STORY. I NEVER OBEYED THE WRITE-WHAT-YOU-KNOW DICTUM THAT TEACHERS OFTEN ADVISE. INSTEAD, I LIKE TO FRISK AND SKYLARK IN MANY PLAYGROUNDS."

—Marly Youmans

never to see again. In *The Wolf Pit*, the prisoners at the Elmira camp long to go South; the novel was written immediately after moving back to Cooperstown and reflects my own distress about the move North, as my father was declining from progressive supranuclear palsy at the time. The two fantasies (*The Curse of the Raven Mocker* and *Ingledove*) I wrote for my daughter are set in the Carolina mountains and mix together Scots-Irish settler lore with Cherokee lore;¹¹ that was a genuine going-home to what surrounded me in my high school years. Pip is a migrant in *White Camellia Orphanage*, traveling in all directions. And story took me to Texas in *Maze of Blood* and to a kind of fairy-tale California in *Val/Orson*.¹² Living in many places must have stretched my sense of where I could set a story. I never obeyed the write-what-you-know dictum that teachers often advise. Instead, I like to frisk and skylark in many playgrounds.

What have been the challenges of writing about new places as a non-native?

Even though I am no native of Cooperstown, I do have an awareness of still being perched on the Appalachian spine. Many of the wildflowers are the same, and the village is nestled in the low mountains between the Catskills and the Adirondacks. In my front border are familiar home plants – sessile trillium, wake robin, solomon's seal, jack-in-the-pulpit, and uvularia. To that degree, I find a connection to home.

It seems to me that in your novel Glimmerglass you explore deeply the perspective of the outsider.¹³ Is that theme rooted in your experience of the place?

"OUTSIDER STATUS ARROWS ALL THE WAY BACK TO EARLY CHILDHOOD. HAVING LIVED IN MANY PLACES BY THE TIME I WAS A TEEN – SOUTH CAROLINA, LOUISIANA (GRAMERCY AND BATON ROUGE), KANSAS, DELAWARE, AND NORTH CAROLINA – I KNEW THE FEELING OF NOT BELONGING."

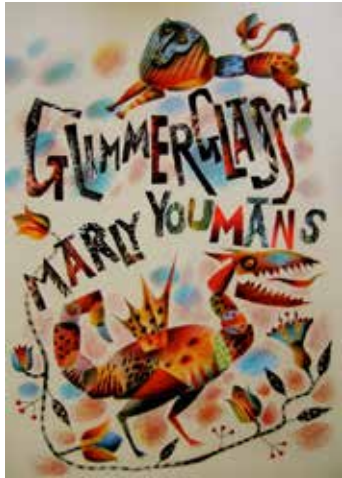
—Marly Youmans

Outsider status arrows all the way back to early childhood. Having lived in many places by the time I was a teen – South Carolina, Louisiana (Gramercy and Baton Rouge), Kansas, Delaware, and North Carolina – I knew the feeling of not belonging, dating from the time we left the liveliness and color of Louisiana after my second grade year. In the West and North, I found myself in settings where a Southerner was a surprise and a spectacle to other children. When I lived in Delaware for a few years, I had a teacher who assumed that I was retarded because of my deep-South drawl; later on, I found her irresistible as an inspiration for a minor character in *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage*. She summoned my Georgia-born parents to discuss the slowness of

¹¹ Youmans discusses *The Curse of the Raven Mocker* (2003) and *Ingledove* (2005), both published by Farrar Straus Giroux, in an interview with Bes Stark Spangler, "Adantis, Land of Melded Cultures: An Interview with Marly Youmans," *North Carolina Literary Review* 13 (2004): 41–47.

¹² *Maze of Blood* (Mercer UP, 2015); *Val/Orson* (PS, 2009).

¹³ *Glimmerglass* (Mercer UP, 2014);



COURTESY OF MARY YOUMANS

my speech (and probably my lack of interest in the so-called New Math), and my father with a PhD in analytic chemistry from LSU and my mother with a master's degree from Emory proved to be just as drawl-ridden as their sweet-talking child: that was an awful yet hilarious day. The joy I felt when we moved to North Carolina is still sharp in memory.

As for *Glimmerglass*, that novel springs out of the sensation of distance the outsider feels but also out of my bemusement at the nature of our little Yankee village. Cooperstown has always struck me as a small, fantastical realm – a magic snow globe, perhaps – where the villagers frequently display a kind of confusion about the line between reality and fiction. People refer to places in the landscape (and in the lake!) by names of locations or events that occurred in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales. Names of characters and places from Cooper sprout on signs for businesses and restaurants. As is also appropriate to Cooper's work, we are plagued with an unusual number of ghosts, a pesky mix of settlers, nineteenth-century villagers, and Native Americans. We have collisions of culture: an Indian mound stands not far from nods to Europe – a Gothic church, ruins, and two stone castles (Kingfisher Tower on Point Judith at the edge of Glimmerglass and Clark Tower in the forest by Iroquois Farms). Naturally, we must also have the requisite glacial lake monster, its uncoiling loops occasionally spotted on Otsego Lake. The outsider stance you detect in *Glimmerglass* comes from my being literally an outsider in a place where genealogy matters and also from my marveling at the semi-fictional strangeness of the village.

Cynthia Sorrel, the protagonist of Glimmerglass finds herself walled out by the social elite of Cooper Patent. How does the class structure you explore in the novel compare to your experience of social class in North Carolina?

At one point, Cynthia is snubbed at a party, and that moment is pilfered from life, Cooperstown being the only place where I have been outright snubbed – once by a lucky former bartender who married a magnate and once by a self-loving fellow from the Glimmerglass Opera staff – the sort of cartoonish snubs where you speak but the other looks you over and then sticks his or her comical nose in the air! Cooperstown and Cooper Patent are both layer cakes of social class, and I found this to be one of the most unusual things about the village when I moved here. The hierarchy of society is crowned by quite wealthy people from families like the Clark (Singer sewing machine fortune) and Busch families and



finds its bottom in the down-on-their-luck clients at our local food pantry. With the academic Bassett Hospital, three museums, the nearby opera house, and an unusual number of immigrants from the UK, the village and its citizens are not at all typical of the towns in the region.

My experience of social class in North Carolina was keenest in high school because at that time the mountain descendants of Scots-Irish settlers were still isolated in mountain coves, particularly in the Little Canada region with its winding dirt roads. They were often much poorer than those of us who lived nearer to school. We were children of the professors at Western Carolina University, shopkeepers, librarians, teachers, etc. According to

their own reports, Little Canada boys were expert at outrunning the state patrol in the mountains. They hung out by the garbage cans behind the school, occasionally fighting over girls, always smoking, sometimes making music. The girls always took Home Ec because it led to a new skirt and dress; some of the boys made dulcimers in shop class. Many teens from the region were old-time stringband musicians and singers, including the children of Mary Jane Queen of Caney Fork, the National Heritage Award winner; her son Henry Queen was a classmate of mine. I had a bright, amusing friend from Little Canada who eventually became quite an entrepreneur and storyteller. But at sixteen she surprised us by marrying, and I vividly remember a visit to her stream-side house. Though there were bridges, the gash between Little Canada and Cullowhee ran deep.

How do you navigate your dual life as poet and novelist?

Long ago when I was teaching, one of my colleagues said to me, "What does the world need with another poem?" For a year afterward, I could not write a poem, so I have my friend Tony to thank – and I do thank him – for my first foray into fiction. Since making things out of words is the way I navigate my world, I had to write something, even if it was not a poem. Writing both poetry and fiction changed my desires. I began to push the two forms farther apart, wishing to use all the devices of poetry and all the resources of fiction. I wanted my poetry to be more like poetry, my fiction to be more like fiction. This meant that I often wrote formal poems, and that I was not concerned with the dominant contemporary mode

**"I LIKED THE IDEA
THAT POETRY SHOULD
APPROACH SINGING
IN ITS LOVE OF SOUND
AND RHYTHM. "**

—Marly Youmans



COURTESY OF MARLY YOUNMANS

of short free verse, often flat and prosaic. I liked the idea that poetry should approach singing in its love of sound and rhythm. Meanwhile, my first book, *Little Jordan*, was definitely a poet's novella; I wasn't interested in how causality propelled story. As I wrote longer books, I became more and more fascinated with propulsion and structure. At the same time, I explored a lot of older forms for poetry and wrote more narrative poems – the natural result of writing novels and stories. Those tendencies resulted in longer narrative poems like the title poem of my second collection of poetry, *The Throne of Psyche*, a wilder mixture of forms in *The Foliage Head*, and a book-length epic adventure in blank verse, *Thaliad*.¹⁴ In both prose and poetry, I like the

freedom to fly through time and space and light down wherever I like, and sometimes to find myself in a world that is even more mysterious than our own.

“MY SENSATION WITH WRITING IS MOST OFTEN A FEELING OF BEING A KIND OF SLUICE AND THAT I’M SIMPLY POURING WORDS INTO DIFFERENT FORMS. THEY HAVE TO BE THE RIGHT SHAPES, BUT THERE’S GREAT LEEWAY IN WHAT A WRITER IS ALLOWED TO ATTEMPT.”

—Marly Youmans

Do you find that your connection to place impacts the two genres differently?

I'm not sure that “connection to place impacts the two genres differently.” Perhaps I am not the right person to ask. My sensation with writing is most often a feeling of being a kind of sluice and that I'm simply pouring words into different forms. They have to be the right shapes, but there's great leeway in what a writer is allowed to attempt.

Is The Book of the Red King rooted in a particular place?

My just-out and upcoming books are quite different from each other in terms of place. *The Book of the Red King* is a long series of poems centered around the alchemically transforming Fool, the mysterious Red King, and the lunar Precious Wentletrap. A reader might imagine this courtly world near the sea is some magical, tucked-away corner of time and place in the world, or perhaps a different world somewhat like our own; it certainly resembles neither Cooperstown nor Cullowhee. *Charis in the World of Wonders*, a novel set in the 1690s Massachusetts Bay Colony, will follow in 2020. Its Puritan landscape is pieced together from extensive but long-ago reading of early poetry and documents, more recent research at The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, and summer trips to Massachusetts. Looking at how those two depart from previous books, I suppose that you would have to say that I'm just not predictable.

“I SUPPOSE THAT YOU WOULD HAVE TO SAY THAT I’M JUST NOT PREDICTABLE.”

—Marly Youmans

¹⁴ *Little Jordan* (David R. Godine, 1995); *The Throne of Psyche* (Mercer UP, 2011); *The Foliage Head* (Stanza, 2012); *Thaliad* (Phoenicia, 2012).



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS KITCHEN, CORNELL UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY

ROBERT MORGAN

Robert Morgan was born in 1944 (on October 3, a birthdate he shares with Thomas Wolfe) in Hendersonville, North Carolina, and grew up on a family farm in the Green River Valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains. After studying at North Carolina State University, he transferred to UNC Chapel Hill, where he graduated in 1965 with a BA in English, followed by an MFA from UNC Greensboro, where he studied with Fred Chappell. Since 1971 he has lived in Northern Appalachia – in Ithaca, New York – where he is Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell University. Since 1998, he has held distinguished visiting professor positions throughout the Carolinas – at Davidson College, Duke University, East Carolina University, Furman University, and Appalachian State University.

Morgan is the author of more than thirty books of poetry, fiction, and biography and has been celebrated for his work in all three genres. A *New York Times* bestselling author, his novels have won the Southern Book Critics Circle Award, have been selected for the Oprah Book Club, and have been listed as a notable book by *Publisher's Weekly* and *The New York Times*. His poetry has been recognized by the James G. Hanes Poetry Prize, the Amon Liner Poetry Prize, the *Southern Poetry Review* Prize, and the Eunice Tietjens Prize from *Poetry*. He has also received fellowships from numerous sources, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2007, he received both the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the R. Hunt Parker Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. In 2010, he was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. His writing in three genres shows a sustained interest in the history of the American frontier and is frequently grounded in the past of his family's farm in Western North Carolina.

"BECAUSE I WAS LIVING AWAY I PROBABLY WROTE MORE ABOUT MY FAMILY AND THE PLACE WHERE I HAD GROWN UP THAN I WOULD HAVE OTHERWISE."

—Robert Morgan

HOVIS: *You grew up in the North Carolina mountains and studied at North Carolina universities. Since 1971 you have lived at the northernmost extent of the Appalachian chain. What cultural continuities have you noted in Appalachia, North and South, and how have these informed your writing?*

ROBERT MORGAN: Before coming to Cornell in 1971 I had never lived outside North Carolina, except for one year at Emory College in Oxford, Georgia. My first contract at Cornell was for only one year. I expected to be back in North Carolina in 1972, probably working as a house painter again. Then someone else went on leave at Cornell, and I was invited to stay for another year. Suddenly in 1973 I was made a professor and placed on the tenure ladder. I'd never expected to remain at Cornell, but was thrilled to have a

"I DISCOVERED I HAD MOVED FROM SOUTHERN APPALACHIA TO NORTHERN APPALACHIA. THE FARMS AROUND TOMPKINS COUNTY HAVE MUCH IN COMMON WITH THE FARMS OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA. THE ACCENT MAY BE DIFFERENT, BUT THE CULTURE IS SIMILAR, AND THE ROLLING HILLS DON'T LOOK ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS."

—Robert Morgan



COURTESY OF ROBERT MORGAN

job and at such a fine university. If I could have chosen to teach at any university in the country, my choice would have been Cornell. Cornell was and is a congenial place for a writer like me, with an interest in physics, astronomy, and soil science, rural culture, as well as literature and writing.

Cornell is situated in a relatively pastoral area of the Finger Lakes region of New York, and I have enjoyed that, the lakes and waterfalls, the vineyards and the history, including Iroquois history. Also I discovered I had moved from Southern Appalachia to Northern Appalachia. The farms around Tompkins County have much in common with the farms of Western North Carolina. The accent may be different, but the culture is similar, and the rolling hills don't look all that different from the Southern highlands.

But out of homesickness and nostalgia, in my early years at Cornell, I began to study the past and culture of the Southern Appalachians in a way I never had while living there. I read accounts of the Cherokees and early settlers, the geology and geography of my native region. But because I lived away from the region, my work, especially the fiction, was mostly set in the past. I have dealt less with the contemporary culture there. It seemed given to me to write about earlier times, inspired by the many stories I'd heard from my dad and other elders. Because I was living away I probably wrote more about my family and the place where I had grown up than I would have otherwise.

Over the past forty-eight years I have noticed extraordinary changes in Western North Carolina, driven by the economic boom and evolving demographics. Most of the population of Western North Carolina is now non-native, with many retirees, and those who have moved there for the tourist and business opportunities. The large Hispanic community has altered and diversified the population. There is far more prosperity than when I lived there. I was born and raised in a time when we plowed with horses, kept milk and butter in a spring house, rarely went to Asheville or Greenville. I still go back often, and I own the house in which I was brought up.

One of the cultural markers of Appalachians (and I believe this is true in both Northern and Southern Appalachia) is that they are aware of their homeland as having once been "the frontier." As the author of two books of biography on frontiersmen, Boone and Lions of the West, how was your own interest in the frontier shaped by the places you've lived?¹⁵

It was my study of the history of the Appalachian region that led me to explore and attempt to recreate the experience of the frontier. The adage is that the frontier lasted longer in the Southern mountains than in other parts of the country. Years ago I planned to write

ABOVE Morgan's Aunt Wessie, grandparents Julia and Robert Hampton Levi, and Uncle William Levi on Gap Creek, 1907 (five years before Morgan's mother was born)

¹⁵ Boone: *A Biography* (Algonquin, 2007); *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion* (Algonquin, 2011).

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL MARESKA



a long poem about my distant kinsman Daniel Boone. I never completed the poem but used the research to begin *Boone: A Biography*. It was while writing the novel *Brave Enemies* that I became interested in the Revolutionary period in the Carolinas.¹⁶ It seemed natural to follow the frontier and expansion to the West in *Lions of the West*. Many, if not most, of those instrumental in the westward movement of the nation were from my region of the country.

As I said, I grew up among storytellers. My dad, who had little formal education, loved history and loved to talk about the Revolution and Civil War. He had sat at the feet of his Grandpa Frank Pace (1838–1918) who had fought in the Civil War and almost died at Elmira prison. I spent much of my childhood listening to my father tell of family and regional history.

One of the fundamental differences between the cultures of Southern Appalachia and much of the rest of the South has to do with slavery and its legacy. Because a plantation economy did not develop to the same extent in the mountains, Appalachians have generally considered themselves free of that darkest of Southern sins. Most Appalachian literature therefore addresses other themes. Why in your most recent novel, Chasing the North Star, did you feel the need to grapple directly with slavery?¹⁷ Were you inspired by any particular slave narratives or neo-slave narratives?

While my family always lived on small farms in the mountains and probably could not have afforded slaves, there was the story of Little Willie, an escaped slave taken in by my great-great-grandparents, Daniel and Sarah Pace. Little Willie was killed by a falling tree. But even in the mountains there was slavery, especially among the wealthy Charleston summer people in nearby Flat Rock. To know our history we must study the presence of slavery in the region. I wrote the novel *Chasing the North Star* to explore some aspects of that history. The novel ends in Ithaca, New York, so I had an opportunity to imagine my other home in 1851.

The main difference between Northern Appalachia and Southern Appalachia is the legacy of the Civil War. The post-war poverty in the Southern mountains was far greater than that in the mountains of Pennsylvania and New York. The effects of that conflict of 1861–1865 are almost too subtle and elusive to explain. I have ancestors who served in the Union army as well as ancestors who fought for the Confederacy. But the memory of losing that devastating war is embedded deep in the DNA of the region, aggravating a sense of otherness and outsidership, undermining confidence. Rural people in Upstate New York may feel outside the mainstream, but

COURTESY OF ROBERT MORGAN



ABOVE TOP Morgan's father, Clyde R. Morgan, 1924

ABOVE BOTTOM One-year-old Robert Morgan with his mother, Fannie Levi Morgan, and sister, Evangeline, in the yard of the old Morgan house down by Green River, 1946

¹⁶ *Brave Enemies* (Algonquin, 2003); discussed in Rebecca Godwin's interview with the writer in *NCLR* 2014.

¹⁷ *Chasing the North Star* (Algonquin, 2016); reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017.

rural folk in Western North Carolina in the era in which I grew up felt even more the otherness, a difference that tended to limit assurance in the ability to get on in the contemporary world. Added to that was a sense of language difference, heightening a feeling of inarticulatness. In complex ways the effects of the Civil War were still with us then.

*When I think of your impressive body of poetry, one of the simplest taxonomies involves the division of poems set in Appalachia and those poems with no setting whatsoever, like your philosophical meditations on scientific ideas in *Dark Energy* or even those early poems about such human inventions as odometers.¹⁸ Has living away from your homeland in North Carolina informed this division? Or has it been consistent throughout your career?*

**“RATHER THAN
LOSING FAITH, I
GAINED GREATER
FAITH AND
UNDERSTANDING OF
THE WORLD AND ITS
HISTORY, THOUGH
NOW I AM LESS
OPTIMISTIC THAN I
WAS BACK THEN.”**

—Robert Morgan

My interest in science antedates my study of regional and local history. As a teenager I wanted to study science. We were told around 1958–59 that it was our duty to “beat the Russians.” Compared to the fundamentalist world I grew up in, science seemed colorful and exhilarating, opening door after door and world onto world. Science offered a fresh view of time and destiny. My dream was to study at Caltech, but I lacked the nerve and money to apply there. At NC State I studied aerospace engineering and applied math, hoping to become a rocket scientist. At UNC I studied math as well as literature. Science thrilled me with new concepts of the structure of matter, time, and human possibility. Rather than losing faith, I gained greater faith and understanding of the world and its history, though now I am less optimistic than I was back then.

You are currently writing a biography of Poe, who was famously an expatriate from the South, living much of his life in the North and suffering a tortured relationship to the literary elite in his native Boston. Perhaps you could tease us a little as we await the book: What are some of the most interesting or surprising aspects you’ve discovered related to Poe’s experience as a Southerner living outside the South?

Though Poe was born in Boston to strolling players, he was orphaned early and spent most of his formative years in Richmond. The fact that he was never actually adopted by John Allan, his foster father, had an incalculable impact on his sense of displacement, of not belonging. Raised in some affluence, he was later forced to make his way as a freelance writer. Poe’s struggle with identity and alcoholism makes his story one of courage as well as genius, and he had a self-destructive tendency.

¹⁸ *Dark Energy* (Penguin, 2015); reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016 and discussed in Rebecca Godwin’s interview with the writer in *NCLR Online* 2017: 13.

"IT HAS NOT BEEN GENERALLY RECOGNIZED THAT POE IS ONE OF OUR FINEST WRITERS ABOUT THE NATURAL WORLD, ALONG WITH THOREAU AND WHITMAN, THOUGH HIS FORESTS AND FIELDS AND STREAMS AND MOUNTAINS HAVE A SOUTHERN FLAVOR."

—Robert Morgan

Though he spent much of his adult life in Philadelphia and New York, Poe almost always identified himself as a Virginian. His deepest sense of self was largely defined by the Tidewater culture. His tragedy was that he did not really fit in there, or anywhere else. He was a wanderer, like his actress mother. But he did original, definitive work in at least three fields: poetry, short fiction, and criticism.

It has not been generally recognized that Poe is one of our finest writers about the natural world, along with Thoreau and Whitman, though his forests and fields and streams and mountains have a Southern flavor. In some of his work, especially *Eureka*, his transcendentalism is very similar to that of Emerson and Whitman. He was both of his time, and alien to it. Much of what Poe wrote was inspired by guilt, and a search for the mother-muse-lover figure, who must always die, but return in another guise. Poe's life is the most dramatic in American letters. Even his death in Baltimore is considered a mystery, as well as his complex lineage on his mother's side.

Without money, family name, or a Harvard education, Poe had to make his way in the world of Longfellow, Bryant, Washington Irving, Cooper, James Russell Lowell, Hawthorne, and Emerson. They knew they belonged to their world. Even so, his achievement is truly extraordinary. He has the largest international audience of any American writer, with the possible exception of Twain.

For years I taught a course at Cornell called "Emerson and Poe: Contrasting Trains of American Romanticism." To understand Poe's life we must know his art, and to understand his art we must know his life. The opportunity to write in some depth about "Our Cousin, Mr. Poe," as Allen Tate called him, was one I could not pass up.

What else might you tell us that I have neglected to ask?

There is almost a tradition of Southern writers living and working outside the region. Poe was only the first, followed by Sidney Lanier, and O. Henry. Since then we have had Robert Penn Warren, who

"THERE IS ALMOST A TRADITION OF SOUTHERN WRITERS LIVING AND WORKING OUTSIDE THE REGION."

—Robert Morgan



spent much of his career at Yale, along with Cleanth Brooks. James Agee lived in New York and Hollywood. Faulkner also spent a great deal of his time in the 1930s and 1940s in Hollywood. Allen Tate lived for decades in Minneapolis, and my colleague A.R. Ammons in Ithaca. Carson McCullers lived in New York for most of her career, as has Gail Godwin. Since 1976 Cormac McCarthy has lived in the Southwest. Tennessee Williams divided his time between Key West and New York. Horton Foote spent most of his career around New York. The great Whitman biographer, Gay Wilson Allen, from Canton, North Carolina, spent most of his career teaching at NYU. It is quite possible that living out of the South has stimulated a number of authors to write more about the region and provided them with an altered perspective in their work. ■

"IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT LIVING OUT OF THE SOUTH HAS STIMULATED A NUMBER OF AUTHORS TO WRITE MORE ABOUT THE REGION AND PROVIDED THEM WITH AN ALTERED PERSPECTIVE IN THEIR WORK."

—Robert Morgan

FIVE EXPATRIATE NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS

Flashes of Past Topics and Continued Community

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

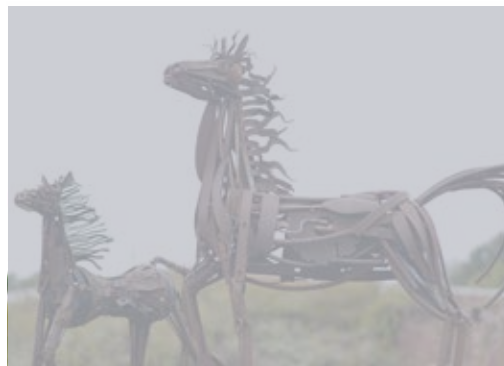
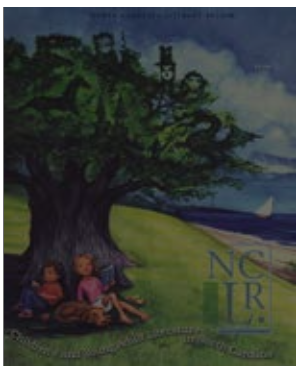
As usual, this Flashbacks section includes several reviews of books related to special feature section topics of our past issues, like Senior Associate Editor Christy Hallberg's review of Jeff Jackson's novel and Jim Clark's review of poetry collections by Lenard D. Moore and David Rigsbee. All of these books bring music and literature together. To read more "North Carolina Literature and the Other Arts," note that we still have *NCLR* 2017 issues available for purchase. Several reviews in this issue echo our 2001 North Carolina speculative fiction focus; we have reviews of four books for young readers, the theme of our 2006 issue; and reviews of two new books by Philip Gerard recall our 1994 (1898 Wilmington coup d'état) and 1999 (Civil War) issue themes. Still more reviews feature writers who have appeared in *NCLR* previously. These and the rest of our print issues are available for [purchase](#), although a few are in limited supply.

Do you remember the several issues in which former Senior Associate Editor Lorraine Hale Robinson wrote about North Carolina "Food Finds"? Don't miss her review of two new books that are quite the finds on food. Retired now, Lorraine continues to bring one of her many areas of expertise

to the table (pun intended), and we appreciate her continued service to *NCLR* as a reviewer. Another long-time *NCLR* writer (and subject of an interview in 2016), Marjorie Hudson returns to the topic of her premiere issue story, John Lawson, to review Scott Huler's award-winning book about retracing Lawson's "Voyage of Discovery."

Also typical of the Flashbacks section of our issues, you'll find here poems by writers who have appeared in our pages before, from Fred Chappell, to several Applewhite Prize finalists, who have been finalists before: J.S. Absher, Gina Malone, Jon Obermeyer, Tori Reynolds, Mark Smith-Soto, and Melinda Thomsen. Melinda's poem, inspired by the metal animal sculptures by Jonathan Bowering, which anyone driving through downtown Greenville can see, is also reminiscent of the 2017 "literature and the other arts" issue.

Speaking of Fred Chappell, notice that he, along with Joseph Mills and David Deutsch, reviews and is reviewed in this issue; that he, along with Marly Youmans, reviews, as well as publishes poems in this issue. I've remarked previously on how much we on the *NCLR* editorial staff appreciate the valuable service of writing book reviews. We know that



FLASHBACKS: *Echoes of Past Issues*

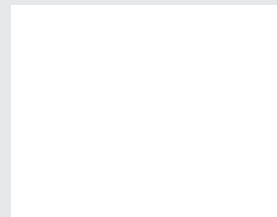
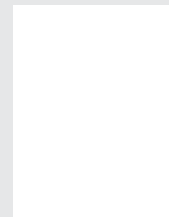
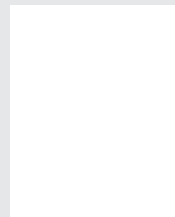
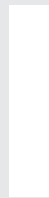
this service takes time that might be spent on the reviewer's own writing, and we know the authors of the books reviewed are grateful for that time.

There are far more books published each year by North Carolina writers than we can possibly review, and still over fifty books were selected by our reviewers for this issue! Since there are no print costs for *NCLR Online*, we are not strictly limited by page count. But we can only consider for review as many books as we can find reviewers to read them. If your book is or has been reviewed in *NCLR Online*, we hope you will accept our invitation to review for us next year – as Dale Bailey and Robert West did after their books were reviewed last year. Reviewers receive a complimentary one-year subscription, which means they can then submit to our writing competitions, which require a subscription rather than a submission fee.

This kind of writer-supporting-writer service was, our readers might recall, a central theme of our twenty-fifth issue, in which we celebrated the unique spirit of community among writers in North Carolina. That communal attitude is reflected too in the award stories you'll read in this section, from the state's highest honor for civilians,

the North Carolina Award for Literature, awarded to Philip Gerard; and the North Carolina Humanities Council's highest honor, the Caldwell Award, presented to Jaki Shelton Green; to the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association's lifetime achievement award for history, the Crittenden Award, to Michael Hill, which we include in our literary review because of Mike's service to North Carolina writers through his management of the state book awards for so many years. All three of these 2019 recipients have spent and are spending their careers serving writers. Read more in these and the other award stories in the pages of this section. Congratulations to all the award recipients.

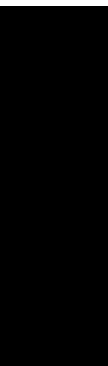
Now, to "flash back" to where I started this introduction, stay tuned for our 2020 summer print issue, which will include Christy Hallberg's lengthy interview with Jeff Jackson, whose new novel she reviews here. In the print issue, too, you'll find more new poems by Fred Chappell, as well as by James Applewhite and the 2019 Applewhite Prize winner, second and third place poems, and honorable mentions. If you have not yet subscribed or renewed (and did not write a review for this issue), please [subscribe](#) today. And thank you for doing so! ■



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 6 ■ **North Carolina Expatriate Writers**
*poetry, prose, interviews,
book reviews, and literary news*
- 176 ■ **North Carolina Miscellany**
poetry, prose, and book reviews,

- 84** *Philip Gerard Honored with the North Carolina Award for Literature*
by Michele Walker
- 86** *Understanding the Present through the Past*
a review by Angela Love Moser
Philip Gerard, *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina and Cape Fear Rising*
- 91** *Old Tractor Equipment*
a poem by Melinda Thomsen
art by Jonathan Bowling
- 92** *Fred Chappell, Fabulous Fabulist*
a review by John Lang
Fred Chappell, *As If It Were*
- 94** *Judgment Day and Mission*
two poems by Fred Chappell
art by Bongsang Cho and Charlotte Foust
- 96** "Wide Awake Red"
a review by Catherine Carter
Kathryn Stripling Byer, *Trawling the Silences*
- 101** *Herd Animal*
a poem by Tori Reynolds
art by Foozhan Kashkooli
- 102** *The Close Harmony We Sing*
a review by Robert M. West
Shelby Stephenson, *Our World, Nin's Poem, and Paul's Hill: Homage to Whitman*
- 108** *Taking Steps to Understand Jim Grimsley and Randall Kenan*
a review by Gary Richards
James A. Crank, *Understanding Randall Kenan*
David Deutsch, *Understanding Jim Grimsley*
- 111** "Ask Mike": Michael Hill Receives Crittenden Award
by Kevin Cherry
- 113** *North Carolina Poet Laureate Receives North Carolina Humanities Council's Highest Honor*
- 114** *1970*
a poem by Gina Malone
art by Brie Castell
- 117** *Music of Words*
a review by Jim Clark
Lenard D. Moore, *The Geography of Jazz*
David Rigsbee, *This Much I Can Tell You*
- 120** *When the Music's Over*
a review by Christy Alexander Hallberg
Jeff Jackson, *Destroy all Monsters*
- 123** *People as Part, Community as Sum*
a review by John Hanley
Anna Jean Mayhew, *Tomorrow's Bread*
De'Shawn Charles Winslow, *In West Mills*
- 126** *Look Closer, Listen*
a review by Christie Collins
Becky Gould Gibson, *Indelible*
Susan Schmidt, *Let Go or Hold Fast*
- 130** *Haunted Lives: Wrestling with the Past*
a review by Lisa Wenger Bro
Therese Anne Fowler, *A Good Neighborhood*
Charles Dodd White, *In the House of the Wilderness*



FLASHBACKS: *Echoes of Past Issues*

- 135** *Gentile Bellini, John the Baptist (Istanbul, 1479)*
a poem by J.S. Absher
art by Jarrett Burch
- 136** *Giving Voice to Place*
a review by Wayne Johns
Celia Bland, *Cherokee Road Kill*
Tyree Daye, *River Hymns*
- 142** *Bubbie Jenny and the Lone Ranger*
a poem by Mark Smith-Soto
art by Carolina Coto
- 144** *The Memory of Water: Searching for Faith, Family, and Familiar Places*
a review by Cameron Bynum
Michael Chitwood, *Search & Rescue*
Al Maginnes, *The Next Place*
- 147** *Kathryn Kirkpatrick Receives a Second Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize*
by Georgann Eubanks
- 148** *Her Eyes Abroad*
a review by Rebecca Duncan
Diane Chamberlain, *The Dream Daughter*
Lee Zacharias, *Across the Great Lake*
- 150** *Time and Touch*
a review by David Clinton
Judy Hogan, *Those Eternally Linked Lives*
David C. Tillinghast, *Sisters, Cousins, and Wayward Angels*
- 154** *Still Life with Monoclonal Antibodies*
a poem by Jon Obermeyer
art by Chieko Murasugi
- 155** *Two-way Mirror*
a review by Meagan Lucas
Joseph Mills, *Bleachers*
Krystal A. Smith, *Two Moons*
- 158** *Good Stories that Shouldn't Be True*
a review by Dale Bailey
Jen Julian, *Earthly Delights and Other Apocalypses*
- 160** *Images of Mystery*
a review by Marly Youmans
Valerie Nieman, *Leopard Lady and To the Bones*
- 162** *Summertime Detours*
a review by Anna McFadyen
Cindy Baldwin, *Where the Watermelons Grow*
Gillian McDunn, *Caterpillar Summer*
- 165** *The Road to Change*
a review by Brianne Holmes
Brenda Rufener, *Where I Live and Since We Last Spoke*
- 167** *Lyons and Minter Receive NC AAUW Young People's Literature Award*
- 168** *North Carolina Foods and Foodways, a Consuming Passion*
a review by Lorraine Hale Robinson
Nanette Davidson, *The Folk School Cookbook*
Georgann Eubanks, *The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods through the Year*
- 173** *A Journey Among Strangers*
a review by Marjorie Hudson
Scott Huler, *A Delicious Country: Rediscovering the Carolinas along the Route of John Lawson's 1700 Expedition*



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 6** ■ **North Carolina Expatriate Writers**
poetry, prose, interviews, book reviews, and literary news
- 176** ■ **North Carolina Miscellany**
poetry, prose, and book reviews,

PHILIP GERARD HONORED WITH THE NORTH CAROLINA AWARD FOR LITERATURE

adapted from event program biography by Michele Walker

Award-winning author Philip Gerard is perhaps best known for his novel *Cape Fear Rising*, a novel about the Wilmington Coup of 1898. He is the author of thirteen books of fiction and non-fiction, most recently *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina*. Gerard also has written eleven documentary television scripts, numerous radio essays, several magazine series, and an award-winning radio drama.

For illuminating North Carolina's history, people and culture through his work, Philip Gerard receives the 2019 North Carolina Award for Literature.

Philip Gerard grew up in Newark, DE, and attended the University of Delaware where he earned a BA in English and Anthropology. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing in 1981 at the University of Arizona.

He grew to love coastal North Carolina as a teenager during summer camping trips on the Outer Banks. Just after graduating high school, Gerard made his way to the Outer Banks and spent the summer there, soaking up the local culture. It was then he promised himself that if he ever had the opportunity to live in coastal North Carolina, he would take it.

That opportunity came in 1989 when he was offered a position in the English Department at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Shortly after joining the university, Gerard took charge of the nascent Creative Writing program, which has grown into a thriving department, and founded the MFA program, now nationally

prominent. Today, he teaches in the BFA and MFA Programs of the Department of Creative Writing at UNC Wilmington. The Philip Gerard Fellowship, endowed by benefactor Charles F. Green III to honor Gerard's work in establishing and directing the MFA program, is awarded annually to an MFA student on the basis of literary merit.

For over a decade, he has served with his wife Jill as co-editor of *Chautauqua*, the literary journal of the Chautauqua Institution in New York, which is designed and edited in the Publishing Laboratory at UNC Wilmington.

In keeping with his conviction that writers should give something back to their profession, he has served on the boards of the North Carolina Writers Network, the Associated Writing Programs, the North Carolina Arts Council, and the *North Carolina Literary Review*. He is the 2012 recipient of the Sam Talmadge Ragan Award for Contributions to the Fine Arts of North Carolina.

His writings embrace his adopted home of North Carolina, examining the state's culture, history and environment through the lens of its people. Gerard's experiences and observations of North Carolina, and his deep appreciation for and knowledge of its history, are apparent throughout his work.

Gerard also is an avid musician who often incorporates bluegrass, folk, country, and original compositions into his readings, playing six- and twelve-string guitar, dobro, banjo, and pedal steel guitar.

Gerard and his wife, Jill, live in Wilmington. ■■■



PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDA FOX; COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

“WORDS
OF TRUTH
HAVE NEVER
MATTERED
MORE.”
—PHILIP GERARD

excerpted from acceptance remarks by Philip Gerard

I am honored and humbled by this recognition from the state that I have been privileged to call home for more than thirty years. I have far too many people to thank for all they have given me – family, friends, teachers, fellow writers, readers, students. You know who you are. So I will name only my parents, Felix and Margaret, who taught me the value of books; my brother Stephen and his wife Laura, who traveled here from California, and my sister Sharon and her husband Mike, who came in from Ohio to be here for this event; Sister Marie Bernadette, my first grade teacher, who taught me to read and write – what a lovely gift that has turned out to be – and my wife Jill, my support and counsel in all things.

Words of truth have never mattered more. I believe in the writer as a witness to evil, as a reporter of injustice, as a chronicler of human compassion, even on occasion of greatness, as one whose skills illuminate the Truth with a capital T, without irony. I believe it is the job of the writer to put into words what is worst – and also what is best – about us. To light up our possibilities, to discover the finest lives to which we can aspire, and to inspire our readers to greatness of soul and heart.

I will continue to do my best to live this credo. Thank you all for this magnificent award. ■

UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST

a review by
Angela Love Moser

Philip Gerard. *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

—. *Cape Fear Rising*. 1994. Blair, 2019.

ANGELA LOVE MOSER earned her BA in English and History from Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, KY. She has MEd degrees in Secondary Education and Instructional Systems Technology. She earned her MA in English with a concentration in Multicultural and Transnational Literature from ECU where she created modules for teaching about the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état through the creative literature inspired by the history. She is currently an English instructor at ECU and Pitt Community College and a Managing Editor of *NCLR*.

Read more about PHILIP GERARD with the preceding story about his recent award, the highest civilian honor given by the North Carolina governor.

No doubt, Philip Gerard will look back at 2019 as a very good year. The publisher of his 1994 novel *Cape Fear Rising*, inspired by the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with the release of a new edition with a foreword by Randall Kenan and an afterword from the author. The same year, UNC Press published Gerard's *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina*, a compilation of his Civil War series, published in installments from 2011 to 2015 in *Our State Magazine*. And in 2019, Gerard received the much-deserved honor of the North Carolina Award for Literature.

Gerard began his career as a journalist who was dedicated to finding stories. As he told his interviewer for the North Carolina Award video: "The most interesting things tend to be complex things, and complex things tend to cause controversy. But you can't really turn over any rock that's interesting enough and not come up with some kind of controversy."¹ His dedication to sharing stories and telling the truth led to a collection of stories about North Carolina during the Civil War and the novel he is most well-known for, *Cape Fear Rising*. Thirty-three years after the end of the Civil War, white supremacists, many of whom fought in the war, overthrew the government of Wilmington, NC, and forced most of the educated and influential African American leaders from the community. Not surprisingly, the issues that inspired the Civil War also influenced the

1898 Wilmington coup d'état. Unfortunately, some of these same issues remain unresolved over 120 years after that insurrection. In both *The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina* and *Cape Fear Rising*, Philip Gerard masterfully demonstrates how these historical events changed and shaped the Old North State and, perhaps, the United States we know today.

Gerard reports that he followed three rules while writing the installments that would become ***The Last Battleground: The Civil War Comes to North Carolina***: the stories he would retell must "in some significant way connect to North Carolina," they would go beyond the battles to show how the war also affected regular citizens and families of North Carolina, and they would be recounted "in present tense" (ix). As Gerard has explained, the role of an author of historical fiction "is to tell a compelling human story, born of true facts, that not only engages the reader emotionally but also sharpens or even awakens an interest in the history that underpins the story."² By following his rules for his nonfictional Civil War story collection, Gerard was able to present how the Old North State and North Carolinians were forever changed by the war.

Collectively, the stories of *The Last Battleground* provide a history of the Civil War in North Carolina that focuses on the effects the war had on the men, women, children, and economy of the Old North State. Gerard

¹ "2019 NC Award for Literature: Philip Gerard," North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 17 Nov. 2019; video; subsequently cited parenthetically.

² Philip Gerard, "The Novelist of History: Using the Techniques of Fiction to Illuminate the Past," *North Carolina Literary Review* 24 (2015): 118.

explains his purpose with this collection as “an attempt to tell the story pretty much the entire Civil War through the lens of one state, and it turns that North Carolina is the best state to do that because it sort of mirrored all the divisions and all the issues that the whole country at large and the South were feeling” (“2019 NC Award”). While the stories follow the war chronologically, they do not follow the generals and battles emphasized in history textbooks. Instead, Gerard focuses on the citizens of North Carolina who were greatly affected by the war years, believing, “All of those human stories add up to a panorama that is far more interesting and complicated than the kind of North/South battle lines, big battle, and then Lincoln frees the slaves narrative, which is sort of the fifth-grade version that we all got in our history class” (“2019 NC Award”).

As the war ravaged the state in numerous ways, Gerard tells stories of lost loved ones, run-down and lost farms, women who kept up families and farms alone, Native Americans who fought, nuns who nursed the sick and injured, slaves who fought for their freedom, deserters, and finally those present during the Confederacy’s surrender. He writes, “As the hard winter of 1865 warms into spring, virtually everything that will affect the outcome of the war – and the coming peace – is happening in North Carolina. And each of the public events is also deeply personal, full of private longing, fear, expectation, desire, suffering,

triumph, and heartbreak” (4). Through the stories in *The Last Battleground*, it becomes clear how pivotal a role the Old North State and its citizens played in America’s civil war. It also becomes clear just how affected North Carolinians were by the devastation of the war.

The collection begins with “The Pageant and the Glory: Parading Off to War.” Per his rule of writing in the present tense, Gerard describes the men as they head off to war: “All over North Carolina, the war begins in a pageant of silk banners and marching men, young and eager, a jubilee of parades with brass bands and snappy drummer boys beating the step with a light tattoo” (5). The men carry flags and banners made by women like Mary Harper “Mamie” Morehead. Just as men in the other Confederate states believed, North Carolina soldiers were sure of themselves, confident that they would soon return to their families and their lives. However, as Gerard reminds the reader, the battles of Fredericksburg and Gettysburg had not yet occurred, and the men had not yet gone hungry, had not witnessed the power of a cannon or their fellow soldiers die, had not “watched the surgeons saw-

ing off legs and arms for hours on end” and the punishment of the men so desperate to return to their families that they would desert. “They are not yet veterans. But for that distinction they will not have long to wait” (10).

As the collection continues through stories of the war, Gerard recounts a wealthy plantation owner who evacuated his family from Wilmington when yellow fever ravages the city. He leaves behind a slave to take care of his property; however, many slaves were not as loyal to their masters as Southern apologist mythology would have us believe. Tales of runaway slaves are woven throughout the book, demonstrating their desperation and the risks these people were willing to take for their freedom.

The “new national pastime” (34) of baseball was played in prisons. “In fact, Salisbury Prison has become the prime venue for base ball” (35). Even so, the prisons were certainly not humane, enjoyable places for soldiers on either side of the divide. Recounting stories of men dying in hospitals and prisons throughout the state, Gerard does not hold back details reflecting the horrific conditions these men suffered in. The same baseball-playing Salisbury prison became a “hellhole of misery

RIGHT *Union Prisoners at Salisbury, N.C., 1863*, by Otto Boetticher (hand-colored lithograph on paper, 25.5x40.25), a gift of Barbara B. Millhouse to the Reynolda House Museum of American Art



and death" (40). Deaths suffered on the battlefield, in hospitals, and in prisons ripped through families throughout the state. Gerard writes about the Stockard family who lost seven men: three brothers, their uncle, and three of their cousins (two of whom were brothers) (130). As soldiers, like the Stockards, piled up in the fields, Christian leaders joined troops as they engaged in the war. They ministered to the sick and dying. One man, the Reverend Alexander Davis Betts, preached to congregations throughout North Carolina for fifty years following the war, "time and again meeting survivors from his old regiment, attended always by a company of ghosts" (146).

While the men fighting and the men administering to the soldiers were engaged in battle, families were at home, struggling to keep their farms and businesses from going under, to put food on their tables, and to maintain hope in spite of no information about how their loved ones were doing on the battlefield. Gerard tells these stories as well. One soldier, Frances Marion Poteet from McDowell County, leaves a wife and children behind when he goes to war. After being threatened with eviction, Poteet "rankles at the law that keep him in the army fighting for a cause that is not his own" (149). Poteet deserts the army to return home and help his wife, Martha. He decides to return to the army and is arrested for his desertion. Martha continues to struggle while he suffers in prison. Despite her strength, "she comes close to breaking" (151).

As the war continues, the effects become more damaging to the citizens of North Carolina.

Families developed new ways to mourn their loved ones:

If the body of a beloved son, husband, or father cannot be carried home from a distant battlefield, then the next best thing is to recover the story of how he died, who was with him to offer comfort and prayer, and with what care and honor he was laid to rest. In their letters home to grieving families, soldiers are careful to provide such details, knowing their own families would crave the same emotional comfort. (229)

Black crepe clothing was no longer discarded after a period of mourning; it was saved, as families knew that they or someone else would soon be in need of it. The families also mourned their lost loved ones with song. The sacrifices were becoming too much, but the dying, the mourning, the stories, the songs, and the black clothing continued.

While speaking with Gerard, I recounted the story from *The Last Battleground* that stuck with me the most, told in Chapter 27, "Occupying Army." In desperate need of soldiers, the Confederate army called in cadets, mere boys (the youngest only fifteen), from the Virginia Military Institute. The boys marched eighty miles in the rain to get to the battlefield. Gerard writes, "Hard pressed by the enemy, but wracked by doubt to the last, Breckinridge orders, 'Put the boys in, and may God forgive me for the order.'" More than a quarter of the boys were killed or wounded. After the battle, "they leave a sight that will come to symbolize the glorious and futile sacrifice of brave boys in the Cause: a field of lost shoes, sucked off their feet by the glutinous mud in the trampled wheat field" (197). This visual reminded

me of the room of shoes once worn by Jewish concentration camp victims in the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, reflecting how history repeats, and innocent victims often pay the heaviest prices.

In turn, Gerard shared one of the stories that stuck with him, which he told in Chapter 35, "Sisters of Mercy," about nuns who came from the North to tend to the wounded in New Bern and found men in conditions unfit for animals: "Patients lie in filth, their dirty bandages unchanged for weeks, walls and floors stained with blood, onlyhardtack and salt beef for food. Medicine of any kind is scarce, and the only nurses are other patients, untrained and unwashed, many of them too ill to stand" (252). The nuns swiftly made changes to the hospital, making it cleaner and more sanitary. Mother Mary Madeline Tobin demanded supplies and the key to the storehouse, or else she would "take her either sisters and return to New York" (253). Despite being wary of the Sisters, the soldiers were quickly won over by the care and love they received from

COURTESY OF ANGELA LOVE INOSER



the nuns. So admired, loved, and appreciated were the nuns that some dying soldiers believed them to be angels. "When Father Bruhl is summoned to the bedside of a dying man who wishes to be baptized, he inquires about the man's faith. 'What the Sisters believe, that is what I believe,' he says" (254). The Sisters stayed until 1863 when they were no longer needed. In Washington, DC, there is a stone monument in honor of their service. On it is inscribed:

THEY COMFORTED THE DYING,
NURSED THE WOUNDED,
CARRIED HOPE TO THE IMPRISONED,
GAVE IN HIS NAME A DRINK OF WATER TO
THE THIRSTY. (257)

Gerard argues that the Civil War was the precursor to the 1898 coup, and *The Last Battle-ground* "is basically the back story to" the coup that inspired his novel.³ According to Gerard, "it's plain the Old North State became a keystone to the whole rebellion" (326). No state sacrificed more during the war than the Old North State. Of the North Carolina men old enough, or young enough, to fight, one in four died. The death toll from North Carolina equaled "30,000 to 35,000 men," and it is unknown how many women, children, and slaves died over the course of the war (326). Many North Carolinians were sent to fight and die in a war in which they had no real stake. These sacrifices were from a state divided in its beliefs; half the population did not agree with the war and did not want to secede, while the other half wanted to secede and keep the institution of slavery alive.

The war was over, yet, in North Carolina, "[t]he hope and terror and heartbreak of Reconstruction will soon begin" (322). As the "winners" are those who write history, the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état is an important historical event that was first misrepresented by those who initially recorded it (in white-owned publications, that is), then largely dropped by historians. According to Gerard most people "started denying that it ever happened" by the 1920s (personal interview). So after early novels inspired by the coup, for example, Charles Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), the latter written from the white supremacist point of view, memories of the coup were largely buried. However, with its original publication in 1994, Gerard's novel *Cape Fear Rising* shone a light on this suppressed chapter in North Carolina history.

Gerard spent a year researching the 1898 coup using only primary documents because he "didn't want any secondhand gauzy memories . . . or any distorted mythologies . . . that just aren't true." He also went to a museum where he physically investigated a Gatling gun and walked the important areas where the coup occurred in Wilmington. His novel started "a ball rolling" that led to North Carolina ordering an investigation and report about what really happened (personal interview). Between 1995 and 2000, residents of Wilmington and faculty from UNC Wilmington began to discuss the coup. In 2000, the North Carolina state

legislature ordered an investigation into the coup. LeRae Umfleet wrote a report of the coup, from the causes, to the violence of the event, to the aftermath. Her 2009 book, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot*, is considered the first definitive report on the events of and leading up to the 1898 coup d'état, the only successful coup d'état in American history. From Gerard's novel to the official report, what facts that could be uncovered and regathered were finally revealed.

In *Cape Fear Rising*, Gerard tells the story of the 1898 coup through the eyes and experiences of the completely fictional Sam and Gray Ellen Jenks, a married couple who relocate to Wilmington from Chicago. Through the outsider eyes of these newcomers, Gerard is able to tell a compelling story that engages the reader and awakens an interest in this bit of little-known history. The Jenks arrive in Wilmington in August of 1898 and quickly find themselves caught up in the secrets and conspiracies that lead to a coup d'état of the local government. Sam, a journalist, works for *The Messenger*, the white-owned newspaper in Wilmington. The couple's relationship is strained, as Sam is a recovering alcoholic, and their efforts to have a child have recently resulted in a miscarriage. Also, Sam does not talk with Gray Ellen about a major reason for his drinking: his cowardly behavior as a journalist during the Spanish American War. Gray Ellen, a schoolteacher, is Sam's much needed moral compass in Wilmington, as he increasingly

³ Angela Love Moser, personal interview with Philip Gerard, Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC, 8 Aug. 2019.

finds himself wrapped up in the schemes, beliefs, and opinions of the white supremacists planning to take control of the local government, if not by votes, then by force.

In one memorable scene, Gray Ellen and Sam attend a white supremacist meeting. In this scene, Gerard recounts the historical speech by Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell about “the miscreants, the vile perpetrators of such a crime spree,” blaming the “*Negro race*” for rising up against the white man (210). Waddell asks the crowd, “Will we of the Anglo-Saxon race stand for this any longer?” to which the crowd yells, “No!” Waddell continues to rile up the crowd until they are standing, shouting, clapping, and singing battle songs from the Civil War. Waddell bellows, “Let them understand that we will not live under these intolerable conditions. No society can stand it! We are resolved to change them, if we have to choke the current of Cape Fear with carcasses!” As the speech comes to an end, Sam notes that Gray Ellen is crying and, after Waddell states, “*Negro domination . . . shall henceforth be only a shameful memory*” (212), she has disappeared from his sight. Sam finds her on the street, where she is hanging from a lamppost shouting, “You lost the War! . . . Can’t you get it through your heads? You *lost* the god-damn War!” Yet, while she is trying to help the citizens of Wilmington (and her husband) see the truth of what is happening around them, her words go unheeded. One man shouts back at her, “Maybe we did, sweetheart – but we’ll sure win

this election!” (213). Through this scene and similar speeches and conversations among the white supremacists, it becomes clear that many of the white men are still professing views that led to the Civil War. They are also trying to win back the status they lost when the South surrendered and re-entered the United States, as well as to put members of the race formerly enslaved back into the limitation of service jobs.

When asked why he decided to make Sam a recovering alcoholic, Gerard explained that he wanted a character who had everything to lose and:

What I didn’t want was this Yankee coming in all morally high and mighty, passing judgment on the poor Southern cousins. What I wanted was somebody who’s flawed. It’s really easy when things are going well and you’re prosperous and you have nothing to lose to take the moral high ground. It’s very hard when what you do may destroy your livelihood and endanger you or your family, might ruin your reputation, might take all the money out of your bank account. So, when you stand up for something, part of the question is, what is it going to cost you? (personal interview)

Sam recognizes that if he makes the wrong decisions or starts drinking again from the pressure of being pulled one way by his employer and patrons and another by his wife, he could lose Gray Ellen forever. He is enjoying his position as the favored journalist of Waddell’s story, but he knows that Gray Ellen (again, who reflects his own conscience) does not agree with Waddell’s plans for Wilmington, and if he does not have the courage to thwart the

establishment’s ideas about how he should report on these events, he could lose her. Sam ultimately has to decide if he wants to join the white supremacists – and, most likely, lose his wife – or go against the white supremacists and stand up for what’s right, thus losing the power and prestige being offered to him.

As the power of the white supremacists went unchecked in Wilmington, it is going unchecked in the United States today. Gerard wanted to release a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Cape Fear Rising* because he had once thought, “my God, white supremacy, that will never come around again,” but then recent events suggested otherwise: “Look, we just had a shooting that was based on white supremacy essentially. We have a president that’s touting it every chance he gets and pretending he’s not,” he told me (personal interview). From Charlottesville, VA, to Charleston, SC, to El Paso, TX, inspired by hate, white supremacists are continuing to leave death and destruction in their wake. In order to understand these present events and put an end to them, we have to remember the past, accurately, and acknowledge when history is being repeated. After all, as Gerard writes in the Afterword to his new edition of *Cape Fear Rising*, “If you don’t tell the story in its truth, you relive it over and over again” (443). Today the ghosts of the Civil War and the Wilmington coup are, indeed, still haunting the United States as similarly terrifying events play out throughout the country. Gerard’s two books collectively underscore that it’s past time to break this cycle of hate and violence. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY MELINDA THOMSEN***Old Tractor Equipment*

Their armature emerges from
a forging of farm equipment:
rasps, chains, gears, and pipes.

Metal tractor parts fashion
a horse whose neck
and ligaments are strong

enough to face the wind
with a mane of almost twenty
flat files billowing in the breeze.

We all move this way, right?
After years of pulling it
together in cut and paste jobs

of bad or non choices,
even if our hearts resemble
rusted tractor ball bearings,

we construct and forge ourselves
from a hodgepodge of muzzles
and flanks into running mares,



PHOTOGRAPH BY JIMMY INGENITO

Mare and Filly (repurposed steel) by Jonathan Bowling

stalky goats, or bold stallions.
Walk over to us, and see our
sprocket nut nostrils flare.

Look at these haunches
made of 20th century shovels
and lawnmower parts.

A trip of goats and a pigpen
of swine have propane
tank bellies, pulley hooks

for goat horns,
and porcine snouts marked
by stainless steel forks.

Nearby, bric-a-brac horses
cast galloping shadows
as we roam and graze.

MELINDA THOMSEN's chapbooks *Naming Rights* (2008) and *Field Rations* (2011) are from Finishing Line Press, and her latest collection, *Armature*, is forthcoming in 2020 from Hermit Feathers Press. Her poems have recently appeared in *Stone Coast Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Comstock Review*, *NCLR*, and *Kakalak*. A contributing editor for *Tar River Poetry* and *Big City Lit*, she teaches composition at Pitt Community College in Greenville, NC. This is her second year in a row as an Applewhite finalist.

JONATHAN BOWLING moved to Greenville in 1996 to pursue an MFA in Sculpture at ECU and has been working out of his Greenville studio ever since. Previously, he attended the University of Kentucky where he received a BFA in Sculpture and a BA in Art History. His sculptures have been featured in numerous outdoor exhibitions, as well as galleries and museums, and can be found throughout downtown Greenville. In 2011, his work *Family* appeared in a juried exhibit at the Coastal Discovery Museum in Hilton Head Island, SC. His winning piece was selected for purchase and installation by the Community Foundation of the Lowcountry and donated to Hilton Head's public art collection. See more of his work on his [website](#) and in *Our State* magazine and *NCLR* 2014.

FRED CHAPPELL, FABULOUS FABULIST

a review by John Lang

Fred Chappell. *As If It Were: Poems*. Louisiana State University Press, 2019.

JOHN LANG is an English Professor Emeritus at Emory & Henry College in Emory, VA, where he taught from 1983 to 2012. He is the author of *Understanding Fred Chappell* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), *Six Poets from the Mountain South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2010), and *Understanding Ron Rash* (University of South Carolina Press, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), as well as the editor of *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South* (University of Tennessee Press, 2006), a collection of interviews from *The Iron Mountain Review*, which he edited for more than twenty years.

Several poems from this **FRED CHAPPELL** collection were originally published in *NCLR* 2017. Read about this acclaimed poet and novelist with new poems by him following this review and in the 2020 print issue.

A recipient of both the Bollingen Prize and the T.S. Eliot Award, Fred Chappell continues to be one of the finest poets writing in the US, as this new book of poems amply demonstrates. *As If It Were* offers readers 105 poems that the poet labels fables or considers akin to fables, those poems presented in eight titled sections of varying lengths arranged topically: "Social Class," "Social Function," "Psychology," "Philosophy," "Folktale," "Fabulists," "Fox," and "Parable." While over a third of the poems (forty-three total) are explicitly attributed to Aesop and La Fontaine, others have quite different sources, including lesser known fabulists like Phaedrus and Babrius, the historian Herodotus, Horace's *Epistles*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and the Bible. The eleven poems in the "Philosophy" section each illustrate a different quotation, appended to the texts, taken from philosophers as varied as Pascal, Locke, Montesquieu, Hobbes, Hume, Edmund Burke, and Kant. Nearly twenty additional poems appear without attribution and are presumably of Chappell's own invention, several of them poems that feature a cat as protagonist, a choice of character not surprising to readers acquainted with Chappell's wonderful collection of cat poems *Familiars* (2014).

Whatever their sources of inspiration, the poems of this new book, consistently witty and urbane, reveal the amazing fertility of Chappell's own imagination as well as his verbal

artistry. All of the poems use rhyme and traditional meters, usually iambic, the lines varying in length as do the stanza structures. Two of the poems are sonnets; three others seem to me sonnet variants. Chappell is especially inventive in his choice of rhymes: *arpeggio/sanglot*, *foodist/nudist*, *paradoxes/foxes*, *Kant/taint*, *attitude/Cattitude*. In a poem based on an Ashanti folktale, Turtle refers to his new diet as *oxygenarian*, not vegetarian (the former's rhyme word). "These days I live on air," says Turtle to Spider, explaining why he has no food to share with his inhospitable acquaintance. Chappell's range of diction and allusion is as striking as his unpredictable rhymes, from the folksy term "fangsome" and the regional place name Blunder Cove to "flageolet" (a musical instrument), "flummery," and "desuetude." Some of the book's refreshing humor arises from the juxtaposition of these different levels of diction and from the poet's skillful use of comic anachronisms. Into the classical pastoral world, Chappell injects allusions to more recent authors and composers, as in this passage from "The Lion and the Melodious Ass":

He [Lion] searched his memory to recollect
Those sounds that make a shattering impact:
Bagpipes, Schoenberg, heavy metal rock,
The organ toccata of J. Sebastian Bach,
Avalanches crushing mountain passes,
The passionate commotion of mating Asses.

Similarly, in "Aesop to Fox," the poet has the legendary fabulist of the sixth-century BCE claim, "To draw an intricate personage / Requires a Chekhov or a Proust."

The variety of comic devices Chappell employs and humorous incidents he portrays is matched by the myriad human foibles he inventories. Egotism, greed, hypocrisy, injustice, self-deception, deceit, selfishness:



COURTESY OF THE MEA WRITING PROGRAM AT UNC GREENSBORO

all are exposed by the poet's keen satire. The braggart, for millennia a stock comic figure, appears here in assorted guises, as do other characters sorely lacking in self-knowledge, like the Bull in "The Bull and the Mouse," who prides himself on being considerate while revealing that "In fact, he took such little note / That of the Mouse he never thought." Like Aesop and La Fontaine, Chappell aims to sharpen his readers' vision of themselves. As he writes in an unpublished "Prologue" to bookstore readings from this collection, "When we visit the Fable zoo / The beasts we view are me and you." Chappell's phrasing here scarcely does justice, however, to the enormous cast of characters who populate *As If It Were*, not just a plethora of personified animals, as befits the fable genre, but also talking trees, assorted flowers, a boastful lamp, the Evening Star, even

paper and ink in a poem inspired by a passage in Leonardo Da Vinci's *Notebooks*, along with occasional gods and goddesses and human figures of all sorts, from kings and St. Francis to pirates and Dumbass Rusticus.

According to Horace, poetry's dual purpose is to instruct and delight. *As If It Were* masterfully fulfills both these aims. Yet at times Chappell seems to resist his fables' didactic function, especially in the section titled "Fabulists," where Aesop is pitted against Moralist in the opening poem and then against La Fontaine as Moralist elsewhere. In the former Aesop speaks the text's final words: "My Fox sounds never so unwise / As when he undertakes to moralize," Chappell's choice of the verb "undertakes" suggesting that there's something deadly about moralizing. But fortunately, in my view, Chappell often cannot abstain from the satirist's impulse to correct. The Moral appended to "Of Presumption" underscores, for instance, the dangers of lack of self-knowledge: "*To limit your file of catastrophes, / Research your true capacities.*" "The Wolf, the Fox, and the Ape" pointedly anticipates its Moral, as true today as in Aesop's time: "*Justice and Law are not synonyms.*" As yet another Moral states, "*If Fables were vain Fantasy, / They would not live in memory, / Reminding us forevermore / Of the kinds of animals we are.*"

Chappell's barbs are perhaps sharpest in the book's half dozen or so overtly political poems, one of which, "Of Extortion," depicts

the aptly named Senator Guano, who tells his carping constituents, "when you enter the voting booth / You put aside concern for truth." Guano remains confident that people will continue to vote for him despite his blatant corruption because

You have imagined someone worse,
A Statesman honest, wise, and just,
Fully deserving the public trust,
One on whom the oppressed may call,
A figure not like yourselves at all.

By concluding *As If It Were* with the section titled "Parable," Chappell provides the book with a religious dimension that deepens its resonance. In one of these poems, the prophet Nathan confronts King David about the King's complicity in Uriah's death, thus attesting to the perennial need to speak truth to power. In another, based on Jesus's parable of the wheat and the tares, readers are told, "By their fruits then we shall know them." The volume's closing poem, "The New and the Old," a title indicative of both the traditional materials with which Chappell works and his clever transformations of and additions to those sources, speaks of the "grand Vision the Counselor revealed" to the "Scribe." That vision unites, as Chappell states, both "the high oracular" and "the rude vernacular," the sublime and the earthy. *As If It Were* is an extraordinary achievement suffused with lively humor, acute insight into what Chappell's Aesop calls "Dilemmas of the Human Species," and superb poetic craft. It should be savored like a fine Bordeaux. ■

BY FRED CHAPPELL

Judgment Day

The gardener straightens from the bed of lilies and hostas,
 rubs her forehead with the heel of her palm,
 kneads her backache with both soiled hands,
 and stares away from the maroon-and-yellow blooms
 into the clouds daubing the blue with cotton swabs,
 as if to choose between an afterlife celestial or earthbound.

If she could know the flower she will in the end become,
 her choice would be fordone.
 She bends anew to her chore,
 judging the flower and the noxious weed,
 firm in her faith they are different kinds of beings.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Root, 2012 (silver, copper, steel, enamel)
 by Bongsang Cho

BONGSANG CHO is a South Korea-born metalsmith working in the US. He received his BFA from Hanyang University and MFA from Savannah College of Art and Design. He taught at the Penland School of Craft in North Carolina and has received numerous awards, including Best of Show during the 2014 Washington Craft Show. His work has been featured in the Smithsonian Craft Show, Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, and Sculpture Objects Functional Art and Design Fair. See more of his work on his [website](#).

A prolific author of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism, **FRED CHAPPELL** served as North Carolina's fourth poet laureate from 1997 to 2002. Born in Canton, NC, the author received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Duke University, and later became a Professor of English at UNC Greensboro. He is now retired, but continues to publish and has written more than twenty-five books. Chappell is the recipient of numerous literary honors, including the North Carolina Award for Literature and Yale University Library's Bollingen Prize for Poetry. Chappell's poetry and prose have been featured often in *NCLR*, for which he also frequently reviews.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Clarity (acrylic on canvas, 36x48) by Charlotte Foust

BY FRED CHAPPELL

Mission

I watch a young couple push through Gateway Park
 a baby carriage while disputing too warmly
 sharp questions of money and etiquette.
 Snuffling toward them, a leashless, brandy-colored spaniel
 stops to gaze imploringly. *Speak no more,*
 she thinks. *You will pollute the sweet noon sunlight.*

Instantly, the wife and man age twenty years
 and come to their senses. "We must not part.
 We will never speak of the matter again."
 Is the infant still asleep? They bend down to inspect.

The dog trots past them, called to watchful diplomacies.

CHARLOTTE FOUST attended ECU before graduating from UNC Charlotte. Her award-winning art has been featured in shows throughout North Carolina and included in *Expressive Drawing* by Steven Aimone (Lark Crafts, 2009) and *Studio Visit Magazine* in 2010. She has exhibited her work in New Mexico, and her North Carolina exhibits include a solo show at Lark & Key Gallery in Charlotte, a two-person show at Art Source in Raleigh, a national juried show at Milton Rhodes Center for the Arts in Winston-Salem, and at UNC Pembroke, where she received first place. See more of her art on her [website](#).

"WIDE AWAKE RED"

a review by Catherine Carter

Kathryn Stripling Byer.
Trawling the Silences.
Jacar Press, 2019.

CATHERINE CARTER lives with her husband in Cullowhee, near Western Carolina University, where she teaches in the English Education and Professional Writing programs. Her full-length collections of poetry include *The Memory of Gills* (2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007), *The Swamp Monster at Home* (2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013), and *Larvae of the Nearest Stars* (2019), all published by Louisiana State University Press. *The Memory of Gills* received the 2007 Roanoke-Chowan Award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. Her chapbook *Marks of the Witch* won Jacar Press's 2014 Chapbook Contest; other recognitions include *NCLR*'s 2018 James Applewhite Poetry Prize (her winning poem published in the 2019 print issue), the 2014 Poet Laureate's award from the North Carolina Poetry Society, the 2013 poetry award from *Still*, and numerous Pushcart nominations. Her work has also appeared in *Best American Poetry 2009*, *Orion*, *Poetry*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Tar River Review*, and *Ploughshares*, among others. She currently serves as interim managing editor for *Cider Press Review*, as the Jackson County regional representative for North Carolina Writers' Network West, and as a regular reviewer for *NCLR*.

ABOVE Kathryn Stripling Byer speaking at her inauguration as North Carolina's Poet Laureate, Raleigh, 2005 (and former Poet Laureate Fred Chappell sitting on right)

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB DONNAN; COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



Faced with a beloved poet's last book, we can hardly help but read it in light of what we now know and what we know we've lost. With Kathryn Stripling Byer's last collection, *Trawling the Silences*, this is more the case than usual. I don't know how much Kay Byer consciously knew about what was to come as she worked to compile this book under the shadow of a lymphoma diagnosis; when she went in for what proved to be her final surgery, she was expected to survive it. But in *Trawling the Silences* – even allowing for the long awareness of death and loss which has marked Byer's poetry – it is hard to escape the sense that at whatever level of conscious awareness, the poet knew enough. The book's most persistently inescapable word is "gone," used fourteen times, increasingly often as the book draws to its end, six times as end words in a variant sestina titled "Gone" (also the title of one of the first poems in Byer's 2012 collection, *Descent*). Add other conjugations of *to go*, and the number rises further; include the book's various elegies to lost friends and family, and the instances of such evocative choices as *death*, *dust*, *body*, *flesh*, *falling*, and *earth*

– well, suffice it to say that it's less disturbing if we don't count too far.

If that were all, this book might equally well have been titled *Descent*, like her 2012 collection, and critics who had ignored or dismissed Byer's work in the past might be tempted to shrug and dismiss it once again as the sort of musings that come upon all of us when our theoretical mortality becomes more immediate. However, that is not all. The poems resolutely refuse the common consolations of hope and faith, at least as those consolations are commonly understood. As always in Byer's work, too, there is a balancing or countering force, which in *Trawling the Silences* might be summarized as "wide awake." "Wake" has always been a powerful word in Byer's oeuvre, to the point of serving as the title of her 2003 chapbook/CD (and of one of the earlier poems in this book); in this final collection, awakes all but vibrates from the language of death, "*stubborn as rock jutting / out of the sodden dishevelment*" ("Household: Her Voices").

Trawling is arranged in three parts; the first section, as in *Descent* (2012), holds up to the world the lens of history and family history, beginning with the formidable grandmother

familiar to Byer readers from prior books, who has and is “so much / body that I make the four-poster creak” in “Her Road.” This unsentimental and large-as-life grandmother sets the volume’s tone and theme: “*This is it*, she declared to the preacher / who urged her to look toward the fields / of the hereafter.” Grandmother and poet alike explicitly find “the earth good enough for me” in “Winged”: earth is “home, its comforts, its shadows.” It is a stance that, when embraced by poets who aren’t mountain women, garners much admiration for its lack of sentimentalism or prettying-up, its courageous willingness to face the world exactly as experienced. Consider, for instance, Galway Kinnell’s short poem “Prayer”: “Whatever happens. Whatever / *what is is what I want*. Only that. But that.”¹ This is the position of both grandmother and poet in *Trawling’s* first verses: embodied, located in physical, actual place, grounded in the world they know and with short shrift for any man, holy or otherwise, who tries to tell them what to believe.

But it’s the grandmother who takes this stance in Byer’s poetry, and grandmothers are often suspect as the corrupting touchstone of the sentimental and the domestic (terms too often treated as synonyms.) In

his elegy for Kathryn Stripling Byer, R.T. Smith wrote,

what I recall most is another poet telling Kay that she couldn’t make a career out of grandmother poems.

Well, it turns out that you can and you can’t. Not that Kay’s range was narrow, but she did have a gift for (and a commitment to) matriarchal lines, women’s work and vision, . . . while extending her perspective to landscape, politics, solitaries, historical figures, music, migration, labor and on and on, Kay Byer held the mountains as touchstone and lodestone as she spun a whole unexplored dimension. She also found family and folk culture fathomless and crucial.²

Smith’s recognition of the human depth of Byer’s territory is percipient; such recognition is not as widespread as Byer’s work deserves. In “Precious Little” (in *Coming to Rest*, 2004) Byer interrogates a workshop interaction with a novelist who “opined / that the only real subject is battle // and how men survive it.” Challenged on this “vision of literature , // beligerent canon / where warring tribes battle it out,” the novelist shrugs, stands up to show off the tight fit of his jeans over his “weapons” to the female workshop students, and departs, unwilling even to engage with the challenge, still choosing to believe that you can’t make a career out of grandmother

poems and that strife is the central Matter of literature. He leaves the poet considering the violence battle enacts upon women and upon families, considering that awareness as her “precious little” weapon against his shallow view of writing: the “shot” of a woman holding a photograph of a daughter lost in the 9/11 attacks, the woman “sifting through ruins in Fallujah / and Kabul,” and a photo of her own daughter.

Never mind that we all had grandmothers, not all of them cookie-bakers and consolers; never mind that Byer’s is the grandmother who comb-scrapes children’s scalps for lice “every dusk with such ruthless care / we could hear the Big Dipper ringing / the night’s bucket” as she states in “Heirloom.” It’s easy – too easy – to write off family and folk culture and grandmothers, the “heirloom of dust,” as folksy, and women’s work and vision as less universal than the concerns of men, artificially divorced from family, who choose to kill and torture one another. But the poems of the first section move on through their fraught territory – home has its comforts, but as “Winged” points out, they are imbricated in its shadows. The shadows stretch here in poems about motherhood as children begin to disappear, like *Tsu’la’*, the Cherokee fox spirit,

¹ Galway Kinnell, *Collected Poems* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

² R.T. Smith, “i.m. Kathryn Stripling Byer (1944–2017): Kay Byer, Poet, Teacher, Old Soul,” *Shenandoah* blog 20 June 2017: [web](#).

KATHRYN STRIPLING BYER (1944–2017) was North Carolina’s first female poet laureate. She authored three chapbooks published by Jacar Press of Durham, NC, six full-length collections of poetry prior to this posthumous collection, all but the first published by Louisiana State University Press, two receiving the Roanoke-Chowan Award and two receiving SIBA Book Awards. Her other honors include the Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets, The North Carolina Literary and Historical Association’s R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. She was born in Camilla, GA, received her MFA degree from UNC Greensboro, and served as poet-in-residence at Western Carolina University. From the late 1960s until her death, she lived in Cullowhee, NC, with her husband, James Byer. Read tributes to her in *NCLR Online* [2018](#).

"Let go / and blowing away from our grasp." In these poems, the beloved child is unable to "come home," and home's comforts are hard to come by, or insufficient to the need. This section ends with a poem about 9/11, "Safe," which ends, speaking to a daughter holding a dead bird, "Now go wash your hands." The command evokes not only Pilate's washing his hands of the Crucifixion, but the necessity, even within the apparent safety of home, to survive and live with death for as long as we have to.

Section II is shaped by its first poem, one which compresses the domestic with the wild, "Household: Her Voices." It begins by meditating upon cleaning: "Woman's work? To be ruthless." Here is ruthlessness once again defined as the realm of women, especially as the speaker goes on to "lose my faith / in a woman's vocation," as earth does "what / she does best, sealing over and / blotting out." Earth then invites the poet to make her way through four subsections, named after the four elements of life and thus evoking earth religions which offer as much violence as comfort while they go about their "housework." The wind describes its work of sweeping away, shaking volcanic ash "like dirt from your scatter / rugs" – volcanoes are compared to women cleaning house, but the trails women blaze disappear "in murk," and unsweepable wet leaves grow heavy "as sleep now you're middle-aged," perhaps damping down or stifling women's fires. Rain is a mother whose human children may finally prove inconsolable even

in sleep, or death. The fire struck from wet matches "can wait long as / I want before / commence kindling," and no human power can force light from it until it is ready. The final section describes a backpacker who staggers under "a burden that bears / you down," falling "the short way down home"; earth adjures the falling woman to be "stubborn" in trying to hold on, like the rock jutting from "the sodden dishevelment." Earth weighs heavily on the poet in these poems, and the constant and ruthless housework seems to have a good deal in common with burial of the dead. If there is a grandmother here, it is the earth itself/herself, and her comb scrapes our skulls hard.

Next, though, comes "Listen," in which the speaker, though she cannot "renounce the roots / holding you fast," drops everything – toothbrush, nightgown – to walk naked out the back door onto grass whose blades "will never / again feel so whetted." And their sharpness is juxtaposed in the following line with "the earth underfoot so forgiving." This is the book's quivering balance: this world, the only world we know, is deadly sharp to exactly the extent (one line each) that it is giving and forgiving. The second section's poems move in turn through a search for a dirty and disturbing female wildness in a Cherokee tale of the Wolf Girl in "Wolf Creek," "her hair dripping tadpoles / and leaf scum"; to a winter-solstice blessing of the desire of the summer katydid, with its "no holds barred wing-fiddling rapture" in "To *Pterophylla Camellipholia** at the Winter Solstice";



to the ghazal in "Sarabande," in which the speaker's remembered child-self becomes "a grown woman, / a katydid tuning her wings to the pitch of her mountain." The katydids too are female; their song of passion and desire must be tuned to the realities of the unmoving, uncompromising mountain. The section draws to a close with "Meditation Before Falling," which doubles as a meditation on falling asleep as well as on falling itself through Byer's careful use of title and line break, and with the book's almost-central poem, "Three for My Trail Guide." In this three-part poem divided among native mountain plants, the poet remembers hiking with her husband.

More urban poets might be tempted to find the hiking couple pastoral. In this poem, though, a non-human nature which is unnamed, and cannot be named and categorized – a lichen that is as “stubborn” as the falling woman of “Household” – “has already claimed” the summit toward which the human couple struggle. The ravens wait ominously above the second section’s star grass. And the third plant of the triptych, galax, one of the Southern Appalachians’ most distinctive indigenous plants, releases its carrion-scent as the speaker squats to urinate in the bushes,

... the breath

of an old woman lowering herself
to her chamber pot . . .

....

... The scent
of her following me.

It is difficult to be quaint or sentimental about mountains, or the threat of old age which the galax invokes, while squatting among the ticks and the poison ivy, with one’s pants down.

Byer assembled her collections with great care for their sequence and arc, often putting aside strong poems if they interfered with the book’s movement. The galax-scent of the old woman follows the speaker from the past into both the speaker’s present and the book’s third segment. Part III begins with “Prana,” an elegy for a friend. The poet declines to blame her rebellious memory for forgetting he’s gone, “refusing to let you no longer be

/ here” (one of Byer’s deft and effective line breaks.) Rather, she chooses to be present to her ghosts: “My door’s always open. Threshold // a scatter of marigold petals,” flowers for the dead, which re-voke the earlier “Wake,” when the poet looking upon a Mexican wake turns away from “so much exposed / death.” This time, though, she welcomes the ghosts, becoming herself a “Bottle / of Sangiovese. Uncorked. Breathing.” At this second volta of the book, the speaker still breathes but lives increasingly in the presence of those who do not. She follows this assertion with “Each Morning,” set in Budapest:

... Each morning

the sky opened as to a captive
released after years of imprisonment.
Where had we been all our lives?

....

I heard words turn to flesh again.
I heard my heart beating,
(as if a jewel in my chest
begged for safekeeping)
sounding its two unmistakable words,
this life,
this life.

This life. It is the poet’s literal and figurative and spiritual answer to “so much exposed / death.” It balances death without cancelling it. This life is familial, quotidian, fleshly, ruthless. Thus, the first poems of the third segment are bleak, full of the weight of flesh and property: a campus clock tower singing its “gone song” to all that’s gone, closing doors in “Noon,” “loss crashing down / around people at home” in

“Not at Home.” In “Diagnostic,” which documents an unknown figure’s testing for dementia, the one diagnosed is finally left with only the memory of a childhood failure to make a pencil work “right,” suggesting a grim pun on a scarring inability to “write.”

The turn into the book’s final ten pages comes with another poem memorializing family, considering an aunt lying in her coffin in “Study in Red, With Lipstick.” It’s tempting to wonder why Byer, a consummate arranger and placer, seated this poem here – it would seem to belong in Part I – except that this is the point at which she begins to consistently re- envision the shrinking, shriveling narrative of death, “(So long in the grave / the voice shrivels to a wind / down a drainpipe.)” She does this by first remembering and documenting, and then by seeking to name the shade of red of the corpse’s lipstick. To do so, she must draw upon her own skill and experience – the ones she has honed in this life – with naming.

I open my poem-sack,
and lift out the golden tube
wherein a scarlet nib waits
to inscribe on your lips
a shade conjured from sheer
disbelief and infused
with no more
than the balm of a name.
Neither Hope.
Nor Hereafter.
But this gleam
of *Wide Awake Red.*

The “poem-sack” purse contains a gold-tubed lipstick that transmutes into a pen (“a scarlet nib”); it writes (“inscribes”) on the lips

of the dead a new shade of red, a different name. This is the awakening of the dead in Byer's poems: not in hope of any hereafter, but in the wide-awake presence, memory, and imagination of the still-alive in the still-now. And it is the immediate presence of literal death that forces this awakening, "conjured from sheer disbelief." *Conjured*: speaking and naming remain acts of magic, performed in the face of death without the aid of traditional belief.

In this last section of *Trawling the Silences*, Byer also includes two uses of a variant sestina form in which the stanzas, with their repeating end word, are five lines long rather than six. In "Gone," her choices are "gone," "over," "forever," "inhuman," and "moving." Here the poet meditates upon the emptiness of the word and its sound,

one word that wipes out the world, that inhuman
moan, that animal sound meaning over
and under the lives that we love waits this other forever,

in which we are swallowed up, the gilded forever
of Heaven, that monstrous contraption that never moves,
the streets of gold, angels, God on his throne over
all of us judging our flesh, our poor flesh, gone
in the twinkling of an eye. I hate that inhuman

deity, weighing our blood in the balance . . .

I want the wind to move
inside our spirits forever,
the word *gone* forever gone
from our mouths.

Here, the magic of word and sound, though powerful, do not undo the *gone-ness* of gone. Indeed, the speaker can say at this point not only that *this is it*, earth is good enough for her, but that she actively hates this concept of an inhuman, fleshless God sitting in judgement upon dying flesh. She prefers the unpersonified wind of the living world. When the musical *The Book of Mormon* offers a song entitled "Fuck God," it's transgressive, sufficiently unheard-of enough to draw national attention. When an ageing mountain woman voices such a sentiment, it is more likely to be simply unheard.

This collection's final poem, "Come Evening," is a tailpiece positioned outside the book's three segments. With its farm landscape, its crickets, its oats, it may evoke for readers Jane Kenyon's famous "Let Evening Come."³ However, this

Byer poem offers more active and immediate consolations, such as they are, than the Biblical double negative of Kenyon's "God does not leave us comfortless." This poem finds its comforts not in God, but in and on earth: Come evening "*the earth lifts her spirits*" from exhaust and exhaustion, "*breathes forth the truth of her burial grounds*" and of origins, her veins becoming "*the wild native yeast of her landscape, / its kneading of weather and soil bringing increase / or famine.*" Here, earth's truth is a burial ground, which the earth of course literally is; mourning doves fall silent, a woman's voice calls "don't tarry too long" (here on earth, perhaps?). Both earth's and woman's kitchen light kindles, while the "*gone faces*" wait around her spread table, and her fire, like magma, glows in her hearth. Earth is indeed a woman, but the book has by this point established rural women as ruthless, wide-awake realists, whose domestic lives includes bloodbaths. But, oh, that table, that hearth. Table, hearth, rural mountains, women's work: the grounds upon which Byer's work could be ignored and excluded by those who imagined such material to be quaint, simplistic, womanly. R.T. Smith added, in his elegy, that

Unfortunately, too many people (readers and professors, too) were reluctant to see Appalachia as the cutting edge and the heart of the country. . . . Her first couple of books received national prizes – the AWP Book Award, the Lamont – but after that, she was often pigeonholed as a shawl woman, a porch voice, a kitchen healer.

But the work of this book, and the work of Kay Byer's life, is difficult, ruthless, and uncompromising – like the work of making bread rise with the wild yeast in the air, like working soil in pursuit of a perilous sustenance, like striking fire from wet matches. It eschews what is commonly understood by words like religion to confront "*the bloodbath of hogs I, her daughter, watched / butchered.*" It recognizes earth's veins as painfully "*varicose,*" and the dividing line between this side and the other as "*barbwire.*"

Trawling the Silences is full of battles – not the kind the novelist in tight jeans so romantically idealized, but the kind none of us can escape, the kind all of us eventually lose. If you read it, tread carefully down her road. Watch out for the barbwire. Stay awake. ■

³ "Come Evening" was originally published as "Communion" in *NCLR Online 2017*; Jane Kenyon, *Let Evening Come: Poems* (Graywolf Press, 1990).

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY TORI REYNOLDS***Herd Animal*

The old horse stands in the burned out field,
 one hock camped like the bent leg of a folding table,
 the anvil of his head sliding off the end
 of his neck, nose suspended just above the dirt.

With eyes half-closed, he dozes.
 The rising sun seeps up his knobbed legs,
 blankets the rack of his ribs, then passes over his rump
 and runs off his terra cotta-colored tail into the red clay,

creating a pool of blue shadow beside him.
 Here is his only companion for years.
 This darker double,

who lifts its head in greeting when he does,
 who shuffles towards the round bale of hay
 and shares a silent mouthful,
 who whisks flies from its barrel with a cool tail.

For years, not a whicker or whinny
 reaches the dead radar of his ears,
 until this evening, when the crack
 of a rifle calls to him from far pastures.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Pastoral (oil on board, 72x96) by Foozhan Kashkooli

TORI REYNOLDS lives in Hillsborough, NC. She has recently had poems published in *Cave Wall*, *Greensboro Review*, *Southwest Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Chautauqua Literary Review*, *Pembroke Magazine* and in anthologies published by Jacar Press and Eno River Press. In 2016, her poems were finalists for the James Applewhite Poetry Prize (and published in *NCLR* 2017) and in the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Competition. She completed a residency at the Vermont Studio Center in 2012 and the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in 2017 and 2018.

FOOZHAN KASHKOOLI received her MFA from Winthrop University and her BA from Queens University of Charlotte. Her art has been exhibited in the Elizabeth Dunlap Patrick Gallery and Lewandowski Student Gallery at Winthrop University, the Loading Dock Gallery, the Gettys Art Center, the Hart Witzen Gallery in Charlotte, and in the Elder Gallery as part of the Carolina's Got Art, Salon 2015 Competition. She is currently working as the Gallery Director at Met Contemporary. To learn more about this artist and see more samples of her work, visit her [website](#).

THE CLOSE HARMONY WE SING

a review by Robert M. West

Shelby Stephenson. *Our World: Poems*. Press 53, 2018.

—. *Nin's Poem*. St. Andrew's University Press, 2018.

—. *Paul's Hill: Homage to Whitman*. Sir Walter Press, 2017.

ROBERT M. WEST's poems, essays, and book reviews have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Southern Literary Journal*, *Southern Cultures*, *Poetry*, and *NCLR*. He has also published two poetry chapbooks, *Out of Hand* (Scienter Press, 2007), and *Convalescent* (Finishing Line Press, 2011). He has an MA and PhD in English and Comparative Literature from UNC Chapel Hill and a BA in English from Wake Forest University. He is a Professor of English at Mississippi State University, where he is an Associate Editor for *Mississippi Quarterly*. He is also the editor of the two-volume *Complete Poems of A.R. Ammons* (W.W. Norton, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019).

SHELBY STEPHENSON served as Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 2014 to 2016. His honors include the North Carolina Award for Literature and induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. His book, *Elegies for Small Game* (Press 53, 2016), has been awarded the Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry. Stephenson received his BA from UNC Chapel Hill where he studied law, then went on to earn his PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was an English Professor at UNC Pembroke from 1978 until he retired in 2010.

After some forty years teaching as an English professor at UNC Pembroke and working over the same period as editor of the invaluable *Pembroke Magazine*, in 2010 Shelby Stephenson retired – sort of. Since then he's written and seen into publication several books and chapbooks of poems, including *Playing Dead* (2011), *Play My Music Anyhow* (2013), *Steal Away* (2014), *The Hunger of Freedom* (2016), and *Elegies for Small Game* (2016). In 2014 his contributions to letters were recognized with induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. Later that year he was appointed the state's poet laureate, an honor that comes with responsibilities: the laureate is expected to serve as a public advocate for reading and writing poetry, and during his term Stephenson gave public readings, interviewed with the press, visited schools, taught writing workshops, and spoke at writers' conferences. All that isn't everyone's idea of retirement.

For decades Stephenson's wife Linda, nicknamed "Nin," has worked at his side, reading and helping him edit his poems. She routinely traveled with him to readings and conferences, where often they performed sets of country and bluegrass songs – him on guitar, her on ukulele, and both singing in beautiful and affecting harmony. (The two have recorded some fine albums.) In recent years, though, her health hasn't allowed for the same degree of partnership: in 2014, no longer able to walk, she moved to an extended-care home. One thing that ties together Stephenson's latest three books – *Paul's Hill: Homage to Whitman*, *Our World*, and *Nin's Poem* – is

testimony to the persistence of love after fifty-plus years of marriage, despite the declines that come with age. That said, the three books, though published in quick succession, are quite different from one another, and they deserve to be treated separately.

Paul's Hill, in eastern North Carolina's Johnston County, is the Stephenson family home. It's where the poet was born, and where he returned to live in 1996, in his late fifties. Stephenson has always taken family, place, and the sense of home as subject matter, so the first part of the title *Paul's Hill: Homage to Whitman* isn't surprising. The subtitle, though, may be: there's not much tradition of Southern poets reaching back to Whitman as inspiration and example. Of course that fact leaves an opportunity for a Southern poet to do something original – not the easiest thing for any poet to do, late in the second decade of the twenty-first century. (Anyone who thinks reaching backward is antithetical to originality must never have read T. S. Eliot or James Joyce.) Stephenson's earlier masterpiece, *Fiddlededee*, first published in 2001 and recently reprinted by Press 53, is itself strongly modeled after the work of an eastern North Carolinian twelve years Stephenson's senior, A.R. Ammons. For *Paul's Hill: Homage to Whitman*, which like *Fiddlededee* is one long poem, the model is clearly not just Whitman in general, but specifically "Song of Myself." The use here of long lines and catalogues – and the powerfully inclusive spirit motivating both – are found in any number of Whitman's poems, but the length of *Paul's Hill* and its division into fifty-two numbered sections point to the good gray poet's longest song.

The same can be said of the poem's shifting train of thought: it's easy enough to say that *Paul's Hill* meditates on the poet's family and home-place, but there's neither a central narrative nor a central argument. One thought – a memory or an idea – leads to another, which leads to another, and so on, and it all hangs together in much the same way that "Song of Myself" does. Which is to say that some readers will find it too unfocused, while others will find it a wondrous performance, a moving symphony of memory, wisdom, and generous vision.

For readers familiar with Whitman's poem, Stephenson's homage offers an additional pleasure. Now and then, Stephenson echoes "Song of Myself" not just by adopting its structures, techniques, and inclusive attitudes, but by echoing specific passages. These echoes pop up in places rather different from where their antecedents appear in Whitman's poem, and that makes their appearances surprising and so all the more delightful. In section 9 of *Paul's Hill*, Stephenson writes, "Perfectionists and whiners want my right to pen syllables. / I'm left with their trip-ups, dribs, and snivel"; Whitman's readers will think of his poem's section 4, which begins, "Trippers and askers surround me, / People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation, / The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new."¹ When, in his own next line, Stephenson tells us, "My son asks *What is wind?* – moving his fingers toward the lake," Whitmanians will recall his poem's section 6, which starts, "A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands." Whereas Whitman declares in his section 52, "I sound my barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world," Stephenson ends his section 45 by "yell[ing] as far as I can – *Hellooooo!*"

The differences between the original text and the echoes invite consideration. For instance, in section 15 of his poem, Whitman describes many very different people at work:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane
whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their
Thanksgiving dinner,

The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a
strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and
harpoon are ready

Many lines later he concludes by declaring that "of these one and all I weave the song of myself." In section 20 of his own poem, Stephenson reels off a similar catalogue of various types of people (plus a few objects), but, rather than claiming those people as artistic material, he sees them as people he wants to represent and champion:

Why do you lift your hand?
For the farmer who raises cattle,
For the tobacco-farmer at the mailbox, removing the
government's buy-out plan,
For the builder in his pickup,
For the crop-duster in his plane scudding low, spraying
cotton to kill the boll-weevils,
For the gins no longer ginning, abandoned,
For the orange tarp on the machine-harvested cotton,
For the pickers in graves, their fingers extending death's
soiling
Runs for moles in cemeteries grown-over with sawbriars,
For slaves who left society's shun for half-shares and less,
For farm-wives whose flour-hands sprout field-peas on
tables heavy with smells,
For the unborn babies under their aprons,
For the children.

Whitman's catalogue is longer, and it deserves praise for its recognition of the variety of Americans' ways of life, but it lacks the appealing selflessness of Stephenson's. In "Song of Myself" and elsewhere, Whitman makes himself out to be a prophet – an exalted figure with biblical resonance – but Stephenson casts himself as something lowlier, as an advocate or a spokesman.

Paul's Hill is a poem that invites and deserves extended commentary, and no doubt it will receive that; here I'll touch on just one more point. In "Song of Myself," Whitman's use of the pronoun "you" is rather slippery: often it refers to the reader, but he also uses it in apostrophes to the sun, the sea, the wind, the earth, groups of people, individual characters he's invented, his own soul, and so on. At times Stephenson is clearly addressing any reader, as when he asks in section 11, "Have you succeeded in making more money than you need? / It is grand to go into something else. / Beat the drum, play the pipe." At

¹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," from the 1891-1892 "deathbed" edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In *Whitman's Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (Library of America, 1982)

others, he addresses particular people (including July, a slave his ancestors owned), but sometimes a particular-sounding “you” goes unnamed:

Who but we should open our throats to the world and
 who but we should be One,
 Walking into your garden, beyond the barn where hay-
 tongues laze,
 Where the female fox froze with her little ones s
 nuggling hard?
 The wild-flowers widen our desires, yours and mine, the
 stakes rusty, waiting,
 Not far from the throngs steaming into stores to buy gro-
 ceries for Thanksgiving.
 Tables wait for families; still you are the one nearest me
 and farthest.

....

Look, I said, a red-tailed hawk, and you turned aside, your
 profile blurring the ridge

....

Your eyes come back to me, my wish to see you more
 often. (from section 18)

....

Admiring your eyes, I walk away and turn toward
 your shadow.

We leave the sick-room; memory doubles for our
 coming back,

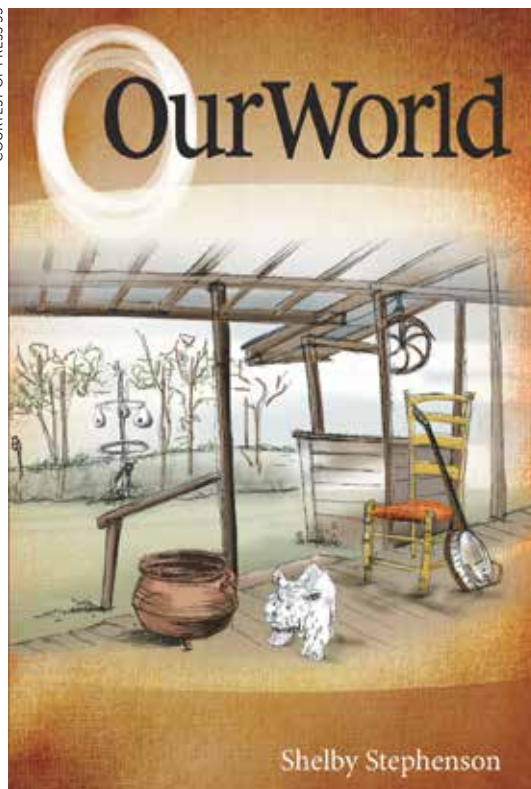
The close harmony we sing. (section 22)

Thinking about such passages, we’d do well to note the poem’s dedication, which reads, “to *Nin*.” John Stuart Mill famously wrote that poetry seems written not so much to be heard as to be *overheard*; in such passages we seem to be doing just that, eavesdropping on the poet’s private talk to his beloved.

Paul’s Hill: Homage to Whitman is handsomely printed and includes many fine illustrations by the poet’s son, Jacob “Jake” Stephenson, whose artwork also graces the covers of *Our World* and *Nin’s Poem*. *Paul’s Hill* also boasts an introduction by Fred Chappell that’s both engaging and helpful.

In the name of full disclosure, I should say that I read *Our World* in manuscript and provided a brief comment for the back cover: “Shelby Stephenson’s rhapsodic, kaleidoscopic *Our World* testifies both to the blessings of longevity and to the frailties of age, both to the joys of long memory and to the facts of forgetting. In these poems, past and present are equally vivid: see

COURTESY OF PRESS 53



“The Mother’s Tale,” for instance, or “Flummoxed & Bumfuzzled.” And against the most painful of human changes, he sets the constancy of nature’s cycles, as in “Walk into Spring” and “Songbirds.” Once again, Stephenson seems about the liveliest poet living.” Having more space here to discuss the book, and having read it again as published, I can expand and add to that assessment.

Our World collects sixty-two poems, most of them clearly addressed to Linda; the more you read the book, the more you realize the title’s “our” refers primarily to the two of them. (The volume’s dedication is “to *Nin* // and to *Fred and Susan Chappell*,” but the Chappells aren’t otherwise invoked.) Most of the poems are less than one page long and none continues past a third; thirty-two are sonnet-length or shorter. This is a book of work that’s as compact as *Paul’s Hill* is expansive. And many of the poems aren’t compact just in terms of their brevity: they’re dense and knotty, sounding compacted. Sometimes this seems a consequence of the author’s occasional use of metrical, rhyming forms, including sonnets (such as “Our World,” “For Your Eyes,” “Always

There”), rhymed quatrains (as in “Empty Shelves Song” and “Poem”), and even terza rima (in “Little Farm Dogs”).

Some of the densest, most difficult poems resemble those by the seventeenth-century “metaphysical” poets John Donne, Abraham Cowley, Edward Taylor, and others. One such, “Lament,” expresses the poet’s grief over the current necessity of his and his wife’s separateness:

I love you more to venture that I love
 Midst trouble and fatigue; yet I know not
 An alternative to quicken our peace
 Intensified by state of health and lack
 Of Fortune’s blooming zest –
 Embraces, warm charms – divine –
 The flowering stars–bone-blossoming breast –
 And soul – as you give all,
 To live for mornings after night’s falling
 Truth, separation’s misery, silence.

There’s wit there, not just in terms of what’s said, but in *how* it’s said: the sly rhyme of “all” and the first syllable of “falling”; the alliteration and rhyme of “blooming zest” with “bone-blossoming breast”; the near rhyme of “warm charms” and that of “charms” and “stars”; the surprise of “quicken our peace” rather than “pace”; and the shift there in line 3 from the iambic pentameter of lines 1 and 2 to a line with just as many syllables but only three stresses, thereby emphasizing the “quicken[ing].” We might think “midst” sounds archaic, but poetry shouldn’t always have to sound like current speech: after all, English gave up “thou” and “thee” long before Wordsworth and Keats used them in poems we regard as masterpieces. Too, some of Stephenson’s work in this formalist vein might draw criticism for its metrical irregularity, but the metaphysicals themselves drew such complaints, most notably from Samuel Johnson, who wrote that “instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear.”² Yet it’s safe to say that their poems have a larger readership today than Johnson’s own, and few (if any) of the best poets and critics today would ask a poem – even a metrical one – to ticktock with the precision of a metronome.

Not all the work gathered here is metrical, rhyming, and/or difficult. One of the most memorable

poems is the winsome and amusingly titled “Flummoxed & Bumfuzzled”:

When I am not with you I hear people say
 Where is she who sings with you
 And I look aside and another so lovely appears,
 Two images which shift back and forth
 And one brings me orange slices on a plate
 And I want to call my mother.

Again, the implied audience is Linda (“she who sings with you”). What a surprise and delight that last line is, as the poet’s sudden vision of his wife as a young woman recalls just as vividly his youthful feelings about her.

That’s one of several poems in which the past phases into the present. Another is “The Mother’s Tale,” which begins with a visit to his mother’s grave:

I walked away from the plot she sure-god
 Did not prepare for anything she’d plant,
 Her memory leaving her so she could
 Not get up herself, flat in Sunnybrook,
 A name she would approve, since she believed
 Every hyped word in her *Southern Living*.
 I could hear her voice, standing at the sink.

“I reckon this kitchen’s been good to me,
 And life, too, since I’ve cut crinkly patterns
 Out for dresses for me and Maytyle Rose
 And you boys: I made your shirts, darned your socks.
 I’ve kept my Paul happy, too, I reckon.
 I told him – would be something else to spend
 Half his dog-money on his family”

Her monologue extends another twenty-one lines and concludes the poem. To Stephenson’s credit, the voice throughout sounds different from his own, so that it lifts from the page as that of an authentic other. (Interestingly, though he commemorates his father in a poem twice as long, “Love Remembered,” he performs there no such ventriloquist act, ascribing to him only one short sentence: “My heels are long as pine-cones.”)

Though *Our World* repeatedly acknowledges difficulties and sadness, it also continually celebrates the endurance of love. An unblinkered happiness survives, as does a bit of oblique optimism. There are many references to night leading into day, and also to winter’s surrender to the season of rebirth. A poem on the birds he feeds, “Songbirds,” is one of the book’s best; it finds Stephenson rejoicing in their

² Samuel Johnson, “Cowley,” *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*, in *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford UP, 1984).

“new songs sung for me,” during “the tail-end of / what, I hope, is the last winter storm.” And in “Walk into Spring,” Stephenson looks ahead to the titular season:

The purple martins will come,
a scout, first,
and I shall walk

out toward the gourds,
unbeknownst to any wings
of purplish-black and those fragile,

clinging toes which look like
ink-stains among the colony.
I am home.

There’s a cheering faith – or perhaps resolve – behind that “shall.” Though the poem never mentions Linda, it definitely belongs in this collection, which could just as well have been titled *Faith and Resolve*.

T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* includes several scenes that dramatize or hint at failed or failing relationships between women and men. Part II, “A Game of Chess,” includes a scene between the narrator and a woman who seems to be either his wife or a lover. There’s a great deal of tension between them: he seems lost in despair, while she is exasperated by his silence. Here’s one exchange, or rather non-exchange, since his response to her complaints is audible only to us:

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

I think we are in rats’ alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.³

The scene was at least partly inspired by Eliot’s marriage at the time, as he and his wife, Vivienne, were nervous people who seem to have worsened each other’s mental and emotional strain. That said, Vivienne seems not to have objected to her husband’s use of their struggles as artistic material. On the contrary, we know that she read

the poem in draft form and wrote beside this particular scene, not once but three times, the word “wonderful.”⁴

Tom and Vivienne Eliot made a disastrous match, one that ended with his desertion of her once he’d cemented his literary fame. That marriage was quite unlike Shelby and Linda Stephenson’s, which seems deeply loving and has endured for more than half a century. However, the Stephensons *have* had to grapple with a longstanding problem that has led to situations resembling that passage from Eliot. Stephenson describes that problem in a 2015 interview with Negative Capability Press, before *Nin’s Poem* had found a publisher: “I am currently circulating a manuscript Nin helped edit: *Nin’s Poem* it is called now. It is a love story, really, of her life living with what is now called bipolar. That’s a misnomer, for there are variations of moods, sways and circulations, within moods.”⁵ Passages in *Our World* allude to that challenge, but *Nin’s Poem* (dedicated “For Nin”) puts it front and center. Whereas much of the former book bemoans the necessity of their living apart now, the latter one dramatizes the ups and downs of their life together before that.

As the title suggests, *Nin’s Poem* is a single poem, but it’s a good deal shorter than *Paul’s Hill*. Divided into twenty-eight numbered sections, it’s constructed from an interplay of mainly three voices: there’s the poet’s present narration, which is printed in roman type; there’s his voice in the

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN HENSLEY;
COURTESY OF JAKE STEPHENSON



³ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*. In *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, Volume I, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Johns Hopkins UP, 2015).

⁴ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Faber and Faber, 1971).

⁵ S.E.B. Detling, Interview with Shelby Stephenson, *Negative Capability Press* 25 Dec. 2015: [web](#).

past, as directed at Nin (Linda), printed in italics with quotation marks; and there's her voice, which is printed in italics *without* quotation marks. The beginning of section 2 poignantly demonstrates that interplay. Nin speaks first, then the poet in the past, then the poet in the present:

*It was Silence from not being able to speak
that terrified me the most.
Two people living in the same house,
but only one was "there" –
the pressure, the unrelenting frustration.
You would come home day after day, week after week,
month after month to the*

SILENCE:

"Talk to me!"

"Hello!"

It follows me, your sadness.

But, as the poet knows, Nin's silence isn't the result of mere sadness: her depressed state is a medical condition that can render her actually incapable of speech. The similarities between the passage above and the one quoted earlier from *The Waste Land* are worth noting, but so are the differences, including the gender reversal, since here it's the wife who isn't speaking, and it's the husband who expresses frustration over the lack of any response. (The communication represented is so intimate we might again recall Mill's idea that poetry seems made to be overheard.)

Depression also leaves her spinning her wheels, unable to complete simple and routine household activities. We learn this early on, at the beginning of section 4:

*I walk through the kitchen and watch you staring
at a grocery list forever unmade.*

*I don't trust my pencil to write a list.
I list something and then don't want it.
I don't trust the stove to cook if I'm not watching it.*

The October sun colors a quest.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JANI HENSLEY.
COURTESY OF JANE STEPHENSON

You shall be well again.
The packhouse weeds turn.
The bluebirds flit onto the starling pole.

Will you sing again?
You sing harmony sharp as the tongues of pineneedles.

What else can I say?
I go down in the valley to pray
and remember the good old days.

No sooner does Stephenson express confidence that she'll be better ("You shall . . ."), than he backs off from that certainty ("Will you . . . ?"). The "quest" mentioned could be the enormous task such list-making has become for her, or we could interpret it more broadly as their ongoing joint quest for her wellness.

It's important to note that Stephenson has cast himself here neither as a long-suffering husband to be pitied nor as a heroic one to be admired. His self-portrait is that of a man who at times has felt driven to his wits' end, sometimes managing and sometimes failing to be understanding and helpful. His portrait of his wife is that of a woman who has often found herself out of control, in both the ups and the downs of her illness – sometimes for long stretches – but who has also tried to be understanding and helpful, as far as she's been able. The poem is neither self-serving nor saccharine, and it finds a brilliant conclusion I won't spoil by quoting here. *Nin's Poem* is a fascinating and moving book, and a worthy addition to the poetry of illness, mental and otherwise. ■

TAKING STEPS TO UNDERSTAND JIM GRIMSLEY AND RANDALL KENAN

a review by Gary Richards

James A. Crank. *Understanding Randall Kenan*. University of South Carolina Press, 2019.

David Deutsch. *Understanding Jim Grimsley*. University of South Carolina Press, 2019.

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. Read his interview with and essay on Jim Grimsley in *NCLR* 2009.

JAMES A. CRANK is an Associate Professor of American literature and culture at the University of Alabama, a former National Humanities Center Summer Fellow, co-host of the podcast *The Sound and the Furious*, and a contributor to the BBC as well as the PBS television show *The Great American Read*. His essays have appeared in *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee* and *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals since the 1970s*.

The University of South Carolina Press's longstanding series *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* functions as a wonderful asset for a range of readers in that, as series editor Linda Wagner-Martin explains in her preface to each volume, the series offers "guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers" (ix) and thus fills something of a unique niche within general contemporary literary criticism. The volumes in the series are far more substantive and well-documented than introductory guides like those offered by *CliffsNotes*, *SparkNotes*, and countless sites on the internet, yet the volumes are written to be significantly more accessible than traditional academic scholarship, which often suffers from difficult jargon, ponderous syntax, and a presumed familiarity with the densities of literary theory. Seeking something of a middle ground, the books in this series are written by noted literary scholars in the field, provide helpful contextualizing biographical information about the selected authors, systematically survey the entirety of their literary works and delineate recurring themes and connections, and offer up-to-date bibliographies of the literary criticism done on those works, all presented via user-friendly prose and organization.

For all of these assets, the series, with its strategic decisions about form and content, may create minor frustrations for some readers, not least of

which is the nagging feeling that the studies might include more substantive analysis and less summary. This holds true for the two recent volumes in the series that take up North Carolina writers Jim Grimsley and Randall Kenan. David Deutsch's *Understanding Jim Grimsley* and James A. Crank's *Understanding Randall Kenan* are fantastic introductions to these two lynchpin contemporary Southern writers and offer whip-smart analyses of their works; however, readers may most productively approach the two volumes as means to whet their appetites and impetuses to proceed from these volumes to the more sustained analyses listed in the bibliographies or, better still, to the works of the authors themselves, which include some of the most important fiction in contemporary US literature, such as Grimsley's *Dream Boy* and Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, as well as a range of intriguing writings in other genres.

That said, one of the signal accomplishments of the two volumes, beyond simply drawing overdue critical attention to Grimsley and Kenan, is, with the volumes' near-simultaneous publications, to invite readers to see the two writers in relation to one another. When one does so, parallels immediately emerge. Both men were born into working-class families from small-town rural North Carolina – Rocky Mount and Wallace, respectively – where Protestant Christianity saturated the men's childhoods and indelibly

DAVID DEUTSCH earned his PhD at the Ohio State University in 2011, having previously earned his MA and BA from the University of Georgia. He joined the Department of English at The University of Alabama in 2011. His research has been supported by an Institute of Historical Research Mellon Fellowship, as well as grants from various other venues. He is working on a book tentatively titled *Bad Beatitudes: Queer Angels in Post-World War II American Fiction and Culture*.

impacted their later writings. Both were educated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where their early literary efforts were molded by the likes of Max Steele, Doris Betts, and others. Both have come out as gay and have centralized issues of queer existence in their writings, just as both have been drawn to and written magical realism, fantasy, and science fiction. And, as they have achieved critical and popular success over their variegated careers, both men have become literary mentors in their own rights, teaching creative writing at a range of academic institutions.

Extensive as these parallels are, however, Grimsley and Kenan are no clones of one another. For instance, almost a decade separates the two men's births, with Grimsley born in 1955 and Kenan in 1963, and a coming of age in the 1970s has typically differed significantly from one in the 1980s. Moreover, although both writers have consistently explored race in Southern and US culture, Grimsley has done so as a European American and Kenan as an African American. Born with hemophilia, Grimsley has also negotiated that disease throughout his life, including its role in his contracting HIV in 1984. Often writing from an autobiographical perspective in his novels, he has recently turned to overt memoir with *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood* (2015) whereas Kenan's autobiographical writ-

ings have been few, although his essays are often autobiographically inflected, and Crank reminds us that Kenan's nonfiction *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (1999) ultimately "becomes less a volume that situates American blackness in the dawning of a new millennium and more a book about Kenan himself" (75).

Finally, the arcs of the two men's careers are a study in contrasts. As Deutsch documents, Grimsley has been extraordinarily prolific in multiple genres, to date producing nine novels, a collection of short stories, a collection of plays, and the mentioned memoir, among other writings; however, despite this steady accretion, public and academic recognition has been somewhat slow to emerge. On the other hand, Kenan's literary production has been significantly less than Grimsley's, but he burst with great – and justified – fanfare onto the literary landscape with the novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and the short story collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* (1992) and, with these two works, almost immediately secured an acknowledged position for himself within canons of contemporary African American, Southern, gay, and US literature. (He is included in Norton's *The Literature of the American South*, for instance, whereas Grimsley is not.) Kenan's subsequent nonfiction has not had the impact of his fiction, largely because of genre reception, one suspects,

COURTESY OF CHOWAN UNIVERSITY



but Crank ends his study – perhaps a bit anxiously – by noting that “Kenan has a novella that is soon to appear in press, manuscript work to finalize a novel (currently being expanded), and countless other works that will doubtless appear over the next several decades” (92).

It is these differences in Grimsley's and Kenan's careers that seem implicitly to shape both the content and the form of the studies written by Deutsch and Crank, with Deutsch's volume on Grimsley ultimately emerging as more substantive than Crank's volume on Kenan in no small part because Deutsch simply has more major primary writings with which to work. Deutsch also crafts greater cohesion to his study by organizing it around central sustained theses, neatly summarized in his conclusion: Grimsley “insists on a pragmatic optimism,

ABOVE Jim Grimsley accepting the 2018 Hobson Prize at Chowan University, Murfreesboro, NC, 2 Apr. 2018 (Read more in *NCLR Online* 2018.)

on a need to critique received traditions so as to understand and to improve them, and on a recognition of the values and struggles of those members of society who too often get overlooked" (123). To further this argument, Deutsch systematically progresses through Grimsley's work while also suggesting a hierarchy of genres, moving in the main chapters that follow the first one, focused on biography, from novels (chapters 2, 3, and the majority of chapter 4) to drama (chapter 4) to fantasy and science fiction (chapter 5). Deutsch first adroitly analyzes the autobiographical Tote-Crell trilogy – *Winter Birds* (1992 in German translation; 1994), *My Drowning* (1997), and *Comfort and Joy* (1999) – that explores the violent, traumatic lives of gay Dan Crell and his family with "bittersweet optimism" (49) before then devoting a separate chapter to the critically acclaimed *Dream Boy* (1995), focused on "the spiritual, natural, and psychological pleasures and traumas of a burgeoning romance between two adolescent boys" (51).

The novels *Boulevard* (2002) and *Forgiveness* (2007) receive similar close analysis, but Deutsch gives short shrift to Grimsley's drama, analyzing only *Mr. Universe*, first performed in 1987, thus reinforcing how forcefully Grimsley has been understood as a novelist at the expense of his work in other forms. In contrast, Deutsch devotes a lengthy final chapter to Grimsley's fantasy and science fiction, which makes for challenging reading unless



COURTESY OF ANDREW MOREHEAD

one has an investment in these genres, even if Deutsch convincingly traces how the novels *Kirith Kirin* (2000), *The Ordinary* (2004), and *The Last Green Tree* (2006) resemble the Tote-Crell narratives in featuring characters who "must learn to forge new domestic spaces that inform their understanding of the choices they have made, could make, and will make to attain a qualified happiness despite the force of often hostile environments in which they are simultaneously insiders and outcasts" (98).

Crank has a more difficult task when taking up Kenan, a fiction writer whose last major fiction was published in 1992; however, when surveying the biography and analyzing Kenan's novel and short stories, *Understanding Randall Kenan* soars. Consistently appreciative of Kenan's work, Crank rehearses in the second and third chapters of the volume the processes of writing and publishing "the bold and rapturous" (14) *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, which includes refashioned early work done on the novel. Crank's subsequent analyses of this fiction brilliantly

relay the complexities of Kenan's form and content, such as his dexterous play with magical realism, his sustained critique of community, his use of doubling, his "explorations of queer mutation" (30), and the problems that arise with the "foreclosure of intimacy" (59), among other elements. Especially valuable is Crank's smart insistence on reading Jimmy Greene as meriting equal attention as Horace Cross in *A Visitation of Spirits*. Perhaps most significant, however, Crank identifies in Kenan's fiction a preoccupation that parallels that which Deutsch finds in Grimsley's: "Like *Visitation*, *LTDBTD* works through the lens of tragedy to explicate the way in which frustrations over identity can ultimately trap characters in a cycle of endless suffering" (54).

Unlike Deutsch's study, however, *Understanding Randall Kenan* often errs on the side of summary at the expense of analysis, especially once Crank moves beyond *A Visitation of Spirits*. For instance, he devotes fifteen pages to summarizing the twelve stories of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* before offering thirteen pages of

separate analysis, occasionally quoting passages included in the summaries.

The same holds true of the fourth and final chapter, "Brother Baldwin and the Shadow of Tims Creek," which catalogs Kenan's literary production since the 1990s. This includes not only longer works, such as *Walking on Water*, but also lesser known – and less substantive – pieces, such as Kenan's ambivalent review of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, released the same year as *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, and "The Rooster, the Rattlesnake, and the Hydrangea Bush," his introduction to *The Carolina Table* (2016), a collection of food narratives by North Carolina writers. With the exception of his analysis of *Walking on Water*, Crank's treatment

of these writings feels rushed. Useful analyses do emerge out of these quick sketches, such as his careful delineation of how important Kenan holds James Baldwin to be as a literary influence, particularly as reflected in Kenan's recurring attention to Baldwin in his writings, such as the essay collection *A Fire This Time* (2007), and his decision to shape his career along the lines of Baldwin's as a public intellectual. Likewise, although Crank refrains from analyzing Kenan's review of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, perhaps because it positions two major queer contemporary writers in opposition to one another, it provides a jumping off point for persons intrigued by this very tension. However, even Crank's inclusion of two appendices – the twenty-five-page "Writing B(l)ack: An

Interview with Randall Kenan" and the three-page "Tims Creek Genealogy" that charts the relationships of Kenan's fictional characters – continues a pattern of providing valuable information that is not fully integrated within the larger study.

On the whole, though, these two volumes do precisely the valuable work demanded by this series: they make smart understandings of the literary works of important contemporary writers available – and, more crucial, accessible – to a range of readers. Moreover, the publication of these volumes marks tangible steps in the overdue canonization of Jim Grimsley and the ongoing importance of Randall Kenan, and, for this, general readers and academics alike owe a debt of gratitude to David Deutsch and Andy Crank. ■

"ASK MIKE": MICHAEL HILL RECEIVES CRITTENDEN AWARD

adapted from remarks by Kevin Cherry

"Ask Mike" is a phrase heard often at 109 East Jones Street, home to the Office of Archives and History, for the last few decades. I know, because I was one of the people who has used this specific phrase over and over to division directors, historical interpreters, historians, curators, archivists, historic preservationists, board members, support group representatives, reporters, members of the general public, and probably most of you in this room. "Ask Mike." For more than thirty-five years, we have asked that son of apple growers, Henderson County's Michael Ray Hill, questions about our past as he served the people of North Carolina in the Office of Archives and History's "Research Branch," now the "Office of Historical Research and Publications." Mike retired as the Supervisor of this office on April 30, 2019. And, yes, we threw an apple-themed retirement party.

The Office of Research and Publications is, really, the core of the original work of our agency. In keeping with the legislation that created the North Carolina



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHEW WAENER. COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

KEVIN CHERRY is the deputy secretary of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and Director of the Office of Archives and History.

ABOVE Michael Hill accepting the Crittenden Award at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association meeting in Raleigh, 7 Nov. 2019

Historical Commission in 1903 (now the North Carolina Office of Archives and History), the mission of the Office of Historical Research and Publications is to foster, promote, and encourage study and appreciation of North Carolina's history as a state through research and writing. Throughout his career, Mike Hill has worked tirelessly to fulfill that mission, all in service to the collective memory of North Carolinians and to reaching North Carolinians on their own terms with clearly communicated, accurate stories about the state's past, our past.

Mike earned his BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1976 with a double major in history and journalism, followed by an MA in History from that same institution. But that did not end his education. Few of us have continued to read and study in a graduate seminar-type fashion for decades following our formal education as Mike has continued to do. His reading schedule and methodology is staggering, and he is always pulling from that personal study to inform whatever he might be up to at the moment.

With a lifelong study of North Carolina history, prodigious memory, and precise, straightforward writing, Mike has been involved in too many North Carolina history projects to note. But, I am willing to lay a wager that he is among the most read historians in the state, if for no other reason than his work on the Highway Historical Marker program. Think of all of those people slowing down to read his words every day, all over the state. Our highway historical marker program, among the oldest in the nation, is the state's most visible public history project – and greatly beloved. Mike was the long-time administrator of this program, (1984–2015) and wrote or edited almost a quarter of the 1609 markers that have been erected over the last eighty-five years. These markers describe the events, places, and people that define North Carolina's very identity in an accurate and comprehensive fashion. During Mike's tenure as program administrator, 360 new markers were placed, many dedicated to telling North Carolina stories previously untold or under told. He is particularly proud – and we are greatly appreciative of – his efforts to expand knowledge of the African American experience in North Carolina through our marker program. Mike is legendary for his ability to distill the accurate facts of a complex event or complicated individual

into the pithy language required for our state's large font, limited lettered metal signs, capable of being read in a passing car at highway speed. You try to put a very complicated and nuanced history in only five to six lines of text and twenty-five spaces per line. Now,

try to do that and make ten PhD historians on the marker committee, the local small-town marker sponsors, living relatives or descendants of a marker subject – all of them – content. Not easy. Now, do all of that and maintain a great relationship with DOT Maintenance in each division across the state.

And that is just the marker program.

Mike's work for the State has also included deep involvement in a wide range of historical research in support of other departmental units or in collaboration with those other units, especially the Division of State Historic Sites and for the North Carolina Historical Commission, the agency's policy-setting commission. He has participated in legislatively directed studies such as the 1898 Wilmington Coup study, a research and writing project that involved a great deal of sensitive diplomacy. He has also contributed to feasibility studies for the addition of sites or museums to our department. He has also helped with work around monuments, including the proposed African American Monument on the State Capitol grounds.

And Mike's work on statewide commemorations has been deep. Recent examples include the Bicentennial of the War of 1812, the centennial of North Carolina's role in World War I and the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, as well as the current efforts to mark the centennial of women's suffrage just this year.

Additionally, the Department often called upon his writing skills for a wide variety of public history projects, including contributions to forty-five nominations for National Register of Historic Places in his early career, speeches for agency secretaries, biographies of North Carolina Award recipients, and a multitude of reports on many historic places and entities. He has also written more than a few official proclamations for governors and legislative leaders.

Mike has served as Editor of the *North Carolina Historical Review*, the publication of our department, leading the important and ongoing historiographical work of North Carolina history, and has led the Historical Publications unit with its multitude of digital

**A STERLING EXAMPLE OF HOW ONE MAY
CONTRIBUTE MIGHTILY TO A NOBLE
MISSION OF STATE SERVICE – PRESERVING
AND TELLING THE IMPORTANT STORIES OF
NORTH CAROLINA AND AIDING HIS FELLOW
CITIZENS TO RECALL AND REFLECT ON THE
COMPLICATED HISTORY OF OUR HOME
STATE TO HELP US BETTER UNDERSTAND
OUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS TODAY
WHILE WORKING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE.**

and traditional print publications available for public consumption. At all times, Mike has adhered to and inspired his colleagues to maintain the highest professional and editorial standards.

His passion for our state's history has extended into other examples of service, including many years as the chief organizer of this very event [the annual North Carolina Literary and Historical Association banquet], longtime treasurer of the Historical Society of North Carolina, shepherd of the North Caroliniana Society's book award, and his yeoman's efforts as co-editor of the *North Carolina Gazetteer: A Dictionary of Tar Heel Places and Their History*, revising and expanding the second edition of the *North Carolina Gazetteer* (UNC Press, 2010), adding approximately 1,200 new entries. He is editor of *Guide to North Carolina Highway Historical Markers* (NC Division of Archives & History, 1990, 2001, and 2007) and *The Governors of North Carolina* (NC Division of Archives & History, 2007); and co-author of *Sherman's March Through North Carolina: A Chronology* (NC Division of Archives & History, 1995)

and *The Old North State At War: The North Carolina Civil War Atlas* (NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 2015).

It would be difficult to count all of the Lions Clubs, Rotaries, Dames, Daughters, and other societies he has spoken to over the years – about disturbed graves and the history of their occupants; weird place names, during which he gets to share a few cuss words with his audience; favorite highway marker topics; and others written for the occasion.

In short, Mike Hill's career is a sterling example of how one may contribute mightily to a noble mission of state service: preserving and telling the important stories of North Carolina and aiding his fellow citizens to recall and reflect on the complicated history of our home state to help us better understand our friends and neighbor today while working for a brighter future.

Friends and neighbors, this year's winner of the Christopher Crittenden Memorial Award for lifetime achievement in North Carolina history, the favorite son of Dana, NC, Mike Hill. ■

NORTH CAROLINA POET LAUREATE RECEIVES NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL'S HIGHEST HONOR

In his profile of North Carolina's first African American Poet Laureate, Jaki Shelton Green, Chris Vitiello credits her "literary life" as beginning in church, where her curiosity about the people around her made her "fidgety." Her grandmother's solution was to give Green a tablet and pencils.*

Soon after she was appointed the state's ninth Poet Laureate, Green was named an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellow by the Academy of American Poets. And the honors have continued to pile onto those she had already received, including North Carolina's highest civilian honor, the North Carolina Award for Literature, which was awarded to her by the Governor in 2003, and induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2014.

Last year, *NCLR* published a [story](#) on Green's 2018 R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award, which the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association gives to recognize significant contributions to North Carolina literature, and this year we report that she is the 2019 recipient of the John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities, the North Carolina Humanities Council's most prestigious honor, awarded to "distinguished individuals who strengthen the educational,

cultural and civic life of North Carolinians through the humanities." According to the Council, "Green was recognized for her achievements as a teacher, humanities advocate and ambassador for poetry and the spoken word." Green selected the poet Nikki Finney to give the lecture at her October 2nd award ceremony in Chapel Hill.

Read more about Jaki Shelton Green in Amber Flora Thomas's interview with her in *NCLR* 2016. (Link to the interview's introduction [here](#).) ■



COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

* Chris Vitiello, "The Right Poet," *Walter Magazine* Jan. 2019: [web](#).

ABOVE Jaki Shelton Green accepting the Caldwell Award, Chapel Hill, 2 Oct. 2019

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY GINA MALONE***1970*

An original hobby is emerging as the birth
of a young village near F____. The new town
is to be called Rayfordsville, and Dr. Rayford L. W____
is the owner and originator. (1959)

A minute's worth of memory
of the womanless gloom of a house
that knew me no more than I knew it
is all there is –
my wanting to put fingers on piano keys
despite the dust years-dark upon them,
to hear what music might come out –
my grandmother shaking her head –
clinical sternness in her face –
No.
I was not yet five.

I would be grown before I knew
that it was the faded-grand home of a failed man
she had worked for once as a nurse. We waited
for the end of a beginning too close
on the heels
of my baby brother's birth.

. . . Charges and Accusations which were as follows:
1. That your mental condition renders you unable
safely to practice medicine . . .

I am glad that I have it, this sliver of then,
a memory, as if it matters, to stave off oblivion.
In my middle years, if I let myself be,
I am beset with unknowing for a life
that might have been entwined with mine.
I could drive myself mad
if I pined, if
I manufactured mourning –
belatedly – for what never was
blanketed and held.

GINA MALONE is a native of South Carolina and now writes in the mountains of western North Carolina. She is pursuing her MFA in creative writing at Lenoir-Rhyne University's Thomas Wolfe Center for Narrative in Asheville. Her short stories and flash fiction have won awards in the Charlotte Writers' Club's annual competitions, most recently in 2018 with Wiley Cash as the judge. She was a winner of the Sidney Lanier Poetry Competition in 2012, and, in 2013, she won a North Carolina Press Association award for feature writing. Her poetry has been published in *Poetry South*, *Kalliope: A Journal of Women's Art*, *Anuran*, and *Kakalak*. This is her second time as a finalist for this competition; her previous finalist poems appear in *NCLR Online* 2017.

My mother does not know I grieve
 for then, for now,
 for her, she
 who has to have memories,
 questions, regrets maybe,
 but moreover a bed-made sense of
 having done what she had decided
 must be done.
 I do not ask her anything. I cannot now.
 I said little the time thirty years
 ago when she did talk of it.
 She was cleaning out the closet
 of her mind. A discarding.
 Here's this sadness, her voice said,
 that I have not worn for years.
 What words
 could I summon then,
 with the knowing come suddenly
 upon me, a startling
 form separating from shadow?
 How unfairly I hate a little
 my grandmother, dead now,
 for frowning when I only wanted
 to bring sound into that stillness,
 for babysitting our unawareness,
 for taking us all there that day.
 And my father?
 I will never know what
 he said, what he thought.
 There are holes in my memory
 where he ought to be.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

REFLECTION, 2019 (Polaroid sheet film, 26x26) by Brie Castell

Dr. W_____ was paged in the hotel to which page
 there was no answer. Mr. Anderson, Attorney, advised
 that Mr. N. L. Britt, Attorney for Dr. W_____
 had acknowledged to him that Dr. W_____
 received notice of the hearing to be held
 at this time.

>>>

BRIE CASTELL received her MFA from East Carolina University in 2006, and was the owner and chief curator of Castell Photography Gallery in Asheville, NC. Her work has been exhibited throughout the US and is held in numerous private and public collections. She taught photography courses at ECU and Virginia Intermont College, among others, and she has been a reviewer at numerous Society for Photographic Education (SPE) national and regional conferences. She was a featured artist in *Eyemazing Magazine*, as well as in *Eyemazing: The New Collectible Art Photography* (Thames & Hudson, 2013). See more of her work on her [website](#).

He was ever one, my father was, for leaving
 all of our lives up to my mother, periphery
 having become habit with him.

... that the license of Dr. W_____ be revoked. Duly
 seconded. Passed unanimously. (1969)

I don't remember my mother that day.
 I pretend her pale and quiet emerging
 from that dismal place being
 slow-danced to the car, a crumpled partner
 in my father's arms.
 I know now that she was sick in the days after
 with an infection that might have killed her,
 but, young, strong, nursed by my grandmother,
 she recovered to mother her three.

There are many known and obvious facts in the realm
 of common knowledge which speak for themselves,
 sometimes even louder than witnesses, expert or otherwise.
 The case as made survives the demurrer.
 Reversed.

Once we had stepped out of the draped dusk
 and the fettering wordlessness,
 into sunshine and rain-washed freshness
 that I do not actually recall,
 into bright birdsong in dull winter
 that I have added for effect to my memory,
 into that town two hundred seventeen
 miles from home, the place
 of my mother's girlhood,

we never went there again
 and I could not find my way there now.

Nor can I find his man-made town with its

... three fishing lake...and many species of fowl, chickens, bantams,
 pheasants, turkeys, native geese, Canadian geese, ducks,
 guineas and tame partridges...

on any map.

In my mind, often without meaning to,
 I, like a timid apparition, haunt myself
 in that dim place barely remembered,
 see again the unplayed ivory,
 feel the unfamiliarity
 and hear the silence
 that was possibility
 passing from this world.

MUSIC OF WORDS

a review by Jim Clark

Lenard D. Moore. *The Geography of Jazz*. Mountains and Rivers Press, 2018; Blair, 2020.

David Rigsbee. *This Much I Can Tell You*. Black Lawrence Press, 2017.

JIM CLARK is Professor Emeritus of English at Barton College in Wilson, NC, where he was the Elizabeth H. Jordan Professor of Southern Literature at Barton College from 2007 until 2019 and served as Dean of the School of Humanities. Some of his honors include the Randall Jarrell Scholarship, the Harriette Simpson Arnow Short Story Award, and the Merrill Moore Writing Award. He served as the President of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in 2015 and the Chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference in 2017.

LENARD D. MOORE, a native of Jacksonville, NC, received the 2014 North Carolina Award for Literature. He has taught at NC A&T, NC State, Shaw University, and currently, the University of Mount Olive. He has served as President of the Haiku Society of America. His poetry has previously appeared in *NCLR* 1996, 2004, and *NCLR Online* 2018, among many other venues. Read an essay about his founding of the African American Writers' Collective in *NCLR* 2016.

DAVID RIGSBEE received the 2009 Black River Poetry Prize and the 2010 Sam Ragan Award for contribution to the arts in North Carolina. In 2012, he received a Pushcart Prize and the Oscar Young Award for the best book by a North Carolina author. His numerous books include essay as well as poetry collections.

RIGHT David Rigsbee reading at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, 2014

One must continue to marvel at the cultural riches that abound in the Old North State. My focus here is on two long-time and highly respected poets with associations to Eastern North Carolina, and especially to Mount Olive University: Lenard D. Moore and David Rigsbee. Rigsbee's collection, *This Much I Can Tell You*, and Moore's volume, *The Geography of Jazz*, are both handsome, well-designed books that gain much impact and intensity from the careful ordering of individual poems within the volumes. Both also focus noticeably on music. This is obvious not only from the poems themselves but also from the poets and writers chosen to provide back cover notes. Rigsbee's book features comments from poets David Wojahn and David Kirby, both of whom have written extensively about music, Florida poet Kirby, in particular, having written several books about popular music and biographies of musicians. Moore's book features folklorist, blues documentarian and former National Endowment for the Humanities Chair William Ferris; poet, scholar, and editor Jerry W. Ward, Jr.; and poet, editor, and translator Carolyne Wright. All of these deeply knowledgeable voices focus on the abundance of music in these poets' poems. Ward eloquently notes that Moore's collection provides "a micro-atlas of the vast territory of jazz, and [his poems] mask, with fine discrimination, the intense labor of conjoining music and poetry." David Wojahn, on the other hand, observes that Rigsbee's poems "celebrate the blessings and consolations of a cultured life, one that can honor Auden and Roy Orbison, Faust and one-hit Doo-wop groups."

These comments offer us a key to the different approaches of each poet to his subject matter.

David Rigsbee's *This Much I Can Tell You* is freewheeling, wide-ranging, and eclectic, making "surprising associations," as Wojahn notes, between the various arts – music, literature, visual arts – and their practitioners. Let's focus briefly on three consecutive poems from early in the book: "A Certain Person," "The Silent 'E'," and "Max and the Promise." In just these three relatively brief poems we find allusions to literary figures (W.H. Auden, George Garrett, Max Steele, Yukio Mishima, and William Empson), musicians (Artie Shaw, Lil Wayne, and The Cure), the painter John Constable, and a few other cultural figures (Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and the Buddha), for good measure.

"A Certain Person" is a poem of presence: "It was Auden, I believe, who said that / in a certain person's presence he felt / 'incapable of doing anything base / or unloving.'" The speaker is reminded of Auden because he is "Walking past the flat / on

PHOTOGRAPH BY SYLVIA FREEMAN



St. Mark's Place, past the memorial / plaque that, until this year, bore his name." By the end, however, the poem moves toward absence: "Where is the Auden plaque now? / It must be someplace, even if / it's noplacé." En route to the poem's ending, the concluding absence is amplified by the "homeless line" that "holds steady / all afternoon" in the park where the competing loudspeaker music of the "difficult" Artie Shaw ("married eight times") duels with that of Lil Wayne, who has had his own difficulties with the law, all the while the enigmatic mouse, trapped in someone's sink, centers the poem.

The title of the next poem, "The Silent 'E'," clearly indicates its theme of absence. This ekphrastic poem describes a photograph of a landscape the speaker wishes he could enter: "To insert yourself in such a landscape / is to feel like the silent 'e' in Anne, to be / there, and yet not at the same time." The picture seems evocative of a failed relationship, perhaps ("For something happened that the photo / can only register as the yearning one brings / to something gone, the full empty landscape / so without you"), and the observation that "The Cure / was playing in the background" provides the appropriate background music for romantic loss. The speaker's inability to enter (or re-enter) the landscape becomes a part of the experience of the photograph ("It is as if you are part / of its perfection"), attaining an almost mystical, or spiritual, dimension ("You could remain / for hours, a pilgrim before the last shrine, / which was also the first").

The final poem of the three, "Max and the Promise," moves us toward the final absence, death, and suicide. For longtime North Carolinians of a literary bent, the poem opens on a pleasing and familiar setting, the UNC Chapel Hill office of fiction writer and writing program director Max Steele: "One day, Max Steele called me into his office / ostensibly to discuss short fiction." This, however, is the day of Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima's suicide ("the news of Mishima's *seppuku* / had swept through the department / earlier that morning"), and Max is clearly disturbed and preoccupied – "Max swung / around in his chair and said, 'promise me / you'll never kill yourself!'" The student/speaker, startled, promises. The first part of the poem brilliantly and evocatively captures the late 1960s/early 1970s in the US when Mishima's ritual suicide took place: "Outside, / the SDS taunted the Young Republicans, / while frat boys in their Madras shorts / talked trash to passing hippies." Max's earnest and

emotional appeal reminds the speaker of Richard Nixon's famous appeal to Henry Kissinger to pray with him on their knees in the Oval Office:

I forgave Nixon
when I realized he was human, and I made
the gentle Max loosen his grip
when I saw how he, unlike his name,
fit so snugly in his little patch
of ground, a plaque commemorating
what forgetfulness routinely undoes.

And so we are reminded of Auden's missing commemorative plaque from the first poem. Thinking of Max's request, and perhaps Mishima's suicide, the speaker muses, "no wonder self-destruction mirrors / self-creation: how could it not?" Still pondering death and suicide, the speaker remembers:

My niece torched herself in a motel room
at 18, prepared and afraid, having made
no promise to a teacher, embracing
self-immolation as the cure for love.
And then there was my brother.

The reference to "the cure for love" gently reminds us of the reference to the band The Cure in "The Silent 'E'." The absent brother motif is one that occurs more than once in these poems. With clear-eyed resolve the speaker, in a figure reminiscent of J. Alfred Prufrock's snickering "eternal Footman," notes, "I have seen the end of my rope / lying in a coil, and you couldn't tell / if it was a snake or a garden hose / or just a length of rope." Just before a mysterious final image of a statue of a hooded cobra protecting the 'double face' of the Buddha, apparently a favorite of the modernist critic William Empson, the speaker rehearses his catalog of losses: "Max and Mishima / are dust; the niece I never knew: / a picture. My brother, the silence / before and after the poem."

If Rigsbee's poetic mode in *This Much I Can Tell You* is expansive and associative, **Lenard D. Moore's** practice in *The Geography of Jazz* is more minimalist and tightly focused, a "micro-atlas" of the territory of jazz, as Jerry W. Ward, Jr., notes. This is hardly surprising considering Moore's long interest in and association with haiku. Many of the poems in Moore's collection are also closely rendered portraits of jazz musicians – Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Nina Simone, Max Roach – most of whom have North Carolina associations.

The first two poems in the book – "Swinging Cool" and "Raleigh Jazz Festival, 1986" – are



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE RUSSO

illustrative of Moore's subject matter and poetics. Unlike Riggsbee's typical loose ten-syllable lines, Moore's lines are shorter, tighter, and whereas Riggsbee's diction is more fluid and conversational, Moore's is more musical and focused on the evocation of sounds. "Swinging Cool" begins:

The bassist hugs
the bass, plunks it.
Ting, boom, ting boom –
the drummer beats
and booms.

Alliteration, onomatopoeia – these are lines that employ poetic devices not only to create, but to call attention to their sound, much like some of Wallace Stevens's early poems. The saxophonist "weaves," "oscillates," "blows," and in a creative and evocative phrase, "the pianist finger-dances / on the keys." The poem concludes with a lovely image that mirrors the organic rhythms and progressions of the music:

Bassman still hugging
the bass, straight sets –
walls thrumming –
steady as the spring moon
inciting the indigo sky.

One can almost hear the sizzle of the snare drum in the sibilance of the "s's" in these lines, and while a specific tune has already been mentioned – "Swinging at the Haven," by the Marsalis Family – it's hard not to be reminded of that older tune, "Mood Indigo," at the poem's end.

The next poem in the collection, "Raleigh Jazz Festival, 1986," of course references a very specific piece of "jazz geography," the Fayetteville Street Mall, in Raleigh. As in the previous poem, there is a wonderful combination of evocative imagery and carefully crafted sonics here, from the "lean man" whose "sax shines," to the trumpeter, whose "angled jaw swerves / and slacks." As for sonics, the third sestet is a marvel:

People snap their fingers;
they are bassline
vibrating autumn.
Pigeons peck peanuts,
drum beaks
on the sidewalk.

The poem, as well as the music, reaches its apotheosis in the fourth and final sestet:

The musicians blast into the sky,
ripple red leaves loose

from a stand of trees,
glow in the sunset,
play vamps
as earthlings will do.

It's a bravura performance.

"At the Train Stop," a reverie that conjures the "specter" of Thelonious Monk "at the ghost piano, foxfire / on concrete platform" at the train stop on the way from Raleigh to Rocky Mount, continues the first two poems' practice of combining vivid, evocative imagery with carefully crafted sound. Like the previous poem, this one ends on a lovely autumnal note, combining sound and imagery into a fantasia of synesthesia:

If notes were visible,
perhaps they would drift crimson,
shimmer like autumn leaves.
A hunch shudders
into evening, a wordless flight.

"Ascension: John Coltrane" is a similarly mystical, evanescent portrait. Here we learn that for Coltrane, the purpose of playing was not for fame or "legendhood," but rather for mystical, spiritual exploration and escape: "I had to escape anything too strict, / take 'Giant Steps' all the way / from Hamlet, North Carolina." "It was kind of spiritual," he allows. He wants to venture to the limits of himself and his horn "and eventually come back again / as if I had never left." The spiritual nature of his musical practice is evident in the poem's conclusion: "It was maybe the only time / I left my body."

It is a most welcome pleasure to have these two fine Eastern North Carolina poets again plying their craft and transporting us with the music of their words. ■

WHEN THE MUSIC'S OVER

a review by Christy Alexander Hallberg

Jeff Jackson. *Destroy All Monsters: The Last Rock Novel*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

CHRISTY ALEXANDER HALLBERG is a Teaching Associate Professor of English at East Carolina University, where she earned her BA and MA in English. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College. In addition to her teaching duties, she serves as Senior Associate Editor of *NCLR*, and her excellent service in this capacity was recognized by the ECU English Department with the department's 2019 Service Award. Her own writing has appeared in *Concho River Review*, *Eclectica*, *Emerge*, *Main Street Rag*, *Riggwelter*, *Solidago*, and *STORGY*. [Hear](#) her talking about *NCLR* and her own writing on Charlotte Readers Podcast, and read her interview with Jeff Jackson in the 2020 print issue of *NCLR*.

JEFF JACKSON is a novelist, playwright, visual artist, and songwriter. He holds an MFA from NYU and six of his plays have been produced by the Obie Award-winning Collapsible Giraffe company in New York City. His short fiction has appeared in *Guernica*, *Vice*, *New York Tyrant*, and *The Collagist*. It has been performed in New York and Los Angeles by New River Dramatists. Read more about him in the interview forthcoming in the 2020 print issue.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE BRAZIL



Jeff Jackson loves music, especially rock music. You might even say he's obsessed with it. His play, *The Last Crash . . . a.k.a. Pee Pee Maw Maw*, performed in New York by the Collapsible Giraffe company, was inspired in part by rock stars Syd Barrett and Ian Curtis. His first novel, *Mira Corpora* (2013), features a mysterious underground musician who is rumored to have bitten off his own tongue during a round of electroshock treatment in a psych hospital. Jackson's music reviews have appeared in such magazines and websites as *The Village Voice* and *MTV Online*. He even writes lyrics and sings in the Charlotte-based band Julian Calendar. It's no wonder that music would pulsate through his latest novel like a C chord with reverb. In a 2018 interview with Benjamin Rybeck, he said, "My writing improved when I adopted J.G. Ballard's philosophy of giving my obsessions free reign, trusting they'll vanish when they've lost their power."* They haven't. Rife with the languid cadence, nihilistic imagery, and avant-garde structure of a Velvet

Underground album, *Destroy All Monsters: The Last Rock Novel* is a powerful read about the sanctity of music and the ramifications of corrupting a pure art form until it becomes, well, a monster that must be destroyed.

Like a vinyl disc, the novel has an A-side and a B-side – flip the book over and upside down to get from one side to the next. Readers can start with either, although the former is the logical choice. After all, it's more straightforward, radio-friendly tracks, like "Gimme Danger" from *Raw Power* by Iggy and the Stooges, that usually appear on A-sides, while more discordant songs, like "Death Trip," tend to haunt B-sides. The same is true of *Destroy All Monsters*: the A-side, titled "My Dark Ages," follows Xenie, a young woman consumed by the string of murders of mid-level bands across the country. The B-side, titled "Kill City," which includes the only chapter in the novel set in North Carolina, is a surreal play-back of the other, akin to those apocryphal subliminal messages rumored to be audible in songs like "Stairway to Heaven" when

* "Something After the End: Ben Interviews Jeff Jackson, Author of *Destroy All Monsters*," [Brazos Bookstore](#)

ABOVE Jeff Jackson singing with the Julian Calendar band

played backwards. Jackson handles the technique to great effect, never letting style usurp substance. In some cases, characters' genders and names are changed, offering a more kaleidoscopic picture of the overall story and themes. "[The B-sides are] the tunes where the bands bury their secrets," Xenie's soon-to-be-boyfriend, Shaun, says, to which she adds, "Their obsessions" (A 20–21).

Of course, obsessions often lead to destruction. Jackson dedicates the A-side of *Destroy All Monsters* to Johnny Ace, "the first rock-and-roll casualty." The singer shot and killed himself on Christmas Day in 1954, his only hit song soaring to the top of the charts posthumously. "People say he's the ghost that haunts rock and roll," Xenie says (A 218). The link between violence and music and the deification of dead *Rock N Rollers* is firmly established before the story even begins.

The A-side opens "the night the music comes home" (A 11) in the fictional town of Arcadia, a failing industrial city somewhere in America. The Carmelite Rifles, a popular local band, is playing a much-ballyhooed concert, and teenagers Xenie, Florian, Eddie, and Shaun are anxiously waiting for the group to take the stage. For Xenie, "it's [not] only Rock 'n Roll," as Mick Jagger once blustered before the Stones sold out to the Corporate Music Industry. She knows the true essence of any artist worth forking over money to see perform live is sincerity, originality, and balls-to-the-wall raw talent. Music, in its purest form, is sacred.

Shortly after the Carmelite Rifles' Arcadia show, the band joins others across the country in their exodus from artistic integrity to the land of low standards and commercial success. The fallout is swift, severe, and widespread. Random killers begin to roam the country shooting small town bands as they perform their sets on stage. The mystery is not who these killers are – their names don't matter, which is why Jackson never states them – or even why they choose the victims of what the news media deems *the epidemic*. The main characters offer theories, but it's Xenie who best articulates motive: "Nobody wants to talk about any connection between the bands that have been targeted," she says, "but most of them have been terrible" (A 132). For Xenie, playing music badly, without heart or soul, is reason for retribution. "Those bands all got what they deserved," she tells Eddie, the manager of Florian's band (A 144). The novel forces readers to question just how far one should go to preserve the authenticity of art. Does selling out warrant execution of one sort or another? Is art worth dying for?

After Florian's best friend, Shaun, is killed while performing with his band at the height of the epidemic, Florian and his group agree to headline a concert as a tribute to Shaun at the newly opened Echo Echo, a prominent club that has been closed since the shooting. By now, Arcadia music lovers have elevated Shaun to sainthood: "After a few weeks, a

shrine for Shaun spontaneously materialized at the site of the shooting. A teeming assemblage of photographs, homemade scrapbooks, handwritten testimonials. *You warped my life in the best ways. Your music will always live on. Your blood is the truth. It was a lucky shot. Stop playing dead. Please watch over us*" (A 76–77). At first, Florian is hesitant to perform, but the epidemic seems to have waned, so he and his bandmates sign on. They take safety precautions – bulletproof vests, a trapdoor for quick escape should violence break out – but just before the show starts, they ditch the vests and their clothes and Florian marks a target on each of their foreheads with red lipstick. "I want to be worthy of their ammunition," he muses (A 202). They take the stage stark naked, *a la* the Red Hot Chili Peppers sans strategically placed socks. Yearning to join the pantheon of martyred musicians, as Shaun did, Florian "flips the switch on the green amp and cranks the volume a few extra notches so there's no chance he won't be heard" (A 202–203). What he fails to recognize is that Shaun's deification wasn't deserved: "he wasn't that good," Xenie proclaims to Eddie, now her lover (A 132). Nor was Shaun's death necessarily a noble one. Shaun did not sacrifice himself on the altar of art; the gods of shitty music stepped in and took him by force, as if they were culling the herd.

A few weeks after the concert, Xenie and Eddie encounter a young hunter in the forest, who tells them there's a cash reward

for the person who kills the most deer. A disease is spreading that's decimating their habitat. "I can see the sickness that's ruining these creatures,' the boy says . . . 'Somebody has to put them out of their misery . . . I'm thinking maybe I'm going to burn down the woods and smoke the deer out'" (A 237). . . . After making love, Xenie and Eddie watch as the woods erupt in a conflagration: "it's remarkably serene. Do you hear it?' Xenie asks. Her head crackles with a strange music. The whisper and sizzle of smoldering bark, blistering leaves, blazing boughs. She's entranced by the intricate slivers of this delicate symphony. They stand naked in the clearing, listening to the rapturous sound of everything burning" (A 254). The A-side ends in purification, a burning baptism, music an exalted being, the Alpha and Omega, triumphant, beautiful.

The B-side's conclusion is just as poetic, although the focus is on the killers rather than the protagonists. The final chapter is told in second-person point-

of-view, as if to invite the reader to the exorcism. *You* ramble through the forest with the killers to a theater, more like a church than a music club, that

appears in this clearing in the middle of the woods – its façade is lit up like a beacon and its radiance illuminates the forest floor – the walls teem with thick shingles of ivy – the windows are scabbed over with multicolor band posters, illustrated concert schedules, official venue announcements – but the glowing white marquee showcases no performer names and remains pristine in its blankness. (B103)

The theater is empty, the band, unnamed and inconsequential, having escaped through a trapdoor in the floor of the stage, the killers' plan for a reckoning thwarted. Jackson ends the novel not with fire but the ritualistic frenzy of a Dionysian festival, a celebration of the profane and sacred, violence and veneration, *yours* and the killers' feet stomping the floor, as if demanding an encore from a band that's already climbed aboard the tour bus.

Jackson's prose is rhythmic, hypnotic, building tension: "there's a heady intoxication as the stomping becomes more insistent, escalating toward a crescendo, enveloping you in its rapturous din – until the thunderous pounding rings in your ears – until your heart swells from the beat – until you realize that it sounds like applause" (B 104–105).

"*When the music's over, / turn out the lights,*" Jim Morrison sang. Jeff Jackson is more optimistic than the Lizard King. In *Destroy All Monsters* he offers another choice: create your own music from the ashes of what you destroyed. Arcadia is not the utopia of Greek mythology, but it can be rebuilt, its soundtrack purified, synthesizers abandoned for screaming guitars, band posters for cheap concert tickets, leather and lace for t-shirts and sneakers. The music can be exalted again.

If that's not rock n roll, I don't know what is. And I bet Jeff Jackson likes it. ■

Doris Betts Fiction Prize

Short Story Competition

**ANNOUNCING A NEW SUBMISSION PERIOD:
SEPTEMBER 15–OCTOBER 31**

2020 winner will be published in our 30th issue.

SPONSORED BY



PEOPLE AS PART, COMMUNITY AS SUM

a review by John Hanley

Anna Jean Mayhew. *Tomorrow's Bread*. Kensington Publishing, 2019.

De'Shawn Charles Winslow. *In West Mills*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

JOHN HANLEY is a graduate student and writer living in Raleigh. In 2017, he received two bachelor's degrees, in Creative Writing and French, from Louisiana State University. He recently moved to North Carolina to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing from NC State University, for which he is currently working on a collection of short stories. He is interested in Southern literature, as well as works that incorporate elements of surrealism and horror.

DE'SHAWN CHARLES WINSLOW was born and raised in Elizabeth City, NC, and in 2003 moved to Brooklyn, NY. He is a 2017 graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop and holds a BFA in creative writing and an MA in English literature from Brooklyn College. He has received scholarships from the Napa Valley Writers' Conference and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Read an interview with him in the 2020 print issue of *NCLR*.

Continuing the Southern literary tradition of blurring whatever lines exist between family and community, between identity and place, *In West Mills* by De'Shawn Charles Winslow and *Tomorrow's Bread* by Anna Jean Mayhew each put forth compelling portraits of neighborhood communities that act as extended families to their inhabitants. The central characters of these novels find themselves consistently confronted either by their own flaws or by the flaws of society, but they rely upon their respective communities to find comfort, growth, and foundation.

Set in the rural North Carolina town of West Mills, **De'Shawn Charles Winslow's** novel *In West Mills*, based on the town of Wilson's Mills, NC, brings this notion of community as family straight to the forefront. As the title suggests, West Mills is itself the central focus of the story, which is a "family" drama in which the conflicts arise as much between neighbors as they do between relatives. The key example would be the book's two central characters: the boozy, strong-willed woman Knot and her sincere-to-a-fault neighbor Otis Lee, who seem to take on a father-daughter dynamic despite the fact that Otis Lee is only five years older than Knot. Otis Lee eagerly

and persistently attempts to fix Knot's problems for her, while Knot is determined to exercise her autonomy and navigate (or, perhaps more aptly, strong-arm through) her struggles on her own terms. However, Knot, who is estranged from her biological family, is also aware of just how much she cares for her two neighbors: "Otis Lee and Pep were the only two people who could convince her to open her door" (53). Within the first chapter, Knot wonders "why the two of them behaved so much like old people" and implicitly solidifies them within a parent-like role, or, at the very least, that of an elder relative (5). She often finds herself leaning on Otis Lee and his wife Pep for support and guidance, whether or not she actually winds up taking their advice. The result is such that, as readers, we cannot help but begin to think of Otis Lee, Pep, and Knot as family. Through that implied dynamic, and as we see how they care for each other over the course of the novel, their bond is clearly much stronger and more meaningful than simple neighborly hospitality.

To drill into this idea even further, Winslow introduces a new generation of characters over the course of the novel who are, unbeknownst to them, related to Knot. While the secrets do eventually begin to unfold, for a good portion of the novel, these

ANNA JEAN MAYHEW'S career path has taken many turns, from court reporting to opera management to medical writing. All the time she was involved in these day jobs, she was writing fiction at night and on weekends, pieces that began as short stories and became novels. For twenty-five years she taught fiction writing at Duke University Continuing Education, at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro, NC, and in her home. Her first novel, *The Dry Grass of August* (Kensington Publishing, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012), now in its thirteenth printing, won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Book Award from the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance. In the fall of 2014, she was in residence for a month at Moulin à Nef Studio Center in Auvillar, France, where she worked on *Tomorrow's Bread*. Read an interview with Mayhew in *NCLR* 2013.



family members see each other only as neighbors. Similarly, Otis Lee's (presumed) mother Rose and grandmother Ma Noni both live in a small house in his backyard, ever-present but not always visible in the story. In this way, not only do neighbors function as family, but family also functions as neighbors. Throughout the novel, family and community become so conflated that, if it weren't for some of the story's bigger secrets and revelations, the differentiation would become virtually insignificant.

The strength of this communal bond seems to be the beating heart of this novel, as it works toward two of the strongest emotional aspects of the story. First, the familial connection between the people of West Mills is what endears us to them, what draws us in to their lives and compels us to empathize with their interpersonal strife. Winslow builds characters in a way that forces us to see the whole of them and to wit-

ness how they are shaped by the people they care about. On the other end, the most heart-aching moments of the novel revolve around the loss (whether from distance or death) of someone in the community. Both Otis Lee and Knot pine for the return of lost lovers, lost family, or old friends. Indeed, one of Otis Lee's most defining conflicts is his desperate desire for his sister (or so he believes) Essie to return home from New York. He expends such emotional energy trying to wrangle his family – and the people he treats as family – and keep them all in one place, that his climactic decision to cast one of them away hits all the harder.

This, too, is how Winslow dodges sentimentality in a book so steeped in internalized pain. While there are some moments in which readers will likely sense that they are *supposed* to feel sad, Winslow's ability to create complex, human characters makes their expressions of pain feel earned and real. The

two greatest moments of pain for Otis Lee are informed by pages and pages of backstory, internal conflict, and dramatic irony, such that his release is as cathartic for us as it is for him. Knot, too, undergoes multiple moments that border on the traumatic, in which she is either rejected by family or must reject her family, but our desire to understand her and how she processes pain carries us through these moments without making us feel like these events happen simply for the sake of being sad.

All of these moments of tragedy lead to the understanding that a community can't necessarily cure all pain but it can still offer the empathy and support of a family. As tumultuous as the relationships can be between the neighbors of West Mills, the care that they have for each other is as unmov- ing and unchanging as the town itself seems to be. Even as decades pass, as characters cycle in and out, West Mills seems locked within time and space, and both Knot and Otis Lee find their sense of foundation within those roots. It is perhaps because of this that both characters feel such hurt when others leave, even if they themselves are the ones who push those people away. It is as if when a neighbor or a loved one leaves, they are taking a piece of West Mills with them.

Anna Jean Mayhew's novel *Tomorrow's Bread* tackles these same core ideas but subverts them. Much of the conflict of this story is derived not from the

flaws of the central characters but from the flaws of the society in which they live. In fact, the novel's three main characters – Loraylee Hawkins, the community's pastor Ebenezer Polk, and a white woman named Persy Marshall – are all good-hearted and honest people who spend the novel battling racism and prejudice.

The story itself centers on the "urban renewal" (destruction and gentrification) of the real Charlotte neighborhood of Brooklyn, a neighborhood Mayhew says she often visited as a child. As Mayhew details in the "Q&A" at the back of *Tomorrow's Bread*, she drew upon both extensive research and personal experience in crafting this rich and sincere portrait of the destruction of a community and the issues of race and class that are inherent to such destruction.

So, while *In West Mills* asks us to examine how a community can be a foundation for its inhabitants, *Tomorrow's Bread* asks us what happens when that foundation is stripped away. The members of the Brooklyn neighborhood are as familiar to each other as family, but unlike what we see in *In West Mills*, it is not the people who leave the place in this novel but the place that leaves the people. The loss of physical nearness and connectiveness leads to the essential dissolution of this communal family.

Having moved to a new area following the destruction of Brooklyn near the end of the novel, the novel's key character (and only first-person narrator) Loraylee muses, "There's not a soul I know in this neighborhood nor anywhere close by. The more I think about how far I am from what I've always known, the worse I feel" (267).

In essence, even though Loraylee (and the other Brooklyn inhabitants) manage to settle comfortably into a new life following Brooklyn's gentrification, Mayhew leaves us with a lingering feeling of loss and injustice.

This feeling of unfairness is as potent as it is largely *because* of the sense of familial community that is baked into this story. The novel is not simply making a political statement; rather, it is casting a glaring light on the very human impact of corporate and political decisions. Beyond noting that gentrification displaces minority communities, *Tomorrow's Bread* stares us in the face and says, *these* are the people being displaced. Know them.

This differentiation is itself represented in the novel through the one white narrator, Persy, and her husband Blaire. Blaire is leading the charge of the urban renewal of Brooklyn, arguing for its economic and social merits, but he is entirely detached from the people his plans will affect. Persy, on the other hand, interacts with Loraylee and other Brooklyn inhabitants just enough for her to begin to empathize with them, and she subsequently

doubts and even openly pushes back against Blaire's intentions as a developer. Persy is ultimately powerless to stop him, in part due to the implicit and explicit constraints of gender roles in 1960s America. However, Persy represents in some ways the process of recognizing and repurposing one's privilege. In spite of her race privilege and whatever lingering prejudice she holds, Persy is well intentioned and thoughtful enough as a character that we are willing to follow her throughout her arc. In the end, it seems as if her arc leads her to discover what is at the heart of the novel: the humanity and unity of the people of Brooklyn and the pain being visited upon them by the destruction of all that they know.

Again, Mayhew dares us to experience the interconnected and complicated lives of these characters and *not* feel some sense of indignation at the loss of such a significant piece of their identity. Indeed, each moment of Brooklyn's destruction is overtly paired with some of these characters' most compassionate and human moments. Not only this, but the destruction



COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE REDEVELOPMENT COMMISSION RECORDS

does not happen quickly. It is drawn out, torturous, painstaking, leaving us time to ruminate over the emotional trauma taking place. The fire that leaves much of Brooklyn in ashes – the effects worsened by the lack of care and resources afforded them by the city of Charlotte – burns for hours and leads to multiple deaths. What we see as a result are the inhabitants of Brooklyn coming together, pooling resources, and caring for each other in a moment of crisis. “How could he console such a loss?” (154), Pastor Polk asks himself, but he answers his own question by literally giving the clothes off his back and opening his doors to those in need.

Later, we see bulldozers moving into Brooklyn and beginning to take down one house at a time over a period of weeks. Loraylee’s house isn’t even fully destroyed by the end of the novel. The workers begin to cut down the magnolia tree in her yard but stop halfway through due to malfunctioning equipment and plan to return the following week. In this moment, Loraylee reflects on how her live-in relatives Uncle Ray and Bibi would have reacted to the sight of such destruction, thinking, “If the house would of broken Bibi’s heart, the tree would break his” (268).

As with *In West Mills, Tomorrow’s Bread* encourages the reader not only to see the value of the parts but also the value of the sum. Yes, there is humanity within each of these characters that deserves our empathy and attention, but there is also an essence of humanity that arises only within the space of a community, of a family. ■

LOOK CLOSER, LISTEN

a review by Christie Collins

Becky Gould Gibson. *Indelible.* Broadkill River Press, 2018.

Susan Schmidt. *Let Go or Hold Fast.* Library Partners Press, 2018.

CHRISTIE COLLINS is a student in the PhD program for Creative and Critical Writing at Cardiff University in Wales. She has taught in the English Departments at Louisiana State University and Mississippi State University. Her writing has been published in *Entropy*, *Still*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Chicago Review of Books*, among others, and she has published a chapbook, *Along the Diminishing Stretch of Memory* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014).

BECKY GOULD GIBSON holds a PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill and taught literature and writing at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC, until her retirement in 2008. Her books include *Heading Home* (Main Street Rag, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), winner of the 2013 Lena Shull Book Contest, and *Aphrodite’s Daughter* (Texas Review Press, 2007; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008), winner of the X.J. Kennedy Prize. She lives in Winston-Salem, NC.

Two recent collections of poems, by North Carolina poets Susan Schmidt and Becky Gould Gibson, ask readers to sit still for a moment of exploration, to look closer, to listen in for the untold story. Though quite different in their subject matters (one environmentally driven, one historical), a common thread between them seems to be a reclaiming of what’s been lost or what’s diminishing. Susan Schmidt’s *Let Go or Hold Fast* and Becky Gould Gibson’s *Indelible* are poetry collections to be read slowly. They call for annotations; they call for a reader who will look up heron species and biblical cities out of sheer curiosity, who will marvel at the splendor of these meticulously detailed poems.

In *Let Go or Hold Fast*, **Susan Schmidt** transports readers to the coastal town of Beaufort, located in the Inner Banks region of North Carolina. Winner of the 2018 Gail O’Day Poetry Award, this collection alludes to the environmental nature of its poems long before the reader turns to the first page of verse. Beyond the cover photo of the vibrant little blue herons, the book begins and ends with a three-page illustration of a heron perched on a rock, which takes flight by the third illustration. Although a minor detail, these illustrations work to glide the reader into and out of coastal Beaufort as the book begins and ends. The poet also dedicates the book to “Science, Endangered Species Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Clean Water, Clean Air, Wilderness Neighbors,” and has carefully chosen three environmentally conscious

epigraphs. Schmidt isn't new to the subject matter this collection embraces. According to her [website](#), "She has been a professor of literature and environmental decision-making, and a government science-policy analyst." In fact, Schmidt's expertise and passion for local and global landscapes come through every aspect of the book, from the cover to the poems. Divided into three sections "Breeze," "Gale," "Storm," the poems are primarily free verse and written in accessible though highly detailed language. Throughout this collection, the poet-speaker walks her homeland and paddles her kayak through nearby tidal creeks, her faithful K-9 companion Kiwi by her side, defending the land, sea, and all creatures therein.

A significant element of this collection is the narrative mode of the poems, which often read like log entries or dispatches. Reminiscent of fellow North Carolina poet Robert Morgan, a central project of the poems seems to be describing the local environs in acute detail and with reverence. For example, in the poem "High Time," the speaker describes the current state of the area: "The west point of Shackleford has eroded / almost a mile in four years from augur / dredging the channel to Morehead Port," which provides an expert's insight into the changing landscape and ultimately warns that it's "Not if but when / we're under water again. / It's only a matter of time." The poem "Not All Tourists Are Dittots" looks at yet another local landscape, describing the granular details of the area's vast littering problem:

Trash on the public beach at Radio Island:
Cigarette butts, cigarette boxes, beer cans, beer bottles:
 a dozen butts next to a dozen beer cans.
Plastic water bottles, plastic toys, straws.
Empty bait boxes, full boxes redolent of dead shrimp,
 fishing line, hooks and rubber worms.

In this poem, the speaker shines a spotlight on tourists and the damaging effects a large number of careless vacationers can have on a landscape and local wildlife. Her poem "Feathery Abundance" can be read as a public service announcement.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MIRIAM SUTTON

The poem begins with an epigraph by Adam Nicolson: "This is one of the ages of loss. Seabirds are keeping watch at the gates of extinction." The poem itself details the immense efforts by State Wildlife biologists and the poet/speaker herself to count and preserve all seabird nests on the island of Bird Shoal. All throughout the collection, indigenous birds and land animals are observed and documented, no creature too insignificant for a line of poetry.

But the poems are not merely a collection of flora and fauna observations; they also share with the reader keen insight into the subject matter. For example, in the poem "How to Survive a Bee Attack," the speaker begins by listing a literal "to do" list in the event of a bee attack – "Be calm. Exude no perfume / that attracts bees to pollinate" – but shifts into less literal, more emotional terrain: "Count your blessings, slowly / one to a hundred. / . . . / . . . Think gratitude. While the end no doubt, in part, hopes to remind us all to be thankful for bees and their immense importance to our planet, the poem also provides a life lesson about maneuvering through tough experiences with grace, gratitude, and perspective.

Although many of Schmidt's poems in this collection have to do with observing, documenting, and preserving the natural world, there's an undeniable journey into the self, as well. For example, in the poem "Ariel's Song," the speaker's walk on

SUSAN SCHMIDT's poems have appeared in *NCLR* and *Literary Trails of Eastern North Carolina*, among other venues, and she has won the 2012 Guy Owen Poetry Prize. She earned a PhD in American Literature from the University of South Carolina and has taught at numerous institutions including Duke University, University of Virginia, and NC State University.

ABOVE Skimmer silhouette at Rachel Carson Reserve in Beaufort, NC, by Miriam Sutton

Bird Shoal leads to finding “a huge buoy” on the sand that’s been “blown from the storm, its anchor chain broken.” From observing this scene, the speaker wonders:

How strong are shackles
to friends, to place, to life?
As I search for harbor
with no chart or compass,
how do I heed the buoy’s warning?
Do Not Approach
Do No Anchor
Does that mean to let go or hold fast?

In the final line, the reader finds the book’s title, signaling the poem’s importance as a focal point of the collection. The speaker has walked out in the natural world and allowed her observations to provoke and teach her. Here, she questions and explores her own strongholds, her ties to the people and places she holds dear. In fact, she even questions the very concepts of releasing and holding on.

The poem “Steering Halcyon” offers yet another example of the poet’s knack for detailing self-discovery. The poem begins like so many of Schmidt’s poems, with a detailed account of the literal scene before her. Here, she finds herself at an oyster roast amid sailors. Having not sailed for sometime, the speaker, by the end of the poem sails once more, disclosing a moving realization: “*I can still do this. I could even fall in love again.*”

Susan Schmidt’s *Let Go or Hold Fast* is a collection of poems to read on a cold, Sunday morning. The poems encourage us to look at the natural world a few more seconds, to take in the sights of our beaches a little more fully, considering their splendor and their needs. Perhaps even more importantly, it reminds us that our brief time here can have devastating effects on Mother Earth. We can choose to embrace the natural world, though. We can choose to hold fast.

Becky Gould Gibson’s new collection of poetry, *Indelible*, also urges readers to pause and re-examine; in this case though, the subject matter is historical rather than environmental. Winner of the 2018 Dogfish Head Poetry Prize, *Indelible* gives voice to Lydia of Philippi, a woman from the Christian Bible who’s often considered to be the first Christian convert in Europe. Gibson, a retired professor in English and Woman’s Studies at Guilford College, has a particular interest in shedding

light on women figures whose stories have remained largely obscured. Previous collections by this poet have given voice to such historic women figures as Hilda, Abbess of Whitby, a Christian saint circa 615–680 AD, and Xanthippe, wife of Socrates. This latest collection of persona poems offers yet another historical re-imaging: this time, the subject is Lydia, known to the Catholic Church as Saint Lydia Purpuraria. Although the women in Gibson’s collections hail from far beyond the US South, the act of returning voices to the forgotten and the marginalized places her firmly in the Southern poetry tradition among such poets as Natasha Trethewey, Kathryn Stripling Byer, and Maurice Manning.

The prologue to the collection, titled “Acts 16:12–15—,” is an important precursor to the poems that follow because it provides the section from the Book of Acts in which Lydia is mentioned; importantly though, in Gibson’s version, Lydia’s voice breaks through, her words denoted by bold and italic lettering interjected between the lines of scripture. She first interjects “*Though I am called Lydia Lydia is not my name.*” And from this point on Lydia’s direct words continue to be in bold italics. More significantly, the prologue denotes that a central project in this book will be Lydia’s reclaiming of her own story: In the final lines of the same poem, she says

*Now listen
listen after all those centuries thumbing past on thin pages
never stopping to ask me who I am
or waiting to hear my answer
Search all you want among these ruins
these endless ancient inscriptions
no scrap of purple no loom or spindle
you’ll find nothing of me know nothing of me
unless I tell you you will never know never even know my name*

Sainted, though largely unremembered, Lydia, the purple cloth dealer barely mentioned in the Bible, is aware of her place in history, her miniscule legacy. She’s back to reclaim her narrative and to set the record straight.

An exciting aspect of this collection is that Lydia’s voice returns fully cognizant of the modern world. Referred to as the “Lydian Woman” (likely because Lydia wasn’t her name, rather a title based on where she lived), she bemoans tourists present in her homeland in the first of several poems titled “The Lydian Woman Speaks with the Pilgrim.” Whereas at one time “*Every sea-captain [was] proud to carry her purple,*” she finds: “*Now I’m a tourist attraction. / Hotel Lydia! / Tourism’s the thing here. / . . . / Converts souls.*”

Convert currency. Lydia observes that the once sacred has turned commercial: *"Euros pour in by the busload – / believers/non-believers, / what anyone wants everyone caters for."* Even Christ, she finds, is a *"brand like Levi's."* In other poems, she takes her religious observations and grievances to modern-day media outlets, like *The Christian Science Monitor, Christianity Today, and Ms. Magazine.* But, Lydia has personal conflicts to work out, as well. For example, when speaking to the Apostle Paul in one of the poems titled "The Lydian Woman Speaks to the Dead Saint," the speaker reveals her ambivalent regard for him:

*The hate your words have engendered –
also love. A genius of hate
you've been called.
Also a genius of love. Sometimes
I hate your words!
More often love.*

In another of the "Dead Saint" poems, Lydia again addresses Paul, lamenting that while women are *"at the belly of creation,"* they are *"pushed to its outskirts."* For this, she blames *"that flat-footed God,"* her quarrel seemingly with God himself. Lydia says at the end of the poem, "A woman need not be cut to bleed," underscoring the struggle inherent in the condition of being a woman, created to suffer, to bleed.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL JONES, COURTESY OF FLYLEAF BOOKS

Interspersed between the "Lydia Speaks to . . ." poems are epistolary poems between both named and unnamed senders and recipients between 49 CE and 64 CE, in cities including Philippi, Thyatira, Corinth, Ephesus, Ostia, and Rome. In these poems, the voices stir, plead, question, argue. And they read like flesh and bone, their grievances and worries accessible, even familiar at times, to the modern sensibility. Importantly, these poems flesh out the Lydia narrative, as one of the voices in the letters is quite certainly hers. Take, for example, the poem "Philippi to Corinth, June, 51 CE" addressed to Paulus (Paul). In the poem, the speaker confesses, "Yes. I grew up a slave in Lydia. / Stirred vats as a child, invited the whip if I stopped stirring." Historians do not know much about Lydia's life and speculate she may have been a slave or servant. Here, Lydia tells her own narrative while exchanging letters with her contemporaries, breathing air into biblical life.

Within the imaginative construct of this collection, not only can the voice of the dead return but things that would normally be inanimate also have a voice, a testament to share. Specifically, a few poems are written from the personified points of view of a river and a road-stone. These poems offer an important, third person insight into the people and places. For example, in one of the "Pilgrim" poems, the Gangites River says, "Today men gather to celebrate her sainthood. / Saint. Saint Lydia. / Ha! I can tell you she's no saint." The river remembers Lydia the person, not the sainted myth. It remembers her humanity, the sensuality of her body: "She's been with me more times than I can number. / I'll never forget how I slipped / between her thighs, / how her skin listened to all I had to tell it." The river, perhaps unknowingly, helps to further Lydia's claim that her story is complicated and rich, even if elusive.

Indelible unearths a narrative behind a likely forgotten, if ever heard Biblical name. Just as the title denotes, the speaker will not let herself be washed away or forgotten. This collection of poems will be a treasure to the history lover, but its relevance reaches far beyond the subject matter. Any female narrative absent from the dominant historical records is a severe loss; we are richer for reclaimed stories, even re-imagined ones. ■

HAUNTED LIVES: WRESTLING WITH THE PAST

a review by Lisa Wenger Bro

Therese Anne Fowler. *A Good Neighborhood*. St. Martin's Press, 2020.

Charles Dodd White. *In the House of the Wilderness*. Swallow Press, 2018.

LISA WENGER BRO received her PhD in English from UNC Greensboro, with a focus on US magical realism, including writers such as North Carolina's Sarah Addison Allen. She is now a Professor of English at Middle Georgia State University, specializing in postmodern American literature, with special emphasis on magical realism and speculative fiction. She is currently working on a book project exploring biopolitics in contemporary science fiction.

Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness* is a haunting exploration of love that alienates and the fragmentation that comes when you sacrifice pieces of yourself for the one you love. The novel is also an exploration of the individuality of loss, pain, and suffering, and how they lead to further alienation and isolation. It is about the lives of haunted individuals trying to find themselves and a way out of their grief.

Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood* offers an equally haunting tale, a tale that at its most basic is about assumptions that eradicate any semblance of understanding, trigger anger, and consequently raise sublimated prejudices. Fowler reveals the heartbreaking account of lives shattered when both class and racial issues come to the surface, when privilege and entitlement take precedence over empathy and understanding.

In fact, there is a haunting, lyrical quality throughout **Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness*** where setting frequently echoes the characters' emotions. An early line – referring to the makeshift home that drifters Wolf, Winter, and Rain create in an abandoned village – stands in for the quiet desperation and searching the two main characters, Rain and

Stratton Bryant, experience: "They patched their homes together, made them as whole as the materials would allow" (5). Setting mirroring emotions also launches us into Stratton's own grief over the loss of his wife, Liza, at the novel's beginning. Ready to abandon the farmhouse and his former life with Liza, he walks a real estate agent through the home, stepping across "the hall with its bruised wood and talking floor" (9). Like Stratton, the floor talks but is not truly heard or understood, both creating an indecipherable language of pain. This connection as well as the individuality of suffering are further cemented when Stratton longs "to talk to someone, to have another person share this immensity with him, but [believes] there was no one, no one who could hear him as he needed to be heard" (156).

While Stratton is isolated in his own grief and suffering, even worse are the pieces that he gave away, sacrificing himself in his love for Liza, his artistically talented and alcoholic wife. Liza was a woman with vision and drive, renowned as much for her photography as her drinking, who became as much a part of her art as were her actual photos: "She had become a personality," Stratton realizes, "[a] woman to be handled so that

OPPOSITE Charles Dodd White reading from his new novel at City Lights Bookstore in Sylva, NC, 20 Oct. 2018

CHARLES DODD WHITE is an Associate Professor at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, TN, and in 2018 he was inducted into the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame. He received the Thomas and Lillie D. Chaffin Award for Excellence in Appalachian Literature, the Appalachian Book of the Year award in fiction, a Jean Ritchie Fellowship from Lincoln Memorial University, and an individual artist's grant from the North Carolina Arts Council. His previous books include the novel *Lambs of Men* (Casperian Books, 2010; reviewed in *NCLR* 2011) and the short story collection, *Sinners of Sanction County* (Bottom Dog Press, 2011), reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013 and including a short story first published in *NCLR* 2010.

she performed to expectations" (97). Just like the tragic images she captures with her camera lens, so becomes Liza's life and death, alcohol consuming her while her fans watch the spectacle as it unfolds.

Stratton, on the other hand, sacrifices his own career for hers and stands by as she spirals out of control. Even at the beginning of their relationship when he gives up his home and life in order to follow Liza, he realizes that "he couldn't make sense of the frail logic behind what he was doing. He had been infatuated before, but this was something different, dangerously so. He felt parts of himself disappearing when he was with Liza, and the onset of this change was more distressing because of the way it seemed to attract his notice but not his care" (92).

This pattern of sacrificing for Liza continues throughout their marriage, as when Liza is offered a three-year extension to her residency at Berea College and accepts "the offer without asking Stratton what he thought because there was nothing really worth discussing, she told him. He agreed, as he was expected to" (93). Loving Liza, in both life and death, means losing himself. What remains is a fragmented man isolated in his grief. This loss of both love and self is most apparent when sitting at Liza's desk and staring at his reflection in the window, he studies his "twinned specter . . . the version of his appearance he liked the best, this hologram compressed into two dimensions. . . . It was this second self in a middle space of canted light that suited what he had become, an image outside

of form, incapable of the many small concerns of being fully realized within its frame" (14). His view of himself as ghostly and as lacking substance is the end result of years of giving to a woman who never gave back.

This same longing for a reciprocated love has an equally devastating impact on Rain. Raised in poverty in a home where her mother was more interested in finding the next man than in her own daughter, Rain is forced to leave when her mother's latest man begins staring at her like a predator. Leaving home with nothing to her name, Rain desperately searches for love. She has no positive example, so when Wolf, a man she meets at a compound, offers her the love and family she craves, Rain latches on.

However, Rain is only an object to Wolf, and she sacrifices parts of herself in order to make him happy. Wolf, though, is a violent and manipulative man who is solely out for himself. He prostitutes both Winter and Rain, wasting the money the women earn on alcohol and drugs while also claiming he's looking out for both and proclaiming his love. Wolf is all about power and control, and, if he can't maintain those through manipulation, then violence will do. Rain is so unsure of herself that she even justifies Wolf's sexual assault shortly after she miscarries his child, even deciding that it is "[b]etter to be the object that receives the act rather than the woman who expresses permission" (53). That Wolf views the women as possessions is something Rain only realizes after she's given over her body, her sense of self, and



PHOTOGRAPH BY JACOB BURKS.
COURTESY OF THE WESTERN CAROLINA JOURNALIST

her free will. When Rain finally tries to leave Wolf, he pulls out a gun, telling her, "You do what I tell you to do, girl. That's how it's always been. And it's going to be how it stays" (68).

Escaping, Rain runs back to Stratton, the one person who'd offered unconditional kindness. Yet like Stratton, she's broken and a shell. At one point, Rain writes, "WHO I AM with a vivid underline. Her pen tapped the page for a while before she began to write other words in a column. First, WOMAN, and later, HIPPIE, WAITRESS, PROSTITUTE, COLLEGE STUDENT, and finally MOTHER?" (159). Her loss of self is indicated through these broad words, all of which are stereotypes and none of which actually get to who Rain truly is. Furthermore, the men in her life frequently reinforce her fragmentation, projecting their own patriarchal beliefs about how women should be onto her. As Wolf tells Rain, his relationship with her was never about love, but rather "I wanted to shape you" (242).

Later, Loyal, a local man Rain dates, grows angry because she

won't move in with him; Rain is not fulfilling his expectations or his desires. Listening to Loyal's tirade, "It was beyond her how she couldn't simply find the words, the specific conveyance of what she needed to find herself, to become who she was in a way that had never been allowed to happen. . . . He wanted her to become part of his world, to cede herself to his idea of what would make him happy" (204). This understanding is similar to Stratton's own when he decides to give away Liza's photos and sell their home: "it was what was needed if he was to find out what it meant to live on his own. Some men could live as ghosts or votaries, hang their fortunes around the throats of the dead, call up the pieties of grief. But Stratton had come close enough to that kind of sacrifice while Liza was still alive" (41). Both recognize the pieces of themselves that they've lost, the love that was turned against them, and how alone in their suffering they have been. Thus, an unlikely friendship grows between the two alienated people as they discover who they are and learn what love should be.

At the center of **Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood*** is an older, well-established neighborhood undergoing gentrification, a beloved oak tree, and two families of different backgrounds and races. So begins the collapse, as the



narrator relates, of the "loose balance between *old* and *new*, *us* and *them*" (3). The tragedy that unfolds in the novel is interwoven with the voice of a narrator who is an unspecified member of the neighborhood. Speaking for the neighborhood "we," the narrator relates the present events, clues to the past tale as it unfolds. This is a voice distant from the story's action, wiser for the knowledge the "we" now holds, and haunted, much like Hamlet, by its own inactivity. In this fashion, the narrator sets up the unfolding drama, relating, "An upscale new house in a simple old neighborhood. A girl on a chaise beside a swimming pool. . . . We begin our story here" (3). The narrator's chorus-like voice shifts, taking on a haunted tone a few sentences later with references to a funeral, to the media's questions about whose side they're on, and to their own complicity for "we never wanted to take sides" (4). So they didn't, and so they didn't intervene.

Valerie and Xavier Alston-Holt, a widowed mother and her teenage son, are part of the old Oak Knoll neighborhood.

It's a peaceful neighborhood, a neighborhood that the narrator terms "progressive" because of the people's acceptance of the mixed race Alston-Holts (Valerie black and her husband, Tom, white) despite "not doing much to demonstrate that character" (14). This is a neighborhood that, while older, is still a wonderful and affordable place to call home and raise a family. Brad Whitman's family, which includes his wife Julia, teenage stepdaughter Juniper, and biological daughter Lily, are the new money, members of an upwardly mobile class who can't afford the city's expensive and prestigious Hillside neighborhood. Oak Knoll, with its older homes, begs for gentrification; the properties can be bought cheaply, razed, and then McMansionized.

This clash of classes stirs up tensions in the neighborhood, particularly for Valerie and her beloved oak tree. Even before the Whitmans' move in next door to Valerie and Xavier, Valerie is angry, "not sure how to be friendly with the kind of people who would put up the money to tear down the old house and cut down the trees. *All of the trees,*" and further commenting that "[p]eople like that have no conscience. It's like they're raping the landscape" (6–7). For Valerie, a PhD whose specialties are forestry and ecology, the oak in her yard has special significance; it was the first thing she and Tom fell in love with when looking at

the property. Consequently, it represents all that she has loved and has lost or will lose: her husband, who died far too young, Xavier's childhood playing under the tree, and the memories that will remain even after Xavier graduates and moves across the country for college. It also has historical significance for Valerie as the site where slaves once gathered. Valerie, therefore, is horrified when the oak begins to die, something she feared would happen when the Whitmans' developer put in a pool. Even before the tree's deterioration, though, Valerie is not inclined to view the Whitmans favorably, even admitting to Xavier, "I can't think of a time when I've been so predisposed to *despise* something or someone this way" (26). Upon first seeing Brad, she pegs him as a "man-child with money" (16). As for his wife, Valerie is "not crazy about the prospect of seeing young, beautiful Julia Whitman lying around the pool all summer in a bikini probably showing off her five-day-a-week-workout-fit body" (23).

With barely a few sentences spoken, Valerie dismisses Brad as an immature idiot flaunting his wealth and Julia as a vapid trophy wife who only cares about her appearance and money.

Brad's assumptions, on the other hand, are tied to race and stereotypes. When he first encounters Xavier, Xavier is doing yard work for his mother. Brad immediately assumes, because of his skin color, that

Xavier is hired help. In fact, we quickly learn of Brad's appalling views of race and of gender, views that both Julia and the narrator justify. After all, Brad is the hero who "rescued" Julia, a single mother, from a life of poverty. The narrator, speaking again for the neighborhood "we," notes how charming, "warm" and "affable" Brad is, and how "[w]e felt privileged . . . that he'd chosen to make our neighborhood his new home" (27). A wealthy white man couldn't possibly put on a façade, and any minor "flaws" witnessed must be an aberration. The neighborhood "we" even dismiss and justify the fact that Brad, who owns a successful HVAC business, only employs technicians who are "clean-cut, polite, honest men, every one of them white because we surmised, Brad understood a truth about his fellow Southern citizens: a great many of them would not open their door to a man of color – especially a black man" (55). While it's the narrator "surmising" and justifying, Brad's racial prejudice is glaring: black men are lesser than their white counterparts. Juniper reinforces Brad's discrimination when questioning what, in her parents' minds, makes a good neighborhood and determines that "*good* seemed to mean there were mainly other people like themselves. So: white, privileged, very concerned with appearances . . . or perceptions" (50). Both Valerie and Brad are so rigid in

their views that neither attempts to understand the other, and both dismiss each other as lesser.

Brad's racist and sexist views dehumanize others and separate him from anyone different from himself. If white is good, in Brad's mind, then white male is even better. He treats Julia almost like a pet. As he reveals, they no longer have a sexual relationship, but he can't help but gloat about being her "savior," telling friends "she's the rescue wife. Things were pretty rough for her before we got together" (54). Julia no longer works, no longer has a focus outside her children and Brad. For Brad, women are objects he controls, and he and Julia pass this view of submissive women to Juniper. Julia monitors her daughter's weight, her appearance, and even her sexuality, making Juniper attend a church that believes a woman's place is in the home and that girls must take purity pledges, abstaining from sex until marriage. Juniper wants to go to college, yet Brad refuses to listen to her, telling her college is worthless because "[i]f you're lucky, you'll



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES CLARK

have a great life with a man who loves and takes care of you so you don't need to work at all" (58). When she wants a job, he manipulates her into working for him, not because he believes she should have a career, but because "[t]hen she wouldn't go off to college at all. Then she would be right there where he could see her every day" (59).

Brad feels entitled; he should be able to get everything he wants, should be able to control everything in his life. He's upset because he has to "settle" for Oak Knoll instead of Hillside. He begins lusting after his stepdaughter and justifying that lust. Furthermore, he believes he should get whatever he wants, and "it galled him to know that something he wanted was not in fact gettable. There had been very little in his life so far that wasn't" (128). He is proud of his "connections" to other powerful white men and in buying material items. Money and possessions make Brad feel worthwhile, and he delights in the fact that he now "had no trouble whatsoever walking into a bank with a request for money and walking out with a Maserati, walking out with a small mansion, walking out with a beach house. Maybe now he'd . . . get himself a boat – a yacht" (152). Brad sees himself as powerful, as superior, and he believes he deserves that power.

Rigid views, entitlement, prejudice, and obliviousness: all the dominoes are in place, and then comes the breeze. Valerie files a lawsuit against both Brad

and his developer, suing for half a million dollars in damages for the loss of her oak tree and assuming nothing will change. After all, Brad is a wealthy, white man, so what's a "little" bit of money. Both Xavier and Chris, Valerie's boyfriend, tell her the lawsuit is a bad idea, but she refuses to listen, dismissing the idea that Brad would become her enemy. When Xavier asks her about Julia, with whom Valerie is becoming friends, she replies, "I have all the friends I need" (109). Not once does she think about who else she might impact, nor does she have empathy for Julia, a woman desperately seeking female friendship. Julia nearly cripples herself with insecurity when she brings foie gras to the neighborhood book club and fears, "she was going to seem pretentious. Foie gras? Jesus. She'd been too eager for these women's approval and now they were going to think she was an ass" (41). Julia, who opens her heart and talks with Valerie about her sexual assault, is so insecure about her poor background that she fixates on appearances. Making assumptions about just who Julia is based solely on appearance and class, Valerie callously dismisses the woman who had grown to view Valerie as a friend. Never mind the growing relationship between Xavier and Juniper.

And then the dominoes fall as Brad's anger leads to lies, racism, false arrest, injustice, and the funeral the narrator references at the very beginning.

Valerie and Xavier, given Xavier's love for Juniper, are stripping away everything that belongs to Brad. Juniper, like his money, is Brad's possession, and "[t]hat boy took something that should have been his, and the boy's mother was trying to rob him, too, and for that they were going to pay" (210). Caught in the middle are Juniper and Xavier, two teens who see the differences between themselves and dismiss them as unimportant, two teens who see the beauty in each other because of those differences. Left in the wake are families who have to piece themselves back together and a neighborhood haunted by its own lack of action.

Both Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness* and Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood* explore the ways in which individuals shatter and the choices and events that lead to that end. Whereas White's novel illustrates a pathway for finding oneself again and for healing, Fowler's explores the tragic outcome when individuals fail to treat all as equals and fail to empathize with and understand those who are different. Both also explore the devastating ideas and ideologies related to gender, class, and/or race that lead to shattered lives and how those entrenched ideas lead to anger, violence, and dehumanization. In this respect, both novels deal with hauntings, the haunting of individuals faced with a past full of pain as well as with the struggle of figuring out how to move forward. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY J.S. ABSHER***Gentile Bellini, John the Baptist (Istanbul, 1479)*

Art cannot save us, a sick man says
to the no one listening
(emperor and clown, lover and priest
pay him no mind): but what fool would say
it's worth it to be saved without art?

When Gentile Bellini painted
the Baptist's unshouldered head
(he says), the blood at the cut bubbled
and winked, mimicking *utile et
dulce* the executioner's art.

But when he showed his royal patron
the deft product of his hand
(the dark prison, the tumbled body,
Salome's décolletage), Mehmet,
his eye practiced in the ruler's arts,

objected, *I admire the brushwork
and coloring – they make me
half in love with death. But see – his nail
gouging the painted wound – see how his
neck protrudes? It should contract: the art*

*of the slaughtered body is one I've
mastered by repetition.*

Mehmet dragged in a slave, a man who
once had sung for him in full-throated
ease. *What can you do for him with art?*

He commanded the Jew's beheading.
*Maestro, paint – and paint quickly:
how well you catch the exquisite fast-
fading violet! To cut throats, fast,
before they slice yours – that, too, is art.*

J.S. ABSHER lives in Raleigh, NC, with his wife, Patti. His full-length book of poetry, *Mouth Work*, won the 2015 Lena Shull Book Award and was published by St. Andrews University Press. His two previous collections of poetry are *Night Weather* (Cynosura Press, 2010) and *The Burial of Anyce Shepherd* (Main Street Rag, 2006). Several of his poems have been selected as finalists in NCLR's James Applewhite competition. Most recently, he won the Clint F. Larson Poetry Prize from *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Absher is currently engaged in writing a book of creative microhistory based on the lives of several men and women in Winston-Salem, NC, in the 1890s. He also has a second full-length collection of poetry nearing completion.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

endymion (acrylic on canvas, 30x24) by Jarrett Burch

JARRETT BURCH, originally from the foothills of north Georgia, lives in Durham, NC. His paintings have been purchased by clients in Raleigh, New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Hamburg, among others. He has exhibited throughout the Triangle in both group and solo shows. He is affiliated with Raleigh's Visual Art Exchange and the Durham Art Guild and is in the artist registry of The Painting Center in New York City. His work has been juried by many distinguished judges, including Anne Strauss (Metropolitan Museum of Art); Peter Nisbet (Ackland Art Museum, Chapel Hill); and Vanessa des Claux (Tate Modern UK). See more of his work on his [website](#).

GIVING VOICE TO PLACE

a review by Wayne Johns

Celia Bland. *Cherokee Road Kill*. Dr. Cicero Books, 2018.

Tyree Daye. *River Hymns*. American Poetry Review, 2017.

WAYNE JOHNS's first book of poems, *Antipsalm*, received the Editor's Choice prize in Unicorn Press's First Book Series and Honorable Mention for the 2019 Brockman-Campbell Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society. He is also the author of two chapbooks, *The Exclusion Zone* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2018) and *An Invisible Veil Between Us* (Thorngate Road, 1997), which received the Frank O'Hara Chapbook Award. His poems have appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Verse Daily*, *New England Review*, *NCLR*, *Ploughshares*, *Image*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others. Johns was a 2018 James Applewhite Poetry Prize finalist and won the competition in 2019: his winning poem will appear in the *NCLR* 2020 print issue. He currently teaches at Greensboro College and serves as Poetry Editor for *The Adroit Journal*.

I have heard people question whether or not something that might be called Southern literature still exists. Of course, those who pose that question are usually from outside the South and are usually referring to fiction, since the notion of what might be referred to as Southern poetry seems (to some) even more outdated. But anyone who might need convincing that Southern poetry not only still exists but is, in fact, thriving need look no further than Tyree Daye's *River Hymns* and Celia Bland's *Cherokee Road Kill*. Of course, place plays a central role in Southern literature, and that's especially true of these two new collections. In fact, I would go so far as to say that both of these collections not only are rooted in place but also give voice to the very landscapes from which they arise.

The poems in **Celia Bland's *Cherokee Road Kill*** are set in the mountains of North Carolina. In *Native Voices: Indigenous Poetry, Craft and Conversations*, Bland writes about her Cherokee grandmother, Minerva Price, and her descendants who "still live outside the Cherokee Reservation in the mountains of North Carolina," which Bland describes as a "different world" where "nearly every month [there was] a car crash or a murder."¹ That violence permeates and drives *Cherokee Road Kill*. The collection of thirty poems – interspersed with thirty-two

COURTESY OF ARTIST



pen and ink drawings by artist Kyoko Miyabe – is divided into two sections. While the second section circles the murder of a woman named Louise (switching point of view between victim and killer), the first section seamlessly intersperses stories of the landscape and townspeople with familial stories. The book opens with "Car Crash," which begins, "There was the first crash when my cousin / crimped like a dog's ear the phone pole. / They cut him from Chevy's metal skull / with oversized shears." At the end of the poem, the "Impala crumpled like a Kleenex / in the second crash." Bland leaves us in the dark with crows scavenging the dead teenager's "teeth for / brackish nests and the / new moon will not will not / will not set."

The picturesque pastoral elements one might expect to find in Southern poetry are here rendered as "Cherokee

¹ Marie Fuhrman and Dean Rader, *Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversations* (Tupelo, 2019).

ABOVE *Creamy Louise*, 2016 (ink on paper, 7x5) by Kyoko Miyabe

Hogscape" where "hogs'll knock you down and *chaw yr eyeballs out of the socket.*" This threat is balanced beside the depiction of them as "nimble church-goers to a pew." We learn that the speaker has as much (or more) to fear from his father as from the hogs. Near the end of the poem, almost as an afterthought, we learn that "in prison, it struck you: / it wasn't Pop's hogs you hated."

Like Daye in *River Hymns*, Bland pays homage to the power of water, in this case, its destructive power. The note to "Dammed" informs us that "Nantahala Lake was created by Duke Power as part of the New Deal's electrification project. It flooded the Cherokee town of Aquore, first mapped by conquistador Hernando de Soto in 1540." So we see the New Deal and Duke Power continuing a process of erasure that started hundreds of years earlier.

Surely the homophone of this poem's title is intentional, calling to mind the "damned." Early in the poem, every seed of tobacco is "a Cherokee child / rising from seed-beds and soaring / glossy green and wavering in the lake's depth." As the poem ends, "Duke Power dims the stars. // Kilo-watts against the dark."

In the collection's title poem, the speaker remembers

Like Kenny Arrowhead who
kissed me in the back of his
brother's Corvette after his brother
strangled his wife –

that other kind of crash.

In the penultimate stanza,

Kenny Arrowhead . . .
. . . skids the glistening
washboard turn into the Nantahala and
flips his Jeep
Cherokee.

That last deadly and tragic line break is indicative of the subtle irony and ferocity of Bland at her best.

The final poems of the first section become at once more personal and more universal as the

speaker interrogates her connections while also making explicit the larger implications. In "Wasps" Bland writes:

A hive is a house is a town is a county is a
state thrumming within and stunted without.
Press your head against the
porous plaster of my house as I press
my ear against your chest.

Contemplating the machinery of the hive, attempting to discern her place in this place, the poem ends with a sting of recognition:

I could have been born a tongue
sounding among dirt daubers and
millworker's cottages.
Oh wait.
I was.

The narrative arc is revealed as the poems build, often echoing and layering images, and moving seamlessly between poems. After "Wasps," the next poem, "Estate Tax," opens, "I inherit a house wracked with ringworm." And that dilapidated house is filled with "dependent memories you can still claim." Playing on the language of accounting, the poem becomes a directive:

Say I love you.
That is, forgiveness
calculated in lines and numbers.
Skip these.

Deduct my assets, that is, story by story,
how I raised this house.

What is mine.

I leave it all to you.

The second section is prefaced, appropriately, with an epigraph from Flannery O'Connor: "What about these dead people I am living with? What about them? We who live will have to pay for their deaths." In a series of poems that shift point-of-view between victim and perpetrator, we learn of the murder of Louise, who teaches a prison writing

class to a group of men studying to receive their GEDs. Bland is masterful in her fusion of lyric and narrative here. Notice how much is divulged, the way in which she ratchets up the tension in this brief exchange in “Nantahala of Interludes”:

I have lived before, she told him.
Her neck was a twig off the
Yew of her chest.

Give me your pillow she said.
You what he said.

Lived another life, she said.
He thought of her in the schoolroom of the
prison framed against walls . . .

Similarly, in “Tats”:

. . . I want to get
a job, be –
he hesitates.
She says, An upstanding member
of the community?
He half-smiles.
Yeah, bitch.
Putting words
in my mouth. You good
at that.

This budding relationship continues to careen downhill from there. Bland effectively shows us the killer’s inner world when he describes Louise as an “invasive weed / camouflaged as / flower,” adding that

Her cunt smells
like the grease of a deep fry
basket like
mercurochrome
like wet cement
at the pool
paper towels
wadded in the corners of
the head.

The interplay between poem and image is more affecting in this section as the pen and ink drawings of Miyabe take a more abstract turn. The lyric sequence, “Trail of Tears,” in the middle of the second section links the story and murder of Louise with the larger genocide. The six brief imagistic lyrics that comprise this section are at once some of the loveliest and most devastating in the collection;

each short double-spaced lyric (none longer than eight lines) faces one of Miyabe’s stark abstract images that, in their fluidity, begin to resemble embellished bones and organs.

Here is the first section of “Trail of Tears” in its entirety:

Dying, she heard the hiss

of radiator. Her hand a leaf

on the floor where he’d dropped it

leaves scattering in the wind of

lungs slit and leaking.

Her mind a nest of twigs.

Dying, the sassafras of breath

yellowing root of tongue.

“Trail of Tears” is the climax to the story of Louise and her unnamed killer. In the book’s penultimate poem, “Louise,” Bland invokes her as representative martyr: “may you weep / for your people // as we weep for you.”

Rather than end there, however, Bland provides us with one last nocturne to the land in the final poem, “Nantahala.” The speaker is standing, staring into the dark night, watching fireflies, and the other animals rustling in the woods beyond the porch light. We see how words can shed a little light into the dark and help us see the world, how a poem (a book) can prove an effective container for life: “The smell is wet earth inside a jar, / a close smell of life pure and potent . . . / The air is a soft skin.”

Epigraphs sometimes point us toward the overarching themes or concerns of the collection; other times they might just be the triggering idea for an individual poem. They might also offer insight into the poet’s influences. While Celia Bland included a number of epigraphs throughout *Cherokee Road Kill* (ten in total), to open the book, at the beginning of sections, and accompanying individual poems, **Tyree Daye** does not preface *River Hymns* with an epigraph. However, at the very bottom of the “Acknowledgments” page, after the thanks and list of places where poems previously appeared, Daye ends with “Always [Lucille Clifton, Etheridge

Knight, Larry Levis].” For Tyree Daye, this is not simply a list of favorite writers, but his direct poetic lineage. One could perhaps identify traces of these influences: for example, Knight’s sense of immediacy, his use of vernacular, and the ways he paid tribute to the earth and his ancestors; Clifton’s keen sense of line and image, her ability to lift the ordinary into the realm of the spiritual; and something of the narrative drive, meditative quality, and expansive vision (especially as it relates to landscape) in Levis’s work. Levis has said that “the most important landscape, for me, is that of my childhood.”² And this is certainly true of the world that Daye evokes and recreates in *River Hymns*.

It is a singular voice and world view that we hear and see in these poems. Daye is in full command of one of the most original and authentic voices in contemporary poetry. It’s interesting that none of the three poets Daye mentions are Southern poets since his poems, to my mind at least, inhabit a distinctly Southern sense of rhythm and place. In an interview for the *Raleigh Review*, I asked Daye whether Komunyakaa’s work (particularly *Magic City*) had been an inspiration; he said that “Yusef is one of those greats to me. Of course Yusef is always in there, his work changed me when I first read it.”³

I believe that the best fiction (especially the best Southern



fiction) positions place almost as its own character, sometimes even the main character. In response to this notion Daye said, “that’s really how I think about my poems place does become a character. You know the place moves. It sometimes determines the people in that place, how they move around, depending on what’s happening in nature. . . . Place, to me, is always more than just what it is; place has to do with race, economics, everything.”

Daye is from Youngsville, NC, a small town about thirty miles north of Raleigh. We learn that *River Hymns* is set there in the second poem, “Lord Here”: “After every funeral it rains, / I was told that’s God crying in Youngsville / . . . / We stood on porches and watched the saved

/ stitch wings in Youngsville.”

In Daye’s poetry, that keen sense of place is inseparable from voice. The voice rises out of the place; or rather, the place is given voice. It is everywhere apparent, but perhaps nowhere more so than in these lines from “Tongues”: “Even the dust that lifted / had something to say – I listened. / Even the grass spoke.” This sense of a speaking landscape haunts many of the poems. Even if the speaker should choose not to listen, we learn in the very next poem, “Southern Silence,” that “what said nothing always grieved.”

This connection to the land (and to ancestors) is immediately established in *River Hymns*. Notice how spirit and voice become one in the collection’s first poem, “Dirt

² “Larry (Patrick) Levis,” *Contemporary Authors Online* (Gale, 2003): web.

³ Wayne Johns, “Inauguration Day 2017 Interview with Tyree Daye,” *Raleigh Review* 20 Jan. 2017: web.

Cakes": "My Grandmother's body / lives under an ash tree / on an old church ground." The grandmother's body and spirit merge with the ash the way "the church's bricks absorb the choir's songs." The seamless fusion of voices that Daye achieves here – that of the child and the adult looking back, sifting and divining – is on display throughout the collection. Here, the speaker asks his deceased grandmother if she still likes "having her scalp scratched?" and "What y'all doing / in heaven today?" The fact that we are on sacred ground in *River Hymns* is clarified in the opening poem's closing lines:

... Dirt

is the only thing I know that can't die,
it makes sense
we would bury here, makes sense
mama don't want me playing in it.

What begins as children playing quickly turns threatening in "Tongues":

We turned the woods
behind my house into a playground,

the men that slept there its keepers,
their matted blankets new ground.
A day was measured in how far away
from home we could get.

At this point, it would be difficult not to look back at the book's cover photograph by Maude Schuyler Clay; it is an image of African American youths playing in front of a faded Coca-Cola sign. One is doing a handstand;

two in the background are facing away; one appears to be walking away, and a hand reaches from outside the frame, touching his shoulder; another is looking directly at the camera, the viewer. This photograph should only evoke innocence, possibly nostalgia, and joy. And yet, this is America, the American South. An August 16, 2019 article in *The Los Angeles Times* reminds us that approximately "1 in 1,000 black men and boys can expect to die at the hands of police." The sociologist, Frank Edwards of Rutgers University, who led the study said, "That's better odds of being killed by police than . . . of winning a lot of scratch-off lottery games."⁴

And there is danger and threat throughout the landscape of *River Hymns*. The speaker's uncle in "As We Tried to Sleep in the Summer" protected him "from everything . . . the dogs going blood-thick crazy, matted black fur / chased kids from house to trailer." There are other, worse animals as well, like "the men that called us niggers // from their trucks" in "Southern Silence." But there are also protectors, primarily the speaker's mother.

"When My Mother Had the World on Her Mind, Crickets in Her Ear," written in the voice of the speaker's mother, begins as a list of advice and anecdotes, what might be called old wives' tales: "1. Boy, don't let a shadow in you . . . / 2. If you dream about fish or a river, somebody's



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY; COURTESY OF AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

pregnant." It quickly turns our attention to the more urgent matters of life and death: "4. They're shooting boys who look like you. You know my number, / Use it, keep all your blood. / 5. Stay / 6. alive."

Here, we note the poem's ingenuity, the way in which the mother has used these other stories with magical elements based in folklore to capture the speaker's imagination, to be certain he is paying attention for the advice that could save his life. And in "Blues for June Bug: Told in the Key of B," we learn the mother's worry is more than warranted when they "found him face down / in field of cabbage / good dirt in his mouth."

The advice and warning from the elders to the youth culminates in "Neuse River":

⁴ Amina Khan, "Getting killed by police is a leading cause of death for young black men in America," *Los Angeles Times* 16 Aug. 2019: [web](#).

Tell them not to go
to the banks alone.

Tell them where
they can drink

without watching
over their shoulders.

Tell them drowning
is third on your list

of concerns.

The poem shifts to first person as the speaker adds, "Even the water / I was baptized in / isn't safe."

River Hymns is divided into two sections of roughly equal length. The penultimate poem of the first section, "Towards the Mouth of the River," is a tour-de-force of a fragmented lyric sequence. The imagery here is both grounded and surreal: "I'm a doe in my mother's house / the water covering my hind legs completely / I drink from the deep end / of her body." The language and imagery circle, swirl, and whirl and Daye's lineation and mise-en-page serve to heighten the dizzying effect. The speaker says:

I put enough dope up my nose to bury
any dead folk hiding in my head

my body one big draining
one big body of brown water.

The sense of continuity, the weight of history (especially familial history), is deepened in the book's second half. Consider these lines, and the stunning final image, from "The Name I Carry":

Daddy your shadow's heart beat
is always asking about itself.

How many times must I tell it that it's a man on fire?

What a price
I have on my head.

What a name I carry.

You are your daddy's son.

The way me and my brother, his legs over
my shoulders, make one big shadow
in the yard,
make one big father.

Similarly, in "Rock-a-bye" Daye writes:

If I made a map of me
my mother's body would appear
her map makes mine

...
I stole the little light
my mother had left."

And in "Dear Children" the speaker says he's side B of his "father's record, / hopefully you understand / jazz by now."

Daye continues to travel back towards the source. In "What Is God but Rain Spilling Over Me," he wonders whether "the dead also gather near the river to drink and confess / in the ribcage of pines." And in the final poem, "Say River, See River," the speaker follows "the dizzy river / into my mother's backyard // watched it fall and flood the houses" until it takes him through a graveyard where "the river would catch a name as we passed the straight stones / and every so often . . . the dead heard the wet voice / and started calling back . . . *River*." It's a beautiful ending, with the river catching the names of the dead and the dead calling back, of a collection in which the first word is "Dirt" (from the title of the first poem), the first line begins with "My Grandmother's body," and the last word we are left with (could it be otherwise?) is "*River*."

Like Clifton and Levis, Daye is an elegist; it's easy to forget that, in the right hands, elegies can also be hymns, which of course are songs of praise.

If we might consider these two stellar collections, *River Hymns* by Tyree Daye and *Cherokee Road Kill* by Celia Bland, indicative of the depth, reach, and seriousness of Southern poetry at present, then rest assured our future is in good hands. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE
BY MARK SMITH-SOTO

Bubbie Jenny and the Lone Ranger

Bubbie Jennie, sixty years you've waited for me,
 in memory or dream, to reenter this dank room where
 you sit in a fat green chair by a thin green lamp

to watch your favorite show, mine too as it happens,
 even as Uncle Frank chats nearby with Pop in a separate,
 transparent world telescoping away from the two of us

at the speed of death, of loss, whatever, the speed of the Alka
 Seltzer fizzing to zero in a juice glass you cover with short,
 thick fingers to hold the bubbles in, dim eyes fixed on the tiny,

far-too-silvery-screen as if I wasn't stranded there next to you
 not daring to adjust the contrast, not daring to say a word –
 But what's the matter, you humpy-grumpy old Lithuanian,

muttering in that almost-English only your sons understood,
 eyes on the television glowing its miracles in the gloom,
 can't you see me here standing next to you in this stuffy den grey

Costa Rican-American poet **MARK SMITH-SOTO** has been with the *International Poetry Review* at UNC Greensboro for over twenty years. Along with three prize-winning chapbooks, he has authored three full-length poetry collections, *Our Lives Are Rivers* (University Press of Florida, 2003), *Any Second Now* (Main Street Rag, 2006), and *Time Pieces* (Main Street Rag, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016). He won the James Applewhite Poetry Prize in 2012, and his winning and other poems were published in the 2013 *NCLR* issues. *NCLR Online* 2013 also featured him in an essay on North Carolina's Latinx writers, and his poetry has appeared in *NCLR* 2001 and 2012. Smith-Soto's work has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize and was recognized in 2006 with an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing. His *Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Istarú* (2010) and his lyrical memoir *Berkeley Prelude* (2013) were both published by Unicorn Press.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

A Tree Full of Dreams II (acrylic on wood panel, 18x18) by Carolina Coto

with old good-byes, grey as the hair-knot on the top of your head,
the green lamplight showing my hand at rest on the great round
of your shoulder where I never dared place it but place it now,

grandson tears rising in me to think how funny, how funny we
both loved that show, even as the dream-scope pulls deeply back
to reveal the two of us, the forever old and the forever young,

tearing across the range on our bright horses.

Born in San José, Costa Rica, **CAROLINA COTO** live on the Outer Banks. She earned a BFA with emphasis in painting from Universidad de Costa Rica. Her work is currently exhibited in galleries along the Outer Banks, including Pea Island Gallery, Down Creek Gallery, and Sea Dragon Gallery. Her awards include First Place at the 20th Annual Artist Self-Portrait Exhibition at Glen Eure's Ghost Fleet Gallery and Honorable Mentions at the 38th and 41st Annual Frank Stick Memorial Art Show. See more of her work at her [website](#).

THE MEMORY OF WATER: SEARCHING FOR FAITH, FAMILY, AND FAMILIAR PLACES

a review by Cameron Bynum

Michael Chitwood. *Search & Rescue*. Louisiana State University Press, 2018.

Al Maginnes. *The Next Place*. Iris Press, 2017.

CAMERON BYNUM is a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill where they majored in Communication Studies with a minor in creative writing and served as Poetry Editor of *Cellar Door*, the official undergraduate campus literary magazine and received the Phillips Travel Scholarship, which was used to research differences between spoken word poetry in the US and Europe. They currently work as a Development Coordinator at Common Cause North Carolina.

ABOVE *At Peace*, 2007, from the *Immersion* series, by Marjorie Pierson (See more of the artist's work from this series in *NCLR* 2018, and read about her on her [website](#).)

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



I've lost someone in a lake before. We weren't close. I was young, and he was just a friend of the family. More than anything I remember being confused by how someone could go from being alive and present to missing, gone without even a body to mourn. The suddenness of such a loss renders it surreal, like the bloodless ways people die in children's movies. Drowning can simultaneously refer to a particular drowning and be a metaphor for the author's past alcoholism which can be shown in how the middle of the poem turns from talking about drowned men to talking about a preacher and his faith. Still there is a purpose to the search: the small peace of mind finding the victim may provide the mourners.

Two recent collections of poetry, *Search & Rescue* by Michael Chitwood and *The Next Place* by Al Maginnes, employ water as a central element: both include poems about drowning and about lakes that swallow memories. These two poets confront the ghosts of their past and the hidden parts of themselves with duty and dedication. Just as there is much beneath water's surface, these poets delve into the mysticism of memory to pull out moments of tenderness.

Michael Chitwood's *Search & Rescue* explores boyhood, a town, and the relationships therein with the scrutiny and inquisitiveness of a search party. The poet's style throughout the book is set within the initial poem featuring a boy with his first hatchet, prying into the various objects in his yard. The boy opens up sumac to discover "a center soft like putty" (3). He tries his newfound sharpness on a baseball only to hit dirt. The poem asks what "the blunt side of the head / would do to the concrete floor of the garage," and then replies with "a pleasant *thock*." Through his violent acts, he's opening things, not so much to understand them, but to simply witness the inner workings as they are and relish the simple experience of seeing. Unconcerned about mechanisms or systems, Chitwood splits right through to the core of his subjects, and, through his acts of poetic incision, he provides a decidedly more visceral view of rural life.

Chitwood uses this idea of prying to underpin the title poem, which is an extended meditation on a search and rescue team as well as the act of searching itself. The speaker watches the team plumb the newly made lake for

drowning victims. The scene suggests an analogy between the team's search for bodies and Chitwood's probing of his past. However, the poem moves beyond this simple dynamic, recounting little vignettes about different ways one can search. By focusing on the probing, Chitwood grapples with the futility brought about when one's goal cannot be found, no matter how hard sought. In the section where a father tears apart a hornet's nest to discover its core, he does indeed find the "the comb / with its tiny pharaohs entombed," but he's ultimately left with a pile of useless paper "too delicate to accept / even the slightest mark" (19). Like the boy with the hatchet, this moment of investigation renders nothing but opened cavities. Yet, that is their value. There is a duty to this digging, if for no other reason than to grapple with what was buried and lost. The poems can embody the poet's own digging as he goes through his dimmed memories and blurred remembrances of people and places. At its core, *Search & Rescue* is less interested in what's found as a result of searching than in what's found through the labor of searching.

Chitwood's particular means of breaking open his imagery often comes in the form of concrete juxtapositions and bold, precise language. Within a few lines, "Her Drawing" shifts from a child's drawing to the ways in which a child describes violence. In reference to her own drawing, the girl "points with her

crayon, / the one labeled 'Flesh.' / This is where the lost ones go. / This is that time we went to the lake" (50). Given previous sections' focus on those who drown and go missing in a lake, the proximity of "flesh" and "lake" conveys the trauma of loss without stating it outright. The poem ends by saying "this is what it's like to not know," and noting that "the rest of the way home it was quiet." These lines recall the child's experience of grappling with trauma while gleaning only hints of an explanation from the way "the people whisper." In a book so intent on viewing the past with a sharp, childlike perspective, this poem in particular suggests the double-edged sword of that innocence. While there's a simple joy in breaking open something without hope of understanding it, many of the moments in this work are left feeling unresolved since the answers sought can never be found.

Despite the joy found in these images and moments, there are places in this collection that are less successful. Sometimes the author's terse style stumbles into simplicity and obviousness. This happens mostly notably in the prose poetry, where the usual lyric pressure that structures Chitwood's poems is lifted, making otherwise otherworldly imagery feel deflated and inert. Scenarios such as a man with a chicken service animal or a woman who has met with an unusually empathetic home intruder seem played for their

weirdness rather than spun with a depth of human complexity or interesting interiority. These sections tend to end with generalities that either try to tack on significance to the previous story or end up feeling like summary. However, these moments are by far the exception. More typically, the book's surprises offer fascinating insights into the settings and people depicted. In a book so centered on discovery as a goal itself, one is not inclined to disparage an author for taking the risk of writing long narrative sections in the middle of a book about history and stories.

If Chitwood's work plumbs the depths of water to recollect memories of his home and to get to the core of the people who live there, then **Al Maginnes's *The Next Place*** does so to get to the bottom of his own faith. The poem "The Drowned" feels almost mythical in tone and in how it frames the interactions of those who live beside a lake. Both authors write about people who have perished in water, but Maginnes builds a story around their journey below. He states that "only the very drunk or very unlucky, / only one determined not to surface would / slide under and stay" (25), and it's hard not to see this assertion as a way of reflecting on his own struggles. Drowning can simultaneously refer to a particular drowning and be a metaphor for the author's past alcoholism, which



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

can be shown in how the middle of the poem turns from talking about drowned men to talking about a preacher and his faith.

Many of the poems in this book grapple with the intersection of Maginnes's past actions and the faith needed to overcome them. He repeats the phrase "no miracles" twice in "The Drowned," first in reference to the preacher refusing to demonstrate his ability to walk on water to those who would view him skeptically and then, later, to talk about the men unable to rise from beneath the water. As someone with less of a relationship with faith, upon my first reading, I took this to mean that the preacher can't actually walk on water and that those gone are lost; however, this repetition conveys Maginnes's understanding of faith as centered on the pressure of acting without certainty. For Maginnes, faith assumes a belief in both God and ourselves as a pathway to overcoming our past and a move towards the future person

we could be. It is this notion of faith, a vehemently held belief that we can move onward, that embodies the intent of the title, *The Next Place*.

The Next Place feels almost fixated on the stickiness of the past. In the book's second poem, "The Way Things Break in This World," Maginnes uses the image of smashing teeth on a railroad as a way of talking about loss in general. He rejects the notion that anything is ever completely eradicated: "nothing returns to dust entirely" (17); rather, he believes things break into "shards" with "imperfect angles, like scraps of broken pottery." Placing these two poems side by side, Maginnes signals the book's most important theme: we are never truly rid of our past, and, therefore, we must be intentional about what we create of ourselves moving forward, since our choices will remain with us.

In this and his previous books, Maginnes has focused on how family requires work and intentionality to maintain. *The Next Place* builds upon the poet's previous book, *Inventing Constellations* (2012), which described Maginnes's family, his role within it, and how those connections intersected. In the title poem of *Inventing Constellations*, Maginnes watches over his sleeping daughter, feeling the tension of an "unfinished conversation." In the moment with him, we can almost hear the "things that can't be / excused or taken back" (19). *The Next Place* also contains a poem about Maginnes tending to

his daughter, but the perspective has drastically shifted. "Guardian" is set in the past, and this time shift alters the tone and point of the poem well. Rather than focusing on what he's worried about now, Maginnes is looking back. The poem takes place during the week his adopted daughter arrived suffering from an ear infection. Setting the poem in the past allows Maginnes to speak about the events themselves and reflect on raising his daughter throughout her life: "it is no small thing to make a child. Or to raise one" (23). Maginnes can speak about his shortcomings and triumphs, not just as they occurred but also with an understanding of what they build towards. The poem ends with how this moment fits into the story of his daughter, a story that Maginnes feels is "the story I can only believe I was born to tell" (24), and the reader recognizes how she was able to become the person in the poem "How Different a Life Can Be," in which she "has grown beyond / any imagining" into a person who might be slowly "grow[ing] beyond needing" him (21).

For its many delightful moments, *The Next Place* can occasionally feel both overdone and unfinished. Maginnes's nostalgic perspective enables him to speak broadly and elevate small moments into general truths. But occasionally it leads to statements that are overly abstract. In "The End of Labor," Maginnes describes the confusion of being in a foreign city in terms of the difficulty

of understanding strange currency: "I had no math / to total the worth of the money in my pocket" (27). This image feels stiff when compared with previous imagery, such as "days measured in squares of dirt, lengths / of wood." In other places, Maginnes's language can verge on the prosaic and expository. In "The Moon Too Is a Daughter," he characterizes his daughter's query about why the moon is important as "a question / I could not answer though I talked until / even I knew I sounded foolish" (33). The poem then goes on to explain how the author uses poetry to make sense of the

world, which takes the poem into an abstract place where the interesting elements of the poem came from the tender moment of the question. Such lines feel clunky in an otherwise moving and emotionally aware book. For a poet who frequently grapples with questions of faith, family, and responsibility so deftly, these poems tell us how to feel rather than showing what is true.

In their new collections, both Chitwood and Maginnes grapple with memory as a source of duty and deliverance. Within their works, remembering is an active process as they dig

into the past and recognize its consequences on the present. These poets dig far below the surfaces of their memory and grow from the depths they reach. What is pulled out from their trolling matters, but what is also important is how combing through the past takes them to a place that is mythical and unnamed, where the ordinary can be made profound or terrifying or even meaningless. Both collections remind us that sometimes, like trawling boats, we plumb the past only to find nothing. We can only be left with a palpable absence in our life and the faith that we will grow from the loss. ■

KATHRYN KIRKPATRICK RECEIVES A SECOND ROANOKE-CHOWAN POETRY PRIZE

excerpted from award presentation remarks by Georgann Eubanks

The Fisher Queen: New and Selected Poems (Salmon Press, 2019) by Kathryn Kirkpatrick has been called "a quiet but insistent ecofeminist anthem."^{*} Her subject matter on the surface is the natural world, but her deepest concerns are the impact of humans on that natural world, the damage we have wrought, and the escalating destruction that now threatens not just the earth but ourselves.

As our state's former poet laureate and her Appalachian State colleague Joseph Bathanti once said, Kathryn's sensibility as a poet "comes through fire-breathing language poem after poem that leaves the reader scorched and cleansed. The candor is brute, harrowing, the sense of humor unexpected and brilliant – often wild, always wise."

Kathryn Kirkpatrick was born in Columbia, SC, and grew up in Texas, Germany, the Philippines, and the Carolinas. She holds degrees from Winthrop University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Emory University. She holds a dual appointment at Appalachian State in the English Department and the Sustainable Development Program. Her book, *Out of the Garden* was a finalist for the SIBA poetry award in 2007, and this year she receives her second Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW WAEHNER.
COURTESY OF NC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

ABOVE Kathryn Kirkpatrick accepting the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Prize, Raleigh, NC, 5 Nov. 2019

* Dorine Jennette, "Flames at Her Chest: A Cancer Survivor's Ecofeminist Poetics," rev. of *Unaccountable Weather* by Kathryn Kirkpatrick, *Terrain.org* 9 Dec. 2012: [web](#).

HER EYES ABROAD

a review by Rebecca Duncan

Diane Chamberlain. *The Dream Daughter*. St. Martin's Press, 2018.

Lee Zacharias. *Across the Great Lake*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.

REBECCA DUNCAN earned her BA in History and her MA in International Affairs from Ohio University and a PhD in English from Florida State University. She teaches British and global literatures and professional writing courses at Meredith College in Raleigh, NC. Her essays and fiction have appeared in *Mosaic*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Pisgah Review*, *Southeast Review*, and *Bella Online Literary Review*. Read her essay on poet-journalist Zoe Kincaid Brockman in *NCLR* 2019.

DIANE CHAMBERLAIN now lives in Raleigh, NC. This *New York Times* bestselling author earned her MA in Clinical Social Work from San Diego University. Before her writing career, she worked as a hospital social worker and had a private practice as a psychotherapist.

Both Diane Chamberlain and Lee Zacharias may once have arrived in North Carolina as accidental birds, but over the years the writings and characters of each have enjoyed a long-term roost in our sand and soil. A number of Zacharias's essays embrace the state's outdoors, from mountains to coast and the backroads in between. Chamberlain captures portraits of lived history and contemporary relationships in remote family enclaves and treasured, aging beachfront cottages. Their latest novels – Chamberlain's *The Dream Daughter* and Zacharias's *Across the Great Lake* – focus on time and place. Chamberlain experiments with the evolving subgenre of the time-travel novel, while Zacharias's protagonist excavates the details of a persistent memory in search of understanding and peace.

A background in social work and psychotherapy allows Chamberlain to develop the characters in her thirty published novels with credibility and empathy. An early exposure to Sinclair Lewis also fuels her interest in social issues. Her North Carolina characters have endured and found resilience in the face of forced sterilization (*Necessary Lies*, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), assisted suicide (*Pretending to Dance*, 2015), and a hurricane (*The Lies We Told*, 2010), along with murders, disappearances, and emotional crises of everyday

folk. She writes on her [website](#) that she favors emotions, secrets, and "twists and surprises" in her plotlines. This combination has earned Chamberlain commercial success and a loyal audience, but some of her readers expressed disappointment when she chose to push beyond her typical realism into the realm of time travel in *The Dream Daughter*. Carly, widow of a Vietnam vet, learns of a potentially fatal heart defect in her unborn daughter. It's 1970, and she is living on the Outer Banks. Her brother-in-law Hunter convinces her to travel to 2001 New York City, when medical technologies are available to correct her daughter's problem.

Readers who ride along willingly on Carly's time journeys will find some of Chamberlain's best drawn and developed characters and plenty to empathize with on behalf of a mother willing to do most anything to bring a healthy baby into the world. In fact, with this novel, Chamberlain engages with the emerging trend of the time-travel plot, common in such mainstream storytelling as *The Time Traveler's Wife*, the *Outlander* series, and the recent film *Yesterday*, which presents an alternate cultural future of twentieth-century popular music.

Each of these works establishes its own range of the possible: Can the past be changed? Can travelers control their movement through time? Ultimately,

LEE ZACHARIAS is Professor Emeritus of creative writing at UNC Greensboro, where she directed the MFA Program and served as a *Greensboro Review* editor. Her books include a short story collection, *Helping Muriel Make it Through the Night* (Louisiana State University Press, 1975), and two previous novels, *Lessons* (Houghton Mifflin 1981), which received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award, and *At Random* (Fugitive Poets Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014). In 2019, the author received a second Raleigh Award for *Across the Great Lake*. Her other publications include essays in *NCLR* 2004 and 2008.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET BAUER

the answers align with central concerns of the human condition, and readers may come to view time travel figuratively, representing emotional distance, splintered identity, and, more broadly, the human inclination to speculate about what could be.

Philip Pullman views the creation of alternate realities as an interplay between world and path. He urges writers and readers not to wander too loosely in the story's world, but rather to stay close to the narrative path.¹ Chamberlain's detail-rich novel gives readers an opportunity to marvel at the many contrasts between American life across three decades and to follow a fictional family's path beyond the probable and back to new versions of themselves.

While Chamberlain's time-traveling Carly longs to return to North Carolina, **Lee Zacharias's** narrator Fern spends her adult life in Raleigh and Wrightsville Beach reimagining her childhood on Lake Michigan.

Her husband's death and the launching of her children into adult lives elsewhere free her to pursue her quest. She does so with the kind of deeply reflective voice and lyricism that distinguish Zacharias's nonfiction.

At the core of ***Across the Great Lake*** is a passage across Lake Michigan on a train ferry named the *Manitou*, or Bear of the Woods. Leaving his gravely ill wife to deal with a stillbirth and postpartum depression, the ship's captain takes their five-year-old daughter Fern along on the voyage. The child inserts herself into the ship's rhythms and rituals; she befriends the lowest-ranking mate and defends him against the taunting of the bosun and senior crew. Through Fern's perspective, readers experience the weather-related crises that a Great Lakes winter can impose upon a ship: ice jams, turbulent storms, assaults on aging welds and joints.

While preserving the purity of simple childlike emotions – attachment to a stowaway cat, for instance – Fern's adult voice also ventures across time to enrich the story with the language and fruit of reflective thought. At the crew's mess table, where Fern establishes herself against the wishes of her father, the sailors reveal their attitudes and superstitions and enact the typical jostling against the hierarchy that characterizes nautical life. On behalf of the

crew and what Melville called the "watery part of the world" in general, then, Fern weaves sailors' yarns around her own story.

Occasionally an eighty-five-year-old Fern emerges; she has returned as a widow to live in her hometown, and she conducts the sort of research and inquiry that for Zacharias produce such distinctive essays as "Buzzards" and "A Grand Canyon."² The older Fern studies the shipping industry with a visit to a car ferry museum and tracks down family graves, all the while sketching a picture of her family's Norwegian heritage, her young life, and a sympathetic backstory for her less advantaged shipboard friend.

So how can such a story cohere, with its temporal shifts, flashbacks, unresolved longings, and shifting narrative perspectives? One option, pursued through self-reflective comments, is to acknowledge the seams and fractures. Fern notes, for instance, that



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATHEW WAHNER, COURTESY OF NC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

¹ Philip Pullman, "That Path Through the Wood," *Daemon Voices: On Stories and Storytelling* (Knopf, 2018) 75–77.

ABOVE LEFT **Diane Chamberlain** speaking at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association meeting in New Bern, NC, 7 Nov. 2014

ABOVE RIGHT **Lee Zacharias** accepting the Sir Walter Raleigh Award at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association meeting in Raleigh, 7 Nov. 2019

² These essays are collected in Zacharias's *The Only Sounds We Make* (Hub City Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015).

a perceived injustice in childhood – being excluded from a party – has “eclipsed” the memory of her mother (31). She acknowledges that her very early memories and her octogenarian musings risk incoherence at times. And on the crew members’ collective memory of a near-disaster that occurred before their time, she observes that “they all talked about it as if they’d been there” (170). Within this broader commentary, the story becomes about the telling as well as the tale.

Another option, though, is to delegate the task of coherence to the story’s ghosts. Both captain and crew advise Fern to leave these spirits alone, but the “haunts” won’t be ignored. To elaborate here would be to disclose some of Zacharias’s narrative magic. It would be fair to observe, however, that there are some fine “ghostly” moments in which an evolving perception of the inexplicable dimension of life floats the story into a new realm of accomplishment for the author.

Although Chamberlain and Zacharias approach storytelling in contrasting ways, the two novels both focus on a sense of place in and across time. Both offer memorable characters and credible quests for identity and connection. And both merit a place on the nightstands of North Carolina readers. Chamberlain’s pacing and suspense will keep you turning pages far into the night, while Zacharias’s rich and lyrical prose will seed your dreams with the soothing rhythms and rituals of the nautical life. ■

TIME AND TOUCH

a review by David Clinton

Judy Hogan. *Those Eternally Linked Lives*. Big Table Publishing, 2018.

David C. Tillinghast. *Sisters, Cousins, and Wayward Angels*. Texas Review Press, 2017.

Time – time as the ever-pressing reality of human existence, time as chronicler of the natural world, time as the most precious commodity to every individual even when it brings pain and loss – makes its presence felt throughout **David Tillinghast’s** well-wrought volume, *Sisters, Cousins, and Wayward Angels*, from the very first poem, “Just in Time,” on the changing seasons and unvarying rhythms of life. Each October brings a new and varied color to a previously green landscape, though the colors remain the same from year to year. Tillinghast paints a striking image of a tree “that shreds / The last sun of day into webs / Of broken shades of dun,” and we regret the shredding and the breaking, even as we realize the necessity of this mark of the passage of time. Perhaps the leaves have begun not only to turn but to fall, with a consequent sense of loss and aging; the picture is one of repetition and even of inevitability. “The lost green,” the only phrase repeated in the poem, bespeaks a cycle that moves forward and never back. We can never fully recapture what time has taken from us. But forward toward what? Through repeated encounters we see the patterns, but we nevertheless each year “lose our way.” Human beings learn from the passage of time, but what they learn is not to be too sanguine about their capacity to escape the disorientation that the succeeding seasons bring.

DAVID CLINTON is a Professor and the Department Chair of Political Science at Baylor University in Waco, TX. He studies international relations theory, American foreign policy, the art and practice of diplomacy, and ethics and international relation. He received his MA and PhD from the University of Virginia.

The finitude of human beings and the resultant becoming modesty about the degree of control that we can exercise over the circumstances that surround us are brought home to the reader by the poet's sensitive use of tangible details to make his picture a vivid one. The effectiveness of his evocation of the larger realities that these mundane particularities illustrate is all the greater because of Tillinghast's insistence that we stop and touch these concrete aspects of life all around us, and allow them to touch us. This, then, is the strength of the volume: Tillinghast's skill at making the reader see, smell, taste, or feel, not generalities but specific and tangible sensations as they are encountered, day by passing day.

Both time and touch appear in the second poem, which gives the entire volume its title. Like the first poem, "Sisters, Cousins, and Wayward Angels" is set in October, and falling leaves make a reappearance. The narrator's sister spins a tale of the identity and purpose of the leaves: to become "swirly serpents" descending to visit their cousins (their alliterative "country cousins") in Hades. The narrator presents himself as much more matter-of-fact in dismissing his sister as impractical, but he himself describes the falling of the leaves as nothing less than

a "casual miracle" in which the leaves are the "leftover wings / Clipped from baby angels / Culled at birth." Whereas the sister's imaginings descend to Hades, the narrator's ascend to Heaven, but even there, it seems, and even in the case of angels, some threads of existence are cut short, chosen, for unknown reasons, never to be woven into the tapestry of existence. The October afternoon melts from a "gray nowhere" into something "soft," but what of the baby angels? Culled for being wayward? Now wayward because culled?

The relationships of family and friends form one of these sensate realities, and the passage of time affects them all. In "Arced Myth," written "for Jim Dickey," we learn that, though what the narrator's friend (poet James Dickey) said to him was not, strictly speaking, true, it contained a deeper truth. What Dickey recounted about a ram-paging bear did not adhere to the literal facts, but it fired the imagination and encouraged the good of companionship in a way that a bare recital of the facts would never have done. The relation between myth, human well-being generated by the myth, and factual accuracy is revealed as still more complex, however. Only in his recollection two decades after the event does the narrator realize

that, while he had known at the time that Dickey was telling a tall tale, Dickey also knew at the time that the author had known of Dickey's embellishment. Or was the tale – Dickey, bear, and all – a fiction concocted by the author? And if the story illuminates something about Dickey's character and, more broadly, the contribution to human community made by storytelling, does the question of fact even arise, especially in the imaginative art of poetry? In a very few lines taking less than a page and a half to set down, the author creates a multi-layered framework for thinking through a puzzle that has existed since the composition of the verses of Homer.

Much the same blend of recollection and imagination may be found in "Sin and Satisfaction," a crazy-quilt depiction of



PHOTOGRAPH BY ISABEL CUTLER

UNC Chapel Hill alumnus **DAVID TILLINGHAST** is a writer and artist. His previous poetry collection is *Women Hoping for Rain and Other Poems* (State Street Press, 1987). He currently serves as Director of Special Projects for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Liaison Cohort and an Associate Professor within the Illustration department at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA. His association with Design Matters, the institution's social impact department, has taken him to the United Nations as lead delegate for a project supporting the Millennium Development Goals, and their most recent collaboration, "Uncool: The Anti-Gun Violence Project," produced a series of award-winning children's books. Read more poems by this poet in *NCLR* 2001.

ABOVE The Bell Rhododendron, created by David Tillinghast for the Perry N. Rudnick Nature and Art Trail, Hendersonville, NC, 2007 (This sculpture has since been damaged.)

an episode involving a screen porch, a cat named Figaro, a bird dazed by flying into a parlor window, and a clairvoyant, all told in the manner of Mark Twain. Each successive detail adds to a seemingly random account before all the elements are brought together in a conclusion as sudden as it is humorous, the tall tale told in short form. This quintessential Southern form of humor (an extended story rather than a wisecrack) is rendered more memorable by the collision of worlds beyond the physical senses (drinking tea and, perhaps, reading tea leaves; the missionary impulse) with the language of the natural sciences

... – as if I'd suddenly forgotten
Who developed the polio vaccine, or who Madame
Curie was. . . .
...
... beyond
Dialogue lies telepathy –

the reader is told, yet this contention that a world of sense and sensation exists beyond the power of words and reason to comprehend is expressed with the utmost intelligent care in the use of just the right word, just the properly polished phrase.

There are poems here of lazy summer days or the colors of spring, but the sensation that most often seems to stoke the author's imagination is that of cold: of deep winter or very early spring, cold that can, in the words of "Meadows of Deception," "split / A rabbit's skull" or, in the phrasing of "What We Know" (which is described as a "cold poem"), "the chill that settles / In your kneecaps and cheekbones."

Indeed, it is striking how often winter and the sensation of cold make their appearance in poems set in the South: in Memphis or Arkansas or South Carolina. It is cold, then – an evening "Too cold for shadow" – that sets the scene for "Meadows of Deception." The cold is said to be so intense that it can "pull birds / From flight." If one wonders how such a trick can be accomplished, the answer comes described with swift economy of language, as a stony meadow, glistening with ice, resembles a pond to passing geese, a few of which attempt to dive but instead meet their end among the outcroppings of slate. It is always the "inquiring" few that end up on the narrator's table.

And on what basis can or should the geese or the reader inquire in a world in which "nothing is ever

very real"? Appearances deceive: as the narrator's sister gathers up the fallen birds, they are said to resemble "clubs." The birds and bats

... latched in Corinthian
Caves tween glassy columns
Of stalagmites, frozen wings clasped
To breast, essences cast straight up
And down . . .

might as well be columns themselves in their stiff vertical postures. In the face of such uncertainty, inquiry seems dangerous, luring us from "our bright circle / Of the still" is when "we hear the witches / Sing, the chasms call." There is much that we do not, cannot, understand and, sensing that vulnerability, "we shiver / In our brief fortune."

Much of this fine collection concerns the precariousness of life and the fleeting nature of fortune. Even memories fade and flicker, sometimes opening the way for their creative redesign for didactic or yarn-spinning purposes, but often due to the frailties of the human frame, succumbing to the cold of age or estrangement, or falling prey to misperception as easily as any goose. In such a world of shifting light and shadow, we find "our bright circle" among family and friends, in the beauty of nature and the loyal companionship of animals, and in the artistry of a talented and sensitive poet who can, as does David Tillingham, bring these sources of light into vivid existence on the page.

Likewise, the passage of time is a refrain of **Judy Hogan's *Those Eternally Linked Lives***, a poignant volume of memory, loss, endurance, and hope. The author, speaking directly to the reader in an authentic conversational style, is well aware of the passing years in her own life. Proud of her healthy natural and simple diet, the continuous physical labor required for life in a country home with a garden and an orchard, and the enjoyment of regular and sufficient rest, she is nevertheless conscious of the number of decades that have passed in her life and of each succeeding birthday.

This is a life that is enriched by the multitude of interests and occupations to which Hogan devotes herself. Her poetry reveals no multi-tasking; she is wholly devoted to experiencing fully each aspect of her existence, whether that attentiveness manifests itself in vivid depiction of the care



COURTESY OF MARRIHA WHEELER AT THE JOYFUL JEWEL

that her hens have taken in their *toilette* following a rainstorm or in regular description of the varied plants that occupy her property, some of which must be pulled up, some pruned back, and some expertly encouraged to grow.

Likewise, some of the relationships that the poet recalls are filled with loving mutual affection, while others may be marked by conflict, and some seem to have been a mixture of both. There is a sharper distinction between the private realm of life and the public than one finds in the Tillinghast volume. One learns of the prospective move of an adult son to the area, where he can be of service and comfort to his "grateful,"

"rejoic[ing]" mother. And one hears in "Changing a Wrong to a Right," which is dedicated to "a wise and thoughtful judge," about "truth," "justice," and a "group of concerned and committed citizens" who "did change a wrong to a right."

The poem "Spring Re-surges" brings together these themes in compact and memorable fashion. Beginning by painting the arrival of spring (evidently the author's favorite season, as it is mentioned far more often than any other) through sight (the "yellow green of new leaves"), hearing ("bird song"), and touch (as "the sun pulls the earth back / to warmer soil"), Hogan affectionately summons the welcome routine of daily life, as "I pick my salad." She chronicles her present stage in the longer arc of a lifetime, reassuring the reader that "I slept well." And then, she turns to her public commitments, fortified by the conviction that "Evil men are doing harm, / but we will stop them." Here her language leaves love and neighborly generosity for the goal of "justice" in the presence of conflict, in which "sooner or later you win, and if need be, you win and win / again."

For all her involvement in the arena of public controversies, however, Hogan never makes

of her art an ideological screed. Her aim, in fact, is wholly the reverse: to combat the dangers of abstraction through immersion in the vividness of the particulars of life. "Observation / wins over theory," she tells the reader of "Reason to be Happy" and demonstrates the superiority of the concrete over the abstract by identifying no fewer than six plants (granted, including one referred to with the admission that "I forget their / name"), two animals, and one fruit. "Sometimes / what's tangible reinforces what we can't / touch or know with absolute certainty," she observes, even while noting that this physical world of soil and sunlight and salad greens (and, it must be admitted, illness and injury) opens the eyes of those who will see "such intangible communion."

The result, if we are fortunate, is "a grace mysterious." In this, one of her most felicitous (and graceful) phrases, Judy Hogan seems to encapsulate her view of life. It is mysterious, unpredictable, even unknowable, but it holds patterns like the recurrence of spring and the kindness of neighbors, and if these patterns are observed closely, in a spirit more of openness than of scientific investigation, they open not only truth but peace. ■

ABOVE Judy Hogan at the Joyful Jewel Vision & Voice, Pittsboro, 28 Apr. 2019

JUDY HOGAN was born in Zenith, KS, but has lived in North Carolina for almost fifty years. She brought to the state a new poetry journal (*Hyperion*, 1970-81), and, in 1976, she founded Carolina Wren Press. She has been active in the area since the early '70s as a reviewer, book distributor, publisher, teacher, writing consultant, and organizer of literary events. In 1984 she helped found and was the first President of the North Carolina Writers' Network, serving until 1987, and she taught at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh from 2004 to 2007. Her papers, correspondence, and a quarter century of extensive diaries are in the Special Collections Department of the Perkins Library at Duke University. She has published six volumes of poetry, three nonfiction books, and two mysteries.

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY JON OBERMEYER***Still Life with Monoclonal Antibodies*

*“Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses,
waiting to see us act with beauty and courage”—Rilke*

Ten stories of glass and natural light
betray the battles fought in each nook,
each private room with a pocket door

and a palliative view of the St. John’s,
a rare river that flows north, like the Nile.
North Florida light floods pine swamp

and salt marsh brack with equal measure.
It ignores the intravenous drip obelisks
and chariot wheelchairs pushed by volunteers.

The morning light rains down on mettle and pluck,
on fields of battle, onto fear and bravura.
It induces the artful peeling open of a tangerine

into a six-petal flower, blossoming near
the infusion chair where you sat:
a princess enthroned, sipping from a chalice.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Warrior (mixed media on panel, 18x24), by Chieko Murasugi

CHIEKO MURASUGI was born in Tokyo and moved to North Carolina in 2012. She has a PhD in Experimental Psychology from New York University and an MFA in Studio Art from UNC Chapel Hill. She has exhibited her work in San Francisco, New York, and in North Carolina at the Block Gallery, Artspace, Greenhill Center, UNC Greensboro’s Gatewood Gallery, and the Ackland and Mint Museums. Her paintings appear in the permanent collections of the City of Raleigh and Duke University. See more of her work on her [website](#).

JON OBERMEYER is a graduate of Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA, and earned an MFA in Creative Writing from UNC Greensboro, where he served as Associate Poetry Editor of *The Greensboro Review*. He lives in Bethesda, NC. A poet, short story writer, essayist, and memoirist, he has published eight books of creative work and makes his living writing grants and editing business books on themes like artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and mergers and acquisitions. This is his third time as an Applewhite Prize finalist. Read his previous finalist poems in *NCLR 2018* and *NCLR Online 2019*.

TWO-WAY MIRROR

a review by Meagan Lucas

Joseph Mills. *Bleachers: Fifty-Four Linked Fictions*. Press 53, 2019.

Krystal A. Smith. *Two Moons: Stories*. BLF Press, 2018.

MEAGAN LUCAS, born in Northern Ontario, now lives in Hendersonville, NC. She teaches English at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College and is the Fiction Editor at *Barren Magazine*. Lucas has a BA in History from Wilfrid Laurier University, an MEd in Curriculum and Instruction from Ferris State University, and an MA in English and Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire State University. She received the 2017 Scythe Prize for Fiction and has been nominated for a 2019 Pushcart Prize.

Joseph Mills's debut fiction collection *Bleachers* is described on its cover as fifty-four linked fictions. Each piece is connected to the others in time, Saturday morning, and place, U11 Rec League's Fields 1 and 2 (intentionally vague enough in location that it could be any soccer field in any suburb), and narrated by the spectators, parents and facilitators of a youth soccer league. Each piece is in the flash form, giving a brief but intense glimpse or impression of the inner lives, the fear and joy, the hope and sorrow, of the individuals populating the stands.

"Family" begins in the quiet poignant way that the reader will come to understand as Mills's subtle voice with Ahmed, a father, restraining himself from explaining to his daughter in the Target aisle how a soccer ball is like their family, "each piece alone being nothing. They can't all be the same. There have to be different ones, and they have to be joined. Integrated. In the right way. When that happens, lines and planes and angles become curved, became a sphere, an orb, a planet, become the perfect form of nature, become a coherent container, holding air, breath, nothing, everything" (31). The soccer ball Ahmed loves, and the center of the game that this collection is crafted around, is also an excellent metaphor for the collection itself, a group of pieces, all different, yet all connected, creating a whole that is greater than its parts.

The collection is cleverly organized, with each fiction placed within a section named after the timeline of a soccer game – Pregame, First Half, building to the Post Game – creating natural narrative progression. While the structure of the book as a whole reflects that of a novel or short story, a reader who comes looking for a novel in flash will leave disappointed. These nuggets are connected, and while some build toward a shared mystery revealed in the end, it is not this revelation that pulls the reader through the fictions, but rather Mills's gift of delving into the characters' deepest desires and revealing the profound through the most mundane of moments.

One is likely not to consider a woman's decision to buy folding camp chairs as a compelling subject for a piece of fiction, but of course the first story in the collection, "Aging," is about much more than a shopping trip. Through the narrator Colleen's reflections on her desire for, and purchase of, the "blue chairs," the author explores compromises people make as we age. Mills also reveals universal truths of parental existence through Colleen: "parenting, at this stage felt mostly like being in a waiting room," and "[m]ost marriages, like most plants, won't thrive in full sun" (4).

Mills is particularly adept at character development, allowing the reader into the mind of his narrators with such gentle and subtle revelations of quirks and motivations that

characters feel like neighbors or even life-long friends. Such is the case with the narrator Dale in "Arrival." Mills tells us in the first paragraph that Dale is the type of guy who upon arrival to his destination, sometimes unclicks "his seatbelt before the car has fully stopped" (5). A character's obsession with punctuality could easily slide into a caricature or stereotype, but Mills balances Dale's obnoxious behavior with glimpses of his reasoning: "[h]e just hates to wait. For anyone. Even people he loves. Especially people he loves. Because if they loved him, they wouldn't make him wait" (6). And with only a few sentences the reader not only understands Dale's obsession, but empathizes. Yes,

Dale is pushy, and seemingly ignorant of the feelings of those around him, and possibly the exact kind of person that one might try to avoid, but by the end of the story Mills reveals a depth of that causes the reader to pause, understand, and maybe even like Dale a little.

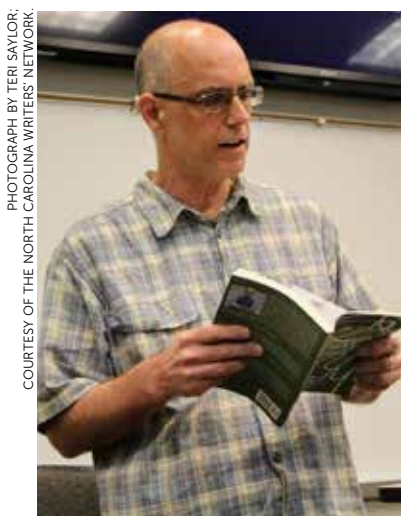
Over the course of these fifty-four fictions, Mills covers topics from humorous, such as the ornamental nature of children's ears; to satirical, how one can understand class in America through dental work; to the deeply emotional, the feeling of being cheated when a loved one dies; all with the same accessibility and warmth. Characters are so vivid and well rendered one might wonder if Mills didn't ask a group of spectators to write him flash personal essays. Much like George Singleton, Mills takes these slices of life, like buying a folding camp chair, and makes them universal and profound. He reveals the connections between us with the minutia of our lives, and it's wonderful.

If Mills takes small moments and expands them into a network of connections that bind us, in her debut collection *Two Moons*, Krystal A. Smith does the opposite. Smith's stories are about such fantastic whimsical

ideas as video dating in space, a love affair between a woman and the moon, shape shifters, magical healers, women who birth gods, and women who are gods; but they are also about love, pain, death, loneliness and change. Mills takes small experiences and blows them into profound big ideas; Smith takes mountains of myth and shrinks them to experiences we all understand through fable-like fictions.

In the title story "Two Moons," Selene has had a special relationship with the moon since she was a child. At fourteen, she began to sleep outside. Her mother, Judith, thinks it is just a phase, but Selene's love grows to where she "knew she was supposed to be up in the sky with her beloved" (20). The moon, Luna, loves Selene in return, and the story, which could easily fall into a (literal) star-crossed lovers trope, is deftly handled and deepened by Smith with inclusion of Judith's thoughts.

Like many parents when their children first begin to act in an unexpected manner, Judith is confused. She "did not pretend to understand, nor did anyone else in [Selene's] life" (21). But as Judith watched Selene and Luna fall deeper in love, she began to understand that "[s]he needn't worry about her daughter being



PHOTOGRAPH BY TERI SAYLOR;
COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS' NETWORK.

JOSEPH MILLS is a faculty member at the UNC School of the Arts, where he holds the Susan Burress Wall Distinguished Professorship in the Humanities and was honored with a 2017 UNC Board of Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching. His work includes poetry, fiction, drama, and criticism. He has published six volumes of poetry with Press 53. He won the 2017 Rose Post Creative Nonfiction Competition sponsored by the North Carolina Writers Network for his essay, "On Hearing My Daughter Trying to Sing Dixie." In 2015, he won the North Carolina Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry for *This Miraculous Turning* (Press 53, 2014). Joseph has degrees in literature from the University of Chicago (BA.), the University of New Mexico (MA), and the University of California-Davis (PhD).

normal anymore. She was indeed, special. Too special to be normal” (28). The story is an allegory for a woman accepting her nature and falling in love and her mother coming to know and accept this pair.

Much like Mills’s collection, many of the pieces contained in Smith’s collection are not traditional short stories but flashes instead. For example, “Catch Me If You Can,” about Jaleesa, a woman who shape shifts into a fox, and her partner, Lomi, whose “breasts and stomach took on a pale, opal colored fur that shimmered when she moved” (39), ends abruptly, perhaps too soon, for it lacks much of a story arc. Repeatedly, throughout the collection the reader is left longing for more of Smith’s words – and worlds.

No story in the collection shows Smith’s power of world building and description like “Harvest.” In this work we meet Korinthia who is both a garden-er, healer, and mom-to-be to an immaculately conceived baby. Outwardly, Korinthia is in control – she cares for and feeds her neighbors, she is important in the community – but internally, she struggles. The pregnancy she carries isn’t her first, although she has no living children; she is a helper to all but seems to have no one she can

rely on. The reader might see this story as a fable for modern life, where the single, working mom, despite a successful outward appearance (social media!) is actually drowning in the overwhelming responsibility to her community, and possibly undiagnosed mental health issues related to lost pregnancies, yet has no one to lean on but herself. A deceptively simple plot reveals Smith’s real magic, that this story resonates on multiple levels.

In “Harvest,” as in other parable and allegorical stories in the collection, Smith reveals a deep connection to the past, particularly to the generational wisdom of women, “as if the stories her grandmother used to tell echoed in her body’s cells.” As Korinthia’s grandmother told her granddaughter, “We got special gifts, us women. Sometimes our gifts and the gods get together, make an even bigger gift. Don’t forsake it. Let live inside you the magic for such things” (46–47). Korinthia must pass through difficulty and use both her gifts, and the gods, before magic happens, for her, and for the reader who is witness to both Korinthia’s rebirth, and potentially their own.

Two Moons is a love song to womanhood. It is filled with strong female characters over-



PHOTOGRAPH BY TERI SAYLOR;
COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS' NETWORK.

coming their circumstances and their fear to find love and happiness. *Two Moons* is also a challenge: the first piece in the collection, “Search” the only piece in the collection told in a second person point of view, is a list of instructions, the map for a journey, and a call to action. “You are here,” it says, “You made this journey. You are worthy (11). Smith’s collection will challenge and inform the reader, and it will leave them better for the experience. In this piece Smith tells us that St. LaDonta “strips you down, frees you, shows you yourself, your splendor” (12). Smith’s stories accomplish that for the reader through the author’s rich description, poignant allegory, and surprisingly relatable characters. ■

A North Carolina native, **KRYSTAL A. SMITH** is a Black lesbian writer of poetry and speculative fiction. Her poems have appeared in *Tulips Touching* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), and recent short stories have appeared in *Summer Love: Stories of Lesbian Holiday Romance* (Ladylit Publishing, 2015) and *Lez Talk: A Collection of Black Lesbian Fiction* (BLF Press, 2016). She holds an MA in English from Western Carolina University and a BA in English from Appalachian State University.

ABOVE LEFT Joe Mills and ABOVE Krystal A. Smith at the North Carolina Writers’ Network’s Spring Conference, Greensboro, 27 Apr. 2019

GOOD STORIES THAT SHOULDN'T BE TRUE

a review by Dale Bailey

Jen Julian. *Earthly Delights and Other Apocalypses*. Press 53, 2018.

Asheville, NC, resident **DALE BAILEY** is the author of eight books, including *In the Night Wood* (John Joseph Adams Books, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), *The End of the End of Everything* (Resurrection House, 2015), and *The Subterranean Season* (Underland Press, 2015). His story "Death and Suffrage" was adapted for Showtime's *Masters of Horror* television series. His short fiction has won the Shirley Jackson Award and the International Horror Guild Award and has been nominated for the Nebula and Bram Stoker awards.

JEN JULIAN is a writer and artist. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Missouri, Columbia, and an MFA in Fiction from UNC Greensboro. Currently, she teaches fiction and literature at Allegheny College. Read an essay by her in *NCLR Online* 2014 and other fiction and essays in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Jellyfish Review*, *JuxtaProse*, *TriQuarterly*, *Beecher's Magazine*, *Greensboro Review*, and *Chattahoochee Review*, among other places.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Illustrations by the reviewed collection's author, Jen Julian

Midway through Jen Julian's superb short story collection, *Earthly Delights and Other Apocalypses*, what has been an enjoyable enough set of slipstream short fictions – think Kelly Link or Karen Russell – suddenly catches fire.

Oddly enough, the turning point in the collection hinges upon the only entirely realistic story in a book that otherwise eschews the conventions of mainstream literary fiction. In "Castle Links Creek" (63), we get the tale of two outcast middle school BFFs who set out to disinter the aborted baby of mean girl Marybeth Pittard. It isn't clear that Marybeth has actually *had* an abortion. In fact, it's pretty unlikely (maybe entirely unlikely), but as the narrator points out in a line that might as well be the collection's leitmotif: "A lie could be like a tart fruit, something you'd hold in your mouth. We could pretend belief in a story we knew wasn't true, if only to explore its flavor" (64). It's pretty much a certainty that Marybeth – even if she did have an abortion – didn't bury the fetus in her yard like a beloved Bichon Frise that had the misfortune to actually *catch* the UPS truck.

But facts don't necessarily make for the best stories, as we learn when Christine (BFF #2) tells BFF #1 (the unnamed narrator) the story of the Ramree Massacre, in which World War II British soldiers pinned down a Japanese battalion in a mangrove swamp, where they were systematically hunted down



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JEN JULIAN

and eaten by crocodiles. "One thousand Japanese soldiers went into the swamp," Christine says. "In the morning there were twenty left" (65). Though there was indeed a Battle of Ramree Island off the coast of Burma, most military historians discount the crocodile massacre as an urban legend. But it makes for a damn good story, as BFF #1 announces with a joyous cry of "MOTHERFUCKING CROCODILES!" (66).

Motherfucking crocodiles indeed. *Earthly Delights* is full of motherfucking crocodiles: good stories that shouldn't be true, that *couldn't* be true, that flagrantly violate both the rules of reality and the conventions of the genre(s) they inhabit, but that are nonetheless so well told that we're forced, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge enjoins us, to suspend our disbelief in the patently absurd "facts" of the narrative to get at the tart fruit that lies just underneath. What is good fiction, but the "tart fruit" of truth hidden inside the rind of the seductive lie?

These seductive fictions almost universally *do* get at something like the truth, if you'll excuse my old-fashioned conviction that good fiction really *does* shed light on what my college literature professors used to call, with unembarrassed certainty, the human condition. This is not to say that all these motherfucking crocodiles bite with the same force. "Bone Men," "Keepers," and "Stereograms," fine as they are, are built around slipstream metaphors that are a little too on the nose. When the academically *démodé* paleontologist of "Bone Men" collapses into dust mid-lecture, liberating his daughter to pursue her own romantic and sexual passions, the hand of the author rests a little hard upon the reader's shoulder. And when the grieving widow of "Stereograms" finds days, years, and decades slipping by without her awareness

while she chases ghosts in the "on-call house" of a decaying mental institution – well, the metaphor for a life forever devastated by grief doesn't leave much in the way of mystery or resonance. These are stories built to be unpacked for college freshmen, when they could have been stories that opened doors into emotional spaces bigger than the words used to describe them.

As crocodiles go, the purely science fiction stories have more teeth. The maiden aunt of "One for Sorrow, Two for Joy" (33) inherits her sister's two children, only to lose them one by one. The first simply evaporates. The second disappears into the rank bedroom nest she's woven of organic debris carried home from beaches and swamps that appear on no map. And when the aunt works up the courage to crawl inside, when she has the chance to follow the children through a gateway (maybe to another and (maybe) better place, she settles instead for a joyless life as an elementary school secretary, living in an apartment surrounded by a sea of concrete and eating take-out Chinese. It's a gut punch of a story, and not the only one Julian has to offer.

The best stories in the collection – the crocodiles with real teeth – are the ones that synthesize the primary modes Julian works in throughout the book. They begin narrowly, with the rigor (if not the plausibility) of hard science fiction, but as they go on, they expand into the kind of slipstream resonance

she's elsewhere only aiming for. After you read "Attachment," you'll never look at anglerfish the same way again, not to mention the mysteries, herein wisely unsolved (as if they could be solved), of love, romance, and marriage. The story is moving and utterly ruthless in following its absurd conceit to a disturbing conclusion.

Other stories give us a wistful vision of men and women trapped in the cascading possibilities of alternate lives, an apocalyptic incursion of spiders, a meditation on the ethical conundrums posed by sex robots, and an exploration of the utility of Artificial Intelligence therapists, all well-worn science fiction tropes, to be sure. But they are here invested with an enigmatic significance, a deep and often powerful resonance, because Julian pushes the stories they inhabit into glimpses of dreamy, at times nightmarish, mysteries that illuminate but do not explain (God save us from explanations) the human condition my antediluvian English profs were so fond of opining on. In "I'm Here, I'm Listening," you'll follow Dr. Daniela Vega and her AI therapist into the dangerously (and weirdly) polluted forest of the Humana Reserve. If you're like me, you won't fully understand what Dr. Vega finds waiting for her there, but you'll recognize the tart taste of a truth that can never be entirely articulated or wholly understood. And you'll be glad you came along on the journey.

Mostly, anyway; these motherfucking crocodiles have teeth. ■



IMAGES OF MYSTERY

a review by Marly Youmans

Valerie Nieman. *Leopard Lady: A Life in Verse*. Press 53, 2019.

—. *To the Bones*. West Virginia University Press, 2019.

MARLY YOUMANS is the author of fourteen novels and collections of poetry. Her most recent book *The Book of the Red King* (Phoenicia, 2019) is a sequence of poems circling around the mysterious Red King, a transforming Fool, and the ethereal Precious Wentletrap. Forthcoming from Ignatius in 2020 is a novel set in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, *Charis in the World of Wonders*.

VALERIE NIEMAN is the poetry editor for *Prime Number* magazine and an Associate Professor at NC A & T State University. She received her MFA from Queens University in Charlotte, NC. Her poetry collections include *Wake, Wake, Wake* (Press 53, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007). Her poetry has also appeared in *NCLR* 2011 and 2012 and *NCLR Online* 2012. She writes fiction as well, including the novel *Blood Clay* (Press 53, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012).

COURTESY OF JEANNE JULIAN



Valerie Nieman's *Leopard Lady* tosses away the usual contemporary playbook for poetry collections in favor of story, round and flat characters, complex setting, and an arc of change. Dinah the Leopard Lady is after big things. She splits open the world like a piece of fruit to get at the seeds of meaning. She prophesies. Like those who find Christ in the Bible, she has the eyes to see "the true things that underprop the world" (xiii). Her hungry appetite reflects the author's ambitious goals; Dinah's eagerness to eat the world (material and metaphysical) to its rind is her strength.

Born of a father with nut-brown skin and a mother with red hair, the Leopard Lady is mixed in nature. Vitiligo gives her light mottling linked in her mind to Jacob's streaked and speckled flocks: as in Jacob's case, the marking sets her apart, and it adds strange richness to her life. The white signs of disease boost her up the circus hierarchy from mere half-believed fortuneteller to status as a *natural*, one of those "shaped by God's thumb" (52). Marring binds her closer to her

mother, dead in childbirth. Her cat-spots give rise to legends of shape-shifting powers, though the danger she offers is always the risk of prophetic news.

Lover of many men, mother of four ghostly abortions, heart-wounded Dinah finds friendship in the scholarly Professor who appears when his life path goes to boggy ground and he turns to using lessons from seminary class for circus spiel. Jonathan's voice shows Dinah from a fresh angle as miracle play, catbird nestling, woman at home with light-fingered carnies. Though the lamp of God is extinguished for him, Jonathan learns that it has not yet gone out for Dinah, who believes God's light and divination to be yoked.

What will become of this broken man, inwardly stricken and marked physically (by the scar from his blue-baby surgery) and spiritually (by loss of light) among the circus nobility? And what becomes of the circus path that Dinah walks? The Professor sees the two of them as "image and negative, my stigmata / and her skin livid from the divine thumb." So bound, surely their fates are tied?

Listen to the Leopard Lady and find out. Listen to a voice that nods to Appalachian speech and loves the sound of words and the Word: *fairy-diddles*, *windrows*, *spangly shawl*, *Elderia Ocean*, *sparrows sold for two farthings*, *fearfully and wonderfully made*, *like the Last Day with Jesus on the doorstep*. Her voice flits like a bird, glancing back in time to the prophets of the Old Testament, lighting on metaphysical twigs to mull the nature of body and soul.

After a stint with the circus, the reader expects something lively from Nieman's new novel, **To the Bones**, and that is exactly what the reader gets. This short, pell-mell book rips open with auditor Darrick MacBrehon awakening in a hellish gap in the earth, surrounded by skulls and rot. He has an equally hellish gap in the back of his head, his skull revealed. Memory gone, he struggles free but finds himself in a sort of Gehenna, a landscape like a dump and a river of orange glop studded with dead fish. Eventually he discovers an ally in Lourana Taylor at the local sweepstakes

parlor. She's a single woman, her marriage destroyed by the rural blights of oxycontin and heroin. Their child, Dreama, is missing, as are others.

Along the way, the unfortunate Darrick is mistaken for a zombie, due to his ataxic gait and injury. Soon he discovers that he possesses psychic powers, including the ability to read emotions and to kill. What appeared to be an over-the-top eco-novel with some acidic things to say about waste drainage from mining and West Virginia corruption now leaps into the realm of the fantastic, to the deep surprise of Darrick himself. The despoiled Broad River is, indeed, a pivotal part of the book, a river-character as weird and horror-generating as Darrick now finds himself to be when burdened by powers. The question of how far he should be willing to take power runs through the tale, as does the mystery of the Kavanaugh clan, what exactly they are doing to the people around them, and the nature of their link to Darrick.

The wild blend of genres complicates even further as the novel pushes on. Nieman

braids together a hard-hitting environmental tale of a caustic river with horror and science fiction, combing together monsters, mine-crack catacombs, an orphan's mysterious *zaubermaus* past in a Franciscan home, folklore, and gimlet-eyed critiques of rural social problems and the sins of mining. Throw in suspense as Darrick and Lourana join with ex-deputy Marco DeLucca and journalist Zadie Person to uncover secrets, and then add a middle-life romance. The reader is now plunged into an even-the-kitchen-sink mash-up of many genres.

Like the sound of these lively narratives? Then support small presses with orders, and enjoy poetry that reaches for more than the brief lyrics that dominate in our time, that embraces narrative, character, and metamorphosis. And if you are a reader with a love for the mash-up and a wide-ranging affection for genres, try a novel with a quick pace, satiric chops, and a mad, free-spirited, fence-leaping approach to genre boundaries. ■

James Applewhite Poetry Prize

\$250 and publication in *NCLR*

SUBMISSION PERIOD: MARCH 15–APRIL 30

No submission fee; subscription required instead.

2020 winner and select finalists will be published in our 30th issue.

SUMMERTIME DETOURS

a review by Anna McFadyen

Cindy Baldwin. *Where the Watermelons Grow*. New York: Harper, 2018.

Gillian McDunn. *Caterpillar Summer*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2019.

Raleigh native ANNA MCFADYEN completed her MA in English Literature at NC State University in 2018. She received her BA in English from Meredith College, where she served as coeditor-in-chief of *The Colton Review*. She continues to expand her graduate research on the development of young adult literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is scheduled to speak on the subject at the University of Prince Edward Island this June. She has previously reviewed for *NCLR*.

CINDY BALDWIN grew up in Durham, NC, and now lives in Portland, OR. Baldwin writes fiction, essays, and poetry, and she co-runs the "Middle Grade at Heart Book Club." *Where the Watermelons Grow* has been honored as a *Washington Post* KidsPost Summer Book Club Selection and as an Indies Introduce and Indie Next title. It received starred reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Shelf Awareness*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Her second novel, *Beginners Welcome*, will be published in 2020.

Cat Gladwell of *Caterpillar Summer* and Della Kelly of *Where the Watermelons Grow* are blindsided when their lives both take a sudden turn. Cat thinks she and her brother are about to vacation with her best friend in Atlanta, while Della has begun the summer believing her mother's mental health is stable. In the process of upheaval, both girls learn important lessons about their own strengths and weaknesses, and each plans to fix her family's problems. But will those plans be enough?

These debut novels broach sensitive topics that are not often addressed in middle grade books. Young readers find encouragement in characters who look or feel like they do, so it is praiseworthy that Cat and Della's families inspire wider inclusivity. Durham native Cindy Baldwin and Gillian McDunn, a Californian who moved to North Carolina, are skillful storytellers who handle difficult cases carefully. Their books have the potential to aid children who grapple with issues such as mental health, special needs, poverty, estrangement, or the pressures on a biracial family. These books pair especially well because they explore anxieties of childhood that are internalized or stigmatized. Cat and Della are endearing characters in their bravery and shrewdness but are heartbreaking because they shoulder more than children ever should.

Both characters deal with major loss. Cat's father passed away years earlier, and the best aspects of Della's mother vanish within schizophrenia. The girls have to grow up quickly, becoming substitute parents who take on major household responsibilities. As oldest siblings, they serve

not only as physical protectors but as guardians of family memories. Cat's first-grade brother, nicknamed "Chicken," was a toddler when their father died, and Della's sister, Mylie, is still an infant; thus, the big sisters worry that these children will never know how their families "really" were, back when everything still felt whole. They make sure to keep telling them.

The girls' personalities overlap in other revealing ways. For example, Cat and Della are both math whizzes. In their unpredictable worlds, numbers that add up dependably – precise solutions – give them a comforting sense of control. Della even uses multiplication to calm herself and distance her thoughts.

These protagonists confront every challenge, but they yearn for support and feel betrayed when Mom or Dad is too overwhelmed with work to pay attention. They eventually learn to feel less guilt when they fail, and they begin to understand what is and is not appropriate for a child to take on. They even become children again, after accepting support from their communities.

The opening line of *Caterpillar Summer* by Gillian McDunn says it all: "Cat always kept her brother in the back of her mind, except for the times he was at the front of it" (3). This rising sixth-grader makes constant sacrifices for her special-needs brother, unable to take her eyes off Chicken long enough to have fun with friends. While her mother works, Cat cooks for him, dresses him, reads bedtime stories, and makes sure he brushes his teeth. She helps teachers at school during his meltdowns and frets about his safety whenever away from him. Most importantly, she stands up for him when anyone frowns on his differences. Cat knows that if she admits weakness

or mistakes about Chicken, her mother will quit one of her three jobs, and they will never pay off her father's medical bills.

However, when summer plans hit a detour, Cat and Chicken spend weeks in North Carolina with grandparents they have never met. As Cat begins to trust Macon and Lily Stone with Chicken, she finally experiences life as a kid, making friends, standing up to bullies, and having fun on the beach. She defines her personality apart from her brother, while also working to mend old wounds between her mother and grandparents. Her mom proves a tough nut to crack, and Cat learns that her own assumptions about people are not always correct. As McDunn writes, "It was hard to untangle the threads of why someone acted the way they did" (160).

The novel is set on fictional Gingerbread Island, combining the best of contemporary beach-town culture. Just as Nell Wise Wechter's classic *Taffy of Torpedo Junction* (1957) gives a taste of what Outer Banks life was like for a girl during World War II, *Caterpillar Summer* portrays what kids today do for fun on the North Carolina coast. As someone who has lived on Topsail Island, I am convinced it was the author's model, with its swing bridge, northern island erosion, sea turtle nests, and pirate lore, but even if she did not intend this particular connection, it is still fun to identify clues and to recognize authentic beach traditions. In that sense, long, marshy Gingerbread

Island belongs to everyone on our coast, with its bike rides for ice cream, tall piers, fishing contests, ghost crabs, kites, fireworks, boogie boards, putt-putt, and hushpuppies with steamed shrimp. We see these things through the eyes of a California girl, who is quickly won over by the magic of our smooth beaches and deep blue horizon.

The few illustrations by Alisa Coburn play a clever role. Cat's mother is an author and illustrator, publishing tales about the friendship between a caterpillar and a chick, and we get to



COURTESY OF BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING

take part with the siblings as they read their mother's books. McDunn integrates these pages seamlessly into the plot, using them to highlight Cat's growth and to contrast reality with the easier way that tricky situations are resolved in stories. We sense why certain elements of the books will bother Cat, without the author's having to say so. Because of *Caterpillar's* characterization, Cat realizes how much of her life she sacrifices

to make Chicken happy – more than is necessary – and she decides to make changes, even though her love for him remains "as wide as the Golden Gate Bridge, as deep as the sea floor, and as fierce as a shark bite" (3).

McDunn's passages on Cat's grief for her father are beautifully written, as are scenes where grief and laughter create that wonderful paradox that helps families bond after loss. When learning about infinity at school, "Cat understood right away. Death was infinity. It wasn't contained in a day, month, or year. It existed in a way that couldn't be measured" (190). The girl tells her grandmother, "It's sad backward and forward," explaining, "I miss him backward when I think about piggy back rides. . . . And I miss him forward when I think of all the things he isn't here for, the things he won't ever be here for. . . . I wish someone would have told me I would miss him forever, in all directions" (191).

This touching yet humorous book is written clearly enough for a middle grade audience, but adults will enjoy *Caterpillar Summer*, as well, and learn from its wisdom.

In ***Where the Watermelons Grow*** by **Cindy Baldwin**,

twelve-year-old Della Kelly lives on a farm in fictional Maryville, NC, near the Albemarle Sound. Her father grows watermelons, among other crops, but this year he is battling severe drought. In the midst of this stress, Della's mother's schizophrenia returns, after many years under control. While Miles Kelly tries to

GILLIAN MCDUNN grew up in California and now lives near Raleigh, NC. Her second novel, *The Queen Bee and Me*, will be published in 2020. *Caterpillar Summer* has been honored as an Indies Introduce, Kids Indie Next Top Ten, and Junior Library Guild selection. It received starred reviews from *Kirkus* and *Publishers Weekly*.

ABOVE Illustration by Alisa Coburn, *Caterpillar and Chicken: The Marmalade Mystery*, from the novel

manage both farming and his wife's paranoid hallucinations, Della manages her baby sister and works the produce stand with Arden, her best friend. She hides her mother's relapse even from Arden, because she hates when people merely "see a *sad family with big problems*," and she believes, "they'd go around treating me and Mama and Daddy and even Mylie like we were made out of glass, ready to shatter any second" (32). She notices that her father deflects questions from outsiders, too, "each of his words as carefully picked as the strawberries we sold in the spring" (39). As Suzanne Kelly's illness progresses, Della fears her return to the mental hospital and their separation. Della begins to give up things she loves, like Emily Dickinson's poetry, because she feels guilty about anything that steals time from helping her mother and sister. Even the sweetness of watermelon sours.

From her mother's old stories, Della has learned folklore surrounding "The Bee Lady," Miss Tabitha Quigley, whose family's honey has healed Maryville ailments for generations. Della believes that it will heal her mother's mind, too – her last hope – and she sets out to cure her. However, magic is not what Suzanne needs in order to heal.

Cindy Baldwin's prose is sophisticated, and although this novel is grouped as a middle grade book, it easily passes for adult reading, while still capturing the feelings of a preteen through Della's tender insecurities and curiosities. The depiction of nature can be enchanting, too, but the magic is ephemeral, as Baldwin outlines the friction between parent and child when both

are helpless to "fix" someone beloved. With frankness, she depicts the way that families can turn on one another during a crisis, but she also opens pathways to peace.

If *Caterpillar Summer* is a model coastal novel, *Where the Watermelons Grow* embodies rural Carolina life. Every page is saturated with metaphors of earth, atmosphere, and agriculture. Most of all, it is saturated by humidity and heat. The reader endures the pressure of suffocating air that refuses to rain. Baldwin's pathetic fallacy becomes a character of its own throughout the novel, as Della feels her painful emotions reflected outdoors, like a Fury that pursues her, adding to her burdens and intensifying her anger. At the climax, Della says, "The world burned up around me," and, "the hurting in Daddy's voice was . . . so sharp it cut into me the way a shovel slices through dirt" (182–83).

Della experiences an internal drought, unable to cry about her mother's illness, which makes her feel unnatural. When she longs for the sky to let down its deluge, the urgency is as metaphorical as physical – "The air around me was hot and heavy with raindrops that couldn't figure out how to fall" (193) – and she wishes that "the sky would just open up and cry all the tears I couldn't" (118). Della feels betrayed as she hears thunder "rumbling off at the corner of the world like a broken promise" (193). She has lost faith in her parents' promise of protection, along with the hope of a downpour.

This elemental language weaves through the life and breath of the novel. A reader would not mistake its imagery

for the sublime storms of a Nicolas Poussin painting, nor the descriptions in a tempestuous Brontë novel. Every mood of Carolina weather is painted by a hand well-acquainted with our summers, and Baldwin's technique does not feel cliché or contrived, even as the drama of each scene heightens because of sky and terrain. Even the inanimate, broken tractor and a power outage darken significant moments.

Baldwin uses Della's descriptions to remind us that, although she is mature for her age, she is still very much a child. She likens her mother's damp pajamas to "papier-mâché on a piñata," plastered to her skin (123), and when she finds her mother obsessively scrubbing with bleach, she remembers its chemical dangers from science class (117). Most poignantly, the playhouse that she and Arden had built the happy summer before becomes her desperate refuge whenever she needs to escape the stress of home.

Baldwin offers lessons on mental health that children may relate to, especially those who face such a confusing abstraction within their own families. Della inches toward having the bravery to face it for what it is, but she learns that it is okay for a child to feel weak or scared. Some things are bigger than we are, but we have to hold onto our individuality in the process and continue to try to love the families we are born into. Her father teaches her that, regardless of schizophrenia, her mother deserves dignity and that it is hurtful to call someone "crazy" when she did not ask for illness (230). He encourages Della to have patience, even if the "old" Mama never fully returns, because that mother's heart will always love her. Like Cat Gladwell and her mom, Della and her father learn to open their hearts to each other and express their needs candidly, helping each other move forward as a team. ■

THE ROAD TO CHANGE

a review by *Brianne Holmes*

Brenda Rufener. *Where I Live*. HarperTeen, 2018.

—. *Since We Last Spoke*. HarperTeen, 2019.

BRIANNE HOLMES received her BA in Communications with a writing concentration from Anderson University and her MA in English with a creative writing concentration from East Carolina University. She is currently employed at Erskine College.

BRENDA RUFENER, a technical writer turned novelist, graduated from Whitman College, focusing on English and Biology. *Where I Live* is her first novel.

Brenda Rufener's two young adult novels, *Where I Live* and *Since We Last Spoke*, are heavy but hopeful. Both novels boldly confront weighty social issues and grapple with emotionally charged subject matter. Remarkably, they do so in ways that remain true to the stories, only occasionally drifting into heavy-handed social commentary.

Where I Live, Rufener's debut novel, opens with an intriguing premise. The protagonist and narrator, Linden Rose, is snarky, smart, and secretly homeless. Linden's main objective is to avoid becoming a ward of the state, even if this means hoodwinking her high school's administration and deceiving her two best friends, Ham and Seung. Linden lives inside her small-town high school and develops clever personal protocols to avoid discovery. Early in the novel, she narrates, "We're all footsteps from death's iced embrace. But homelessness? I'm one step ahead. Living by rules I designed will keep me there" (1). Linden actually wants to remain homeless because she believes this will give her the autonomy to shape her own future.

Linden is capable and independent, but her situation becomes increasingly complicated as she and her friend Seung begin to develop romantic feelings for one another. Linden must decide whether she can build a relationship without complete truth and trust.

While the plot of the novel is fast-paced and engaging, transitions in the story are sometimes abrupt and confusing. Sudden changes in location or jumps in time occur without sufficient details to ground the reader in the action. In addition, the nov-

el's supporting cast members occasionally become caricatures rather than characters, present in the story to fill a role or make a point, and at times the dialogue seems a bit unnatural.

That said, Rufener maintains a strong narrative voice and creates characters who are genuinely endearing. Linden refers to herself and her two best friends as "the Triangle." All three are intensely loyal and delightfully quirky. With no biological relatives of her own, Linden claims the Triangle as her family and quotes a mob movie to support her assertion that family is "who you are sworn to, not who you were born to" (326). The friendship between Linden, Ham, and Seung forms the emotional and thematic core of the story. Kindness and friendship offer hope in the midst of the harshest of circumstances.

Throughout the novel, Rufener grapples with the issue of homelessness in a way that is both engaging and personal. With Linden as the first-person narrator, the reader is able to experience her constant anxiety, along with the mental and physical stress of daily survival. At the same time, Linden longs for love and acceptance like any other teen, like any other human. These ordinary human desires make her both likable and believable.

Not only does the book bring homelessness to a personal level, its subplot highlights the issue of domestic violence. As the story progresses, Linden, Ham, and Seung begin to suspect that their classmate Bea is in an abusive relationship. This suspicion dredges up unwanted memories for Linden as her mother was also a victim of domestic violence. While

this subplot has its interesting moments, it mostly distracts attention from the main plot. The minor characters involved in the subplot are less subtly portrayed and, therefore, less believable than the other characters in the novel. At times, they seem to exist merely for the purpose of highlighting a social issue. On the other hand, the novel's minor characters do help to create a sense of the larger community in which Linden struggles to build her life. This raises interesting questions concerning the role of the community in supporting and protecting its members. What are we to do when we think someone we know is being mistreated? How are we to respond? While the subplot may, at times, seem forced, it does foster a relevant discussion on individuals' responsibility toward one another.

At its core, the novel is a coming-of-age story. In order to continue with confidence into the future, Linden must face her tragic past and her uncertain present. Ultimately, she must contend with the realization that love is costly: "People hurt you whether intentionally or not. The pain comes when you're aware of how you feel. The pain comes when you love" (237).

Rufener's second novel, *Since We Last Spoke*, deals with similar themes of love, family, and friendship, but it tackles different social and emotional issues. This novel is largely concerned with the effects of grief and guilt on individuals, families, and relationships.

Set on the shores of a lake in Western North Carolina, the story revolves around teens Aggi Frank and Max Granger, who

PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY CARAWAN
SANDY SHORES PHOTOGRAPHY



have been neighbors and friends their entire lives and who fall in love during their junior year of high school. Their romance is cut short, however, when Aggi's older sister, Kate, and Max's older brother, Cal, get into a car wreck with Kate at the wheel. Cal is killed in the wreck, and Kate, overcome with guilt and sorrow, commits suicide. The grieving families hurl blame at one another and forbid any interaction between Aggi and Max. Of course, the star-crossed lovers inevitably do meet again, a year after the accident. When they finally find themselves face-to-face, they must choose what they will do with a year's worth of grief, guilt, suspicion, and unrequited love.

With a family feud for a backdrop, this novel could have become just another *Romeo and Juliet* retelling. Rufener is too inventive for that, however. The narrative focuses more on the choices each character makes in response to tragedy. Aggi's mother withdraws, and her father turns to alcohol and rage. Max's parents numb themselves with excessive television. Aggi and Max are stranded in the middle, trying to process their own grief and make the right choices with very little guidance.

Stylistically, *Since We Last Spoke* is far superior to *Where I Live*. *Since We Last Spoke* is almost entirely free of the awkward transitions that hampered the rhythm of the first novel. In addition, the characters are more believable, and the dialogue is more authentic. Rufener also makes excellent use of silence in this novel as Aggi and Max spend more time *not* talking than they do talking. This silence creates tension, and the characters' internal monologues are far more poignant than anything they could have said. When Aggi and Max do speak, their dialogue is often believably awkward. Throughout the novel, Rufener employs a split point of view with chapters alternating between Aggi's and Max's perspectives. This underscores the frequent misjudgments the characters make when trying to assess one another's motivations.

Like Rufener's first novel, this story emphasizes the redemptive power of friendship and love. At the beginning of the novel, Aggi narrates, "My sister Kate told me love was glue, a strong adhesive holding people together. She swore it worked as a protective layer of bulletproof glass, something shatter-free. *Love sticks together when the*

world around you fractures into pieces, Kate said” (1). As Aggi witnesses the shattering of her family and endures her separation from Max, she questions whether her sister was right. As the story progresses, however, love and friendship serve to piece Aggi’s life back together. Max’s best friend, Henry, and Aggi’s best friend, Umé, embody loyalty and kindness. In fact, Henry and Umé are the wheels that turn the plot as they conspire together to reunite Aggi and Max. As their families fail them, the teens find stability and support within their friendships.

In this novel, Rufener confronts the issue of suicide. Kate’s suicide results in traumatic effects for her family and friends, effects she clearly did not intend. Through flashbacks in Aggi’s narration, Kate is portrayed sympathetically in the midst of her despair. The

flashbacks also reveal Aggi’s love and idolization of her older sister. At the same time, the devastating consequences of Kate’s actions are borne out through the story. The narration also hints that another key character may be contemplating suicide, and a portion of the action centers around efforts to prevent another tragedy.

Rufener also deals with the issue of abusive sibling bullying. Max’s best friend Henry is a gentle giant, but he comes from a home where violence is normal and most members of his family have criminal records. In particular, Henry’s twin brothers focus their abusive tendencies on him. Like most of Rufener’s characters, Henry is dealt a difficult hand. But like most of Rufener’s characters, what he decides to do with the situation is the point. Each character has a choice. What will he or

she do with the circumstances life has brought?

Ultimately, both novels offer hope that change for individuals, friendships, and families is possible. The past may be traumatic, and the present may be difficult, but a choice must be made. Will we allow ourselves to be defined by our past, or will we choose to overcome it? As Aggi says, “The road to change isn’t always straight. . . . And sometimes in the middle of the journey, when everything around you is a muddled mess, the clearing at the end of the road is hard to see. . . . The clearing – full of sunshine and hope and bright light – might burn your eyes at first, but after they adjust, you’ll see the beauty that surrounds you and the pain will subside” (281). ■

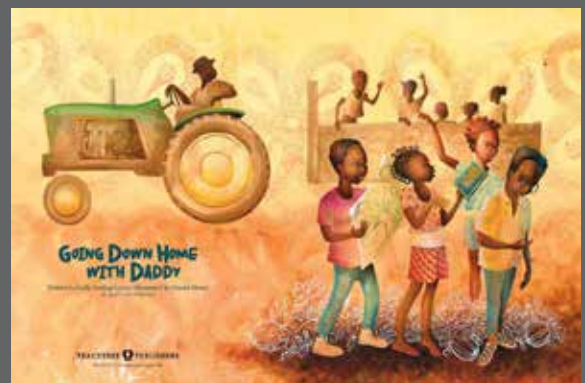
LYONS AND MINTER RECEIVE NC AAUW YOUNG PEOPLE’S LITERATURE AWARD

Kelly Starling Lyons and Daniel Minter have been awarded the 2019 North Carolina AAUW award for their book, *Going Down Home with Daddy*, published by Peachtree in Atlanta. *Kirkus Reviews* described this children’s book as “a warm, loving, necessary reminder of the power in families coming together.”¹ *Going Down Home with Daddy* tells the story of a family reconnecting with its Southern roots, when Lil Alan meets his extended family and discovers his family history, culture, and pride.

School Library Journal praised “Minter’s illustrations, rendered in an acrylic wash, [for] working in beautiful harmony with Lyons’s joyful portrait of a deeply loving multigenerational family.”² Minter graduated from the Art Institute of Atlanta.

A Raleigh resident, Lyons is a Pittsburgh native who earned her BA in African American Studies and her MS

in Magazine Journalism from Syracuse University in New York. This is her second NC AAUW award from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. ■



COURTESY OF PEACHTREE

¹ Rev. of *Going Down Home with Daddy* by Kelly Starling Lyons, Daniel Minter, *Kirkus Reviews* 28 Jan. 2019: [web](#).

² Lauren Strohecker, rev. of *Going Down Home with Daddy*, *School Library Journal* 1 Apr. 2019: [web](#).

NORTH CAROLINA FOODS AND FOODWAYS, A CONSUMING PASSION

*a review by Lorraine Hale
Robinson*

Nanette Davidson. *The Folk School Cookbook*. John C. Campbell Folk School, 2018.

Georgann Eubanks. *The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods through the Year*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

LORRAINE HALE ROBINSON wrote, from 1998 to 2007, the entries in *NCLR's* serialized "dictionary of North Carolina Writers," as well as various articles (many food-related), sidebars, and reviews, while serving as Senior Associate Editor of *NCLR*. See, in particular, her original recipe for stuffed collards, which *NCLR* published in the 2007 issue. She retired in 2012, but continues to respond enthusiastically and wisely when called upon for advice and book reviews.

On a typical day, minute by minute, we rarely think about the atmosphere that we inhale and exhale, day-in, day-out. But food we think, we plan. This sort of planning has a long history. Menna (probably scribe to Pharaoh Thoth Moses IV, 1380 BCE) decided that "you can take it with you" and that you'd better, so his tomb is stockpiled with a small mountain of provisions for the journey into the afterlife.

The diurnal decisions about what to eat and when to eat consume us. Should we cut out the carbs, eat like a paleo, go vegan, or score a double cheeseburger? The abundance in our stores and markets and food establishments is staggering. We are vibrating to the tension between choosing kale smoothies or sugar-chocopops for breakfast, an apple or a candy bar as a snack.

Whether we are "breatharian" or omnivorous, *if* we eat and *how* we eat and *where* we eat and *when* we eat are profound signifiers of both personal and broader cultural values; and, unlike some personal behaviors that remain, for the most part, quite private, eating is often a shared activity, be it a family birthday party, a Thanksgiving dinner, or a wedding reception. While we might close the doors to some rooms in our house, we throw open the door to the dining room.

So at multiple levels, food expresses our broader life philosophy and is a major component of our cultural identity, validating the things that we deem important. This validation often takes the form of how we apportion our resources: we make lists to help us decide whether or not to splurge on those sky-high steaks or on

that exotic vegetable. So food is connected to economics. Food also faces us with decisions that have political implications: do we buy non-GMO items or "fair trade" products?

In 2018, nearly eighteen million hardcopy cookbooks alone were purchased. Obviously, the augured demise of the hardcopy cookbook has been greatly exaggerated. And one can trace recipe writing back to 6000 BCE's receipt for something in Britain called Nettle Pudding and two early Mesopotamian recipes for beer (those Mesopotamians had their priorities right). So what is it about food writing (cookbooks and other food-related books) that generates sales in the millions?

There is a hunger for what food "means" to people, whether that meaning is family associations, exotic ingredients, or cross-cultural connections. Food both creates and reinforces meaning; food words are threaded through our language. A woman calls her boyfriend "sweetie." The team's loss at season's end is a "bitter" pill. The old sailor's language is pretty "salty." That supervisor is a real "sourpuss." Food – how to produce/gather/forage/fish it; how to get enough of it and when and where it's needed or wanted. We just can't get away from it.

Food is nourishment at so many levels: when we dine in or dine out, we are restoring ourselves, the original meaning of "restaurant," from the French *restaurer*. And as food nourishes, so can food writing. The *smörgåsbord* of contemporary food writing encompasses cookbooks, memoirs, cultural histories, agricultural treatises, books on economics or geography,

and more. So what should the best food writing be and do?

Great food writing should be engaging, expressive of the personality of the writer; it should be dynamic in the sense that the field of food writing is a constantly changing “organism”; and it should be “connected” – situated meaningfully at the intersection of alimentary elements and the larger cultural story.

How do food and culture connect? One illustrative anecdote: a few years ago, a lovely Southern lady in New Bern felt more confident of the success of her granddaughter’s marriage because Aunt Laura’s homemade pulled mints were on the reception table. And further evidence of the cultural implications of food: the 2019 North Carolina Literary and Historical Association’s Annual Meeting features a keynote address by Bridgette Lacy, Raleigh food and arts writer, on the cultural institution of Sunday dinner.

The best North Carolina food writing mines the remarkable abundance and variety of the Old North State’s foods and foodways. The state’s Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services enumerates with pride: “grown, raised, caught, made – got to be North Carolina,” and this alimentary affluence along with the last twenty years of North Carolina-based James Beard award winners is making North Carolina a culinary destination. So how can we enjoy this bounty? Here is a nourishing and *calorie-free* way to enjoy North Carolina’s foods

and foodways: the following two new food volumes constitute a feast.

Engaging, dynamic, and connected, ***The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods Through the Year*** by **Georgann Eubanks** is a felicitous addition to North Carolina food writing. Eubanks reminds us of the transitory nature of everything in her quote from Epictetus’s *The Golden Sayings* that provides inspiration for the title of the book. Permanence is illusory, but what we can enjoy with greatest intensity is something at the point of its “ripeness.” Eubanks selects and squeezes the delicious nectar from twelve of the state’s heritage foods. The volume is enhanced by photographs by Donna Campbell and exquisite illustrations by Carol Misner, the latter worthy of framing. A bibliography, both general and chapter-specific, invites the hungry reader to explore further, and Eubanks’ useful index points the reader to specifics. Here is a book that also satisfies as you hold it in your hands. There is beauty everywhere: the table of contents is both textual and visual, the strong typeface chapter titles delicately underpinned by Misner’s paintings, so, for the reader, which chapter to devour first? Eubanks has chosen her “food of the month” with respect to some expected North Carolina favorites but delights with some surprising selections. Shad and scuppernongs might have been



COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS

anticipated, but snow cream (that most ephemeral of ingredients for those of us downeast) and serviceberries? The author does not just hold up a mirror to North Carolina’s gustatory largesse; rather her handsome book is a dispersive prism revealing unexpected palate/palette nuances each month.

Anticipation as an enhancer drives the entire volume. In writing about North Carolina’s official state fruit, Eubanks’s wait for scuppernongs each fall “makes them so much sweeter” (xi). Her September chapter on scuppernongs explains in detail the “method” for those not familiar with how to eat the fruit. Yes, the hulls are like leather (*tough* leather) and the meat is simply resistant in the mouth, but, for fans, the flavor of the juice makes the work worth it. Eubanks ties the grape to her own family story of how her mother and grandmother put up scuppernong jelly in the late days of summer. But Eubanks

ABOVE An example of Carol Misner’s watercolor illustrations in the book, this one from the chapter on January’s food theme, Snow

GEORGANN EUBANKS is a writer, teacher, and consultant to nonprofit groups across the country. She is director of the Table Rock Writers Workshop, was a founder of the North Carolina Writers’ Network, and is past chair of the North Carolina Humanities Council. She is the author of the *Literary Trails of North Carolina* series, published by the University of North Carolina Press for the North Carolina Arts Council. These volumes were reviewed by Robinson in *NCLR* 2008 and 2011 and in *NCLR Online* 2014.

broadens her personal story into current science by the National Institutes of Health that, just over a decade ago promoted the fruit's significant health benefits.

There is also an energy in the wide variations among Eubanks's monthly selections, but each one is, at some clear level, reflective of the "state's culture and history" (xi). Eastern North Carolina, especially, does not get much snow – some years none at all, so any snowfall is an EVENT. But every family across the state seems to have its own preferred process for snow cream. North Carolina writers Jill McCorkle and Randall Kenan and Shelby Stephenson all share memories and "methods" for making snow cream. Evaporated milk or fresh milk from the cow? Eggs or no eggs? Variation is good.

Eubanks's also does probing research that adds to the reader's understandings and experience. February's chapter on goat's milk reveals information about goat breeds and the range of their behaviors: "When a goat stares directly at you, it's like an inquisition: the intensity can be unnerving" (20). But Eubanks is not writing dry "fact-bits"; her images are both apt and poetic, comparing the animals' movements to "tai chi" and a "barnyard pas de deux" (20). The reader really meets the goats through Eubanks's writing. But the reader does not meet just the disconcerting *animals*; we encounter Flat Rock goat-breeder Lillian Steichen Sandburg who just happens to have been the wife of Pulitzer-prize winning author Carl Sandburg.

In the November chapter on persimmons, Eubanks's explores the range of reactions to this challenging fruit. *Diospyros*

virginiana as food got very mixed reviews from various US Department of Agriculture bulletins, where the common use for persimmons was mentioned as a feed for hogs while noting that the wood of the tree (in the ebony family) is renowned for incredible hardness and beautiful striations. As for the fruit, it might be fair to say that you either love 'em or you don't. The perishable nature of the persimmons (they don't keep, and really can't ship) and the labor-intensive seed removal process make this a fruit, when fresh, for serious aficionados only. But Eubanks extends the reader's knowledge, reaching into the fields of dialectology and historical-comparative linguistics with "*putchamin*, *pasaminian*, and *pessamin* – hence the name English colonists eventually adopted for the American persimmon" (185).

Eubanks also explores science-related aspects of North Carolina's food story. In the June chapter on serviceberries, the reader meets Ashe County horticulturalist Hollis Wild and learns about how propagation changes (grafting, budding or tissue culture) relate to the serviceberry story. And then Eubanks moves into "mixology," discussing serviceberry libations incorporating bourbon or mint or prosecco. The author transports the reader back to mid-state, where Chatham County native Peyton Holland shares his mother's recipe for "Juneberry Pie." Like scuppernongs, this fruit offers its own challenges: you have to beat the birds to the berries, but at the right time and with great effort, there is nothing like the Juneberry. In this chapter, as in others about so many of North Carolina's heri-

tage foods, a parable emerges about the value of timing and hard work.

Eubanks's chapter on oysters is another testimony to hard work – no, *enormously hard and complex work*. Gambling in Las Vegas might be a more reliable method of making a living than going into shellfishing. Eubanks on her quest for the holy grail of "the best oysters" got many responses. Jimmy Phillips of Swansboro answered, "It depends what you mean by best. . . . There's best yield, best quality, best size, best flavor" (215). So here is the situation in an oyster shell: oysters are delicious; delicious and popular; delicious, popular, and overharvested. And with increased coastal development, Eubanks writes about the issues of reduced harvest and problems with run-off and with epizootic and other infections. Las Vegas might be looking better all the time. The oyster itself may make a slow comeback in coastal North Carolina, but as for the local waterman, that species may be more endangered than the bivalve being harvested. Eubanks provides a close-up of the human geography, the ecology, and the economic implications to coastal North Carolina, the second largest estuarine system in the United States. So food writing is much more than *food stuffs*: it is North Carolinians and their lives and their livelihoods, not just what's on their plates.

With her wide-ranging selections, Georgann Eubanks's volume transcends, as the children in *Oliver!* sing, magical, wonderful, marvelous, beautiful foods, engaging readers to nourish themselves on many of the state's collective stories. This

is a book to read through from cover to cover; it's also a book to sample in any given month, when the reader is ripe for what's best at that moment.

Nanette Davidson's *The Folk School Cookbook: A Collection of Seasonal Favorites from John C. Campbell Folk School* is an equally distinguished, book. This is a *big, hefty* book, weighing in at three and a half pounds. The substantial volume's cover is Suzanne DesLauriers's *Bales at Orchard House*, and the painting's inviting mountain vistas plant the reader firmly in the life of rural western North Carolina. The founder of the folk school's cooking program (in 1999) and resident cooking artist, Davidson has "helped facilitate over 600 cooking classes" (335) on a wide range of culinary topics and is an active blogger at *BrasstownPotluck.com*. The volume's photographer and art director Keather Gougler is the school's Director of Marketing whose interests extend to gardening and Morris dancing. The pied beauty of the photograph of students strolling to Keith House is just one of the images that capture and convey the allure of the campus. Photographs range from sensitive outdoor settings to close-ups of food to helpful pictures of method. And the book is graced by Sara Boggs's charming illustrations that delicately enhance page after page.

Throughout the book are attractive mini-essays on traditions and culinary culture: the reader learns "about biscuits"



COURTESY OF JOHN C. CAMPBELL FOLK SCHOOL

(181) and about New Year's traditions at Brasstown. But the book is much more than a compendium of recipes. Yes, there is the Cottage Cheese Dill Bread recipe that appeared in the school's first cookbook but present day interest in vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free preparations are also well represented with choices like Tofu Sliders, Baked Tempeh with Jamaican Jerk Sauce, and Wild Salmon Cakes. Some recipes are tied to specific activities at the Folk School. For dancers who have worked up a thirst at the all-night New Year's dance, there is Brasstown Country Dancer Punch, and the section on Spring Desserts is introduced with a short essay about the Celtic tradition of Maypole dancing, accompanied by a photograph of dancers holding the pole's colored streamers out in the first, so-transitory golden green of the mountains.

Like the Eubanks book, this volume is arranged seasonally. Within each segment, there are further subdivisions including Breakfasts, Salads, Soups, Entrees, and Desserts, but there are other sections that are more

seasonally focused: Jams and Chutney, Fall Festival Fare, Winter Cookies. The book "respects" each food and its preparation, whether simple (Bob Dalsemer's four magical ingredients for his shortbread) or relatively complex (North Indian Stuffed Eggplant [prepared with homemade *garam masala*] and served with Sweet Tomato Chutney), a recipe absolutely worth the time!

The book's justifiable claim is that it includes "foodways up the holler and around the world" (14). Folk School foods are often close to nature and very close to home – literally underfoot: Dandelion Jelly is made, not from the leaves (an early spring salad that many Southerners enjoy), but from the flowers themselves. But Brasstown's food universe is simultaneously expansively international: where else can we find recipes like Icelandic Almond Cake?

The Folk School Cookbook opens with four important segments *before* the reader gets to the actual recipes. Executive Director Jerry Jackson writes warmly of his own arrival into the Folk School community, characterizing life there as

ABOVE Davidson's tofu sliders

NANETTE DAVIDSON, after many years of cooking, gardening, working in restaurants and teaching classes, was asked to launch the Cooking curriculum at the Folk School in 1999, and she served as Resident Artist in Cooking until 2018. She now maintains a successful business weaving rag rugs for galleries and interior designers. She is a member of the Southern Highland Craft Guild.

"[j]oyful living . . . embodied in the mountains and the music, the craft and non-competitive learning, and the dance and art of this place" (7). But like the best food writing, the volume is about much more than "just" food: it's about *story*, as that story is told and worked out and reworked each day.

Davidson provides a detailed preface that is also grounded both in the arc of time and in the specificity of place. She drew on previous folk school cookbook volumes, as this new book "celebrate[s] seasonal change in [her] rural oasis of Southern Appalachia," acknowledging "the best time of year to serve these dishes . . . when ingredients are fresh, plentiful and in season" (9). The seasonal organization also gives scope for the vibrant photographs and illustrations.

The third pre-recipe segment is an introduction by the cookbook author and compiler's husband Jan Davidson, executive director from 1992 to 2017, emphasizing the concept that the folk school "bring[s] folks together." Family style really has meaning here, and nowhere on the campus is that merging of lives more visible than around the table: "Food at the Folk School is more than just sustenance, it's a central part of the education" (13).

The final pre-recipe segment is entitled "A Joyful, Enlivening, and Tasty History." The *story* of this place is woven into the recipes that follow, and the broad scope of Brasstown's version of the transformative Danish *folkehøjskole* movement, with its humane emphasis on collaboration, has led to the vibrance of the Brasstown community and to the richness of the cookbook itself.

A design feature of all the seasonal recipe sections is the decision to print the necessary ingredients in red. This give a visual "pop" to the page and makes shopping for or assembling ingredients easy. Along the way are occasional information segments; for example, one on that Southern staple, buttermilk. These provide expanded culinary or cultural understandings as well as information about science (kitchen or general) and health. Some of the recipes begin with a headnote about the source (often a person) of the recipe, and other recipes start with a note about a featured ingredient; still other recipes relate the food to its history and relationship with the Brasstown School.

The activities of a recipe's "method" are printed in black and are surrounded by a generous amount of white space, which invites the user of the book to add personal notes. Such a personally annotated cookbook is a multi-generational family treasure. Certainly my own "inherited" cookbooks are rich with smears of butter and spilled ingredients, but are richer still with the handwriting of great-grandparents and grandparents and parents, a palpable connection with my past. The design of the 2018 Folk School cookbook encourages this sort of time-transcending conversation. The volume also helpfully "self-refers," directing the user to related information elsewhere in the volume, and provides tips and suggests alternatives.

I have tried over a dozen of the recipes in the book and found every one of them clear to follow and tasty to eat. (I also made it a point to try at

least one recipe featuring an ingredient of which I am *not* especially fond. And that recipe was a success, beginning a bit of a conversion from my previous lack of enthusiasm.)

A few very small issues could be worked out (there will be another Folk School Cookbook in the future, I feel sure!) to make this book even better. A pan size in the recipe header is not what is actually mentioned in the recipe itself (323); another recipe in the book is referenced but the page number for the secondary recipe is not routinely provided (224); the picture accompanying a recipe appears to have an ingredient (cheese) not mentioned in the recipe itself (150–51).

The Folk School Cookbook comes full circle with its epilogue from Mads Hansen's (1834–1880) *Jeg ere en simple bondemand* (I am a simple farmer) who sings behind the plow, and the back cover of the volume extends an invitation "Join us at Our Appalachian Table." The Folk School's 2018 cooking and culture book is a "joyful and life enriching experience" (back cover) for those who love food, and the mountains, and vibrant living.

Whether your interests are specifically in food (as one experienced in the kitchen or as an "armchair cook") or more generally in North Carolina culture, *The Month of Their Ripening: North Carolina Heritage Foods Through the Year* by Georgann Eubanks and *The Folk School Cookbook: A Collection of Seasonal Favorites from John C. Campbell Folk School* are, in their own ways, deeply satisfying and highly recommended. ■

A JOURNEY AMONG STRANGERS

a review by Marjorie Hudson

Scott Huler. *A Delicious Country: Rediscovering the Carolinas along the Route of John Lawson's 1700 Expedition*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

MARJORIE HUDSON is the author of an historic travelogue, *Searching for Virginia Dare* (2002; reviewed in *NCLR* 2003; reprinted by Press 53 in 2013), and the short story collection *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas* (Press 53, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012). She published a short story and an essay on Lawson in *NCLR* 1992 and 2002, respectively, and was interviewed in *NCLR* 2016.

Raleigh resident **SCOTT HULER** is the author of seven books of nonfiction. He has written for such newspapers as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, as well as magazines like *Backpacker*, *Fortune*, and *ESPN*. His award-winning radio work has been heard on *All Things Considered* and *Day to Day* on National Public Radio and on *Marketplace* and *Splendid Table* on American Public Media. He has been a staff writer for *The Philadelphia Daily News* and the *Raleigh News & Observer* and a staff reporter and producer for Nashville Public Radio. He was the founding and managing editor of Nashville's *City Paper*. He has taught at such colleges as Berry College and UNC Chapel Hill. He is now a senior writer for *Duke Magazine*.



COURTESY OF SCOTT HULER

In 1700, a young English gentleman named John Lawson set out on a journey of a thousand miles to document twenty nations of Native people and the fascinating land, plants, and animals of the Carolinas. He later published a book about it, *A New Voyage to Carolina* (1709, 1967), and it is the most open-hearted, detailed, and humorous read of that era of Southern writing.

In late 2014, Raleigh, NC, writer Scott Huler set out to retrace John Lawson's steps and see what he could see – nature, people, civilizations – then wrote his own book. Huler says Lawson's philosophy seemed to be: "The hell with planning; this looks fun" (9). Huler, a family man with a job and obligations, mapped out his journey over a series of weekends, made a [website](#), a [blog](#), and an Instagram account ([lawsontrek](#)) for posting photos. He found naturalists and historians to guide him; some had already done extensive research to track locations on Lawson's historic path.

Huler begins, as Lawson did, in December, in Charleston, SC, ferrying across tidal waters in a heavy-laden two-man canoe.

Lawson traveled in an open cypress vessel with nine companions, including native guides, one of whom was a woman. Where Huler struggles through trackless *Spartina* marsh grass, Lawson wrote, "the most difficult Way I ever saw . . . turning and winding like a Labyrinth" (qtd. in Huler 16). One night Huler sleeps on a cabin porch and hears three varieties of common owls, "screech, barred, and great horned," all calling at once. He quotes from Lawson's description of his encounter with a great horned: "They make a fearful Hollowing in the Night-time, like a Man, whereby they often make Strangers lose their way in the Woods" (14). Guide Elizabeth Anderegg introduces Huler to the delights of "jingle shells" (22), the soundtrack for Huler's days on the coast. Eddie Deal introduces Huler to the "Sewee Shell Ring" (25), one of several enormous, centuries-old middens found on the coast, testimony to the Native people still thriving in places when Lawson came visiting.

Huler paddles up the Santee River to a place where Lawson switched to foot travel: "He seemed glad to get out of the

boat," Huler remarks. "By the time I was done I couldn't blame him" (18). The author is convinced that Lawson left the paddling to others; master of the significant detail, the man would have written about his blisters.

Here Huler begins a series of hikes through the "gloomy magnificence" (37) of cypress-tupelo swamps, patches of what were in Lawson's time vast tracts of longleaf pines, and the vivid remnants of an extraordinary Catawba settlement. Small towns are full of abandoned buildings and shops. Small-town people tell stories of how it used to be. Country stores provide fried baloney sandwiches and morning biscuits, relief from Huler's mac-n-cheese supply. The author meets with a Santee leader, who tells of her first powwow, blessed by the sudden appearance of an eagle. Lawson encountered a Waxhaw powwow: "They danced about an Hour, shewing many strange Gestures . . . turning their Bodies, Arms and Legs, into such frightful Postures, that you would have guess'd they had been quite raving mad" (56). Lawson ate, among other things, "Deers, which were very poor, and their Maws full of large Grubs" and Santee-style barbecue: venison ripped to shreds by women's teeth, then pounded and stewed.

Huler's account follows a path curving west past dammed rivers, then north to the very center of Charlotte, NC, where he stands on the corner of Trade

and Tryon streets, overlaying the historic confluence of the north-south Great Trading Path that Lawson followed and a second trading path that connected Cherokee people to the coast. Every day brings encounters with traces of John Lawson's world. And every day brings encounters with ordinary present-day people in economically depressed towns who have extraordinary things to say.

In Salisbury, NC, Huler speaks with two black men. One says, "Don't forget to see the hanging tree," then the other advises Huler to "Google 'lynching' and 'Salisbury'" (139). Just down the road in Denton, NC, Huler starts to walk away from a store selling Confederate flags, then returns, determined to report on all the people he encounters. The shop keeper leads him into a heated but surprisingly civil conversation covering a wildly variant point of view on the causes of the Civil War.

As Huler's path turns eastward through the North Carolina Piedmont toward Albemarle Sound, he falls into a funk. Lawson's world is barely recognizable anymore. Standing in an

outdoors supply shop, Huler "got the willies" (163) from all the irony; he is surrounded by development, country music is playing nostalgic songs about small towns, yet all the little towns he's been encountering are abandoned to the point of disappearing.

Like Lawson, Huler "never felt happier than when I was fortunate enough to have the locals tell me things" (25). In addition to random strangers, scholars, and guides, Huler seeks out more descendants of the tribal people who still live where Lawson found them: Catawba, Waxhaw, Eno. Catawba language preservationist Beckee Garris greets Huler with "Natchedeha," which means "I am happy to see you" (109). Small towns are disappearing, but tribal people, after decimation, wars, and suppression, are standing up for their culture and people.

Huler wraps up his journey with a discussion of the second part of Lawson's book, where the explorer tells outrageous stories of fishing racoons and bellowing alligators and lays out the admirable qualities of the Native people, "the freest People in the World" who "care

COURTESY OF SCOTT HULER



RIGHT Douglas and Jean Guerry hosting Huler during his travels (Douglas is likely a direct descendant of people who hosted John Lawson.)

OPPOSITE Scott Huler leaving Grimesland, NC, on the last day of the Lawson Trek

for the widow and orphan" (213). Then he gives a clear-eyed, angry account of how English people are destroying them. Lawson "gives us a glimpse into what it would have looked like, what it would have felt like, to walk around in the last moments of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth." Huler has tried, in turn, "by walking through highway underpasses and eating at lunch counters and talking to everyone I met, to give a glimpse of the second decade of the twenty-first" (217). The twenty-first holds only a patchwork of delicious country remnants from Lawson's time. Huler's work gives a haunting sense that in the Carolinas today, as in Lawson's time, entire civilizations of people in small villages are hanging on by a thread.

This reader hopes that Huler's adventure introduces more people to John Lawson and that the author's contemporary trek



COURTESY OF SCOTT HULER

brings more awareness to his own work: six other nonfiction books on such diverse topics as NASCAR, *The Beaufort Scale*, and *The Odyssey*. Huler chooses subjects that snag at surfaces but reveal great depths; he puts his mind and body on a journey of encounter, then

brings science and history to life by including human stories.

Lawson's journey haunts Carolina's nature and travel writers. I've heard more than one of them yearn to do just what Huler did. Reading *A Delicious Country*, preferably in a hammock tied between two trees, may be the next best thing. ■

Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize

\$1000 for winner and finalists selected for publication
(at least \$250 for the prize-winning essay)

**ANNOUNCING A NEW SUBMISSION PERIOD:
JANUARY 15–MARCH 1
2020 FINAL JUDGE: PHILIP GERARD**

2020 winner and select finalists will be published in our 30th issue.

No submission fee; subscription required instead.

Congratulations and Gratitude

by Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

Congratulations to Faith Holsaert, whose essay was selected by Tony Earley for the 2019 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize. New to *NCLR*, she asked us to publish it in the online issue, so you can read it in this section. Several of the Applewhite Poetry Prize finalists are also new to our pages. Enjoy their poems here, too. The winner and others selected for special honors will be published in the print issue, due out this summer.

I'd like to take this space to thank the numerous visual artists who have generously allowed us to feature their work throughout this issue. Our Art Editor, Diane Rodman, is tireless in her search for sources of North Carolina art. She has an amazing talent for matching literary content with visual art, and we're grateful to have her continue on the *NCLR* staff, even after her retirement from ECU last year. We thank, too, the gallery and museum staff members who help us acquire many of our art selections. We invite artists and gallery owners to bring work to Diane's attention.

The generosity of artists and writers is much appreciated, but we agree with granting agencies that their talent should be recognized with remuneration. And now that we have the John Ehle Prize to award the author of an article on or interview with a neglected writer, we would like to add a similar prize for such content on a new North Carolina writer. If you are inclined to support *NCLR* toward these goals, please contact [Jessica Nottingham](#) in the ECU Harriot College of Arts and Sciences or turn to the back cover of this issue for a direct link to our Foundation fund.

You can also support *NCLR* by [subscribing](#). Subscribers not only receive the annual print issue, but also can submit to *NCLR*'s competitions, with no additional submission fee. We just require a subscription. We certainly hope the authors of the books reviewed in this issue will subscribe and submit their writing to our upcoming competitions. Note the new submission periods announced earlier in this issue. ■

Call for Submissions for *NCLR* 30 (2021)

**NORTH
CAROLINA
LITERARY
REVIEW**

FEATURING HEALING THROUGH WRITING

Submit interviews with and critical analyses of
North Carolina writers living here or elsewhere.

DEADLINE AUGUST 31, 2020*

Submit poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction
through our three competitions.

DEADLINES VARY BY GENRE*

* For more information, writers' guidelines,
and submission instructions, go to:

www.nclr.ecu.edu/submissions

NORTH CAROLINA

Miscellany

- 178** *How I Was Mothered*
the 2019 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize story by Faith S. Holsaert
art by Dawn Surratt
- 190** *The Sacred Strangeness of the Mother*
a review by Helen Stead
art by Barbara Tyroler
Samia Serageldin and Lee Smith, Editors,
Mothers and Strangers: Essays on Motherhood from the New South
- 192** *Credit Where It's Due*
a poem by Emily Banks
art by Carolyn DeMeritt
- 194** *A True Spectrum of Queer North Carolina Writing*
a review by David Deutsch
Wilton Barnhardt, Editor, *Every True Pleasure: LGBTQ Tales of North Carolina*
- 196** *Treatise on Whether to Write the Mango*
a poem by Eric Tran
art by Kenny Nguyen
- 198** *Stories of Ordinary People in Uncomfortable Situations*
a review by James W. Kirkland
George Singleton, *Staff Picks*
- 202** *Mount Zion Cemetery*
a poem by Betty Ritz Rogers
art by Angela Franks Wells
- 203** *Finding Hope and Goodness among Life's Twists*
a review by Barbara Bennett
Belle Boggs, *The Gulf*
Kathryn Schwillie, *What Luck, This Life*
- 206** *At Carolina Beach*
a poem by Anna Lena Phillips Bell
art by Mitchell Lonas
- 208** *No Other Stories Like These: The Liminal Lives of Other(ed) Women*
a review by Savannah Paige Murray
Mesha Maren, *Sugar Run*
Etaf Rum, *A Woman is No Man*
- 211** *The Tender*
a poem by Barbara Campbell
art by Jane Cheek
- 212** *Sensible Solutions to Discomfort*
a review by Laura Sloan Patterson
Maura Way, *Another Bungalow*
- 214** *Baba Yaga After a Bad Tinder Date*
a poem by John Frank Haugh
art by Jean LeCluyse
- 216** *On the Demise of a Bibliophile*
a poem by Michael Gaspeny
art by Daniel Essig
- 217** "We will never forgive one another / for being human"
a review by Hannah Crane Sykes
Emilia Phillips, *Empty Clip*
Kevin Rippin, *Amber Drive*
- 220** *After the Acquittal*
a poem by Amy Elsie Parkes
art by Taylor O. Thomas
- 222** *The Memory of Objects*
a review by Joseph Mills
Mark Cox, *Readiness*
Holly Iglesias, *Sleeping Things*
- 226** *My Life in Shreds*
a poem Jonathan Giles
art by Thomas Schmidt



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 6** ■ **North Carolina Expatriate Writers**
poetry, prose, interviews,
book reviews, and literary news
- 80** ■ **Flashbacks: Echoes of Past Issues**
poetry, book reviews, and literary news

2019 ALEX ALBRIGHT
CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER

from *Matrilineal*

BY FAITH S. HOLSAERT

WITH ART BY DAWN SURRATT

HOW

MY FATHER WANTS HIS MOTHER'S ATTENTION, but she is behind a door and they say, *Shh*. The house is cold; the wood of the wainscoting dark. He plays with his toy trains. *James, you are so apathetic*, his sister chides. There is a photo of him as a one-year-old, angry black eyes; he sits in the midst of his baby skirts. He has four names: James Manning Burton Holsaert. His sister has heard that word, *apathetic* applied to their mother.

I WAS

The word, *invalid*; later when he looks it up in the dictionary on its heavy stand, means *inauthentic* or *sick*.

His sister's hair flames like an apricot, bushy *like a heathen's*, their father says. Because his wife has absented herself from family life, the father judges their appearance before church. The boy, with his neat skull, wears gray pants like his father and a white shirt and a tie. *Where is that jacket?* His father says, *Damn it James*.

MOTHERED

FAITH S. HOLSAERT has published fiction since the 1980s and has begun to publish poetry. She co-edited *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (University of Illinois Press, 2010). She earned her MFA from Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, NC, and lives in Durham, NC, with her partner, Vicki Smith. "Matrilineal" is part of a longer piece in six parts.

Tony Earley, selected Holsaert's story for the prize saying, "I found myself mesmerized by the writing. Set in the lost worlds of mid-century Manhattan and pre-Duvalier Haiti, the piece is lyrically evocative in its world-building and precisely-focused in its concerns – the ways in which we seek to combine the families into which we are born, and the families we choose for ourselves, into the one family that will keep us alive. It's a remarkable piece of writing about a remarkable confluence of American lives."

His father left the ministry because, the boy has heard him say, it was not right to expect the parish to provide for a man with a family and an invalid wife. Now his father is a banker. James has no idea what this means, except the bank is as cold as their Manasquan, New Jersey house.

The boy dreams of going outdoors, dreams the sun turns his hair apricot, dreams he can feel a smile in his mouth, dreams his father is outdoors beside him. They are running round and round a driveway. The boy runs until he begins to sweat into his fine shirt, until his shoes are scuffed. He is talking while he is running. *Dad, look. Dad. Dad, look at me. I am a horse. Dad. Look.* And his father in sober gray is running and sweating, too, and tipping his head, which is wreathed in light, to gaze down and sideways. If it wouldn't topple them he would stretch out his gentleman's hand and lay it briefly upon the boy's neat hair.

My mother Eunice says her mother wouldn't feed her eggs, or butter, or chocolate because Grandma Spellman did not want my mother to be *sallow*, code for dark and *not American enough*. To the end of her life, my mother scours her dusky skin with Dr. Palmer's Almomeal Compound, which comes in a tin. Her skin looks peeled and glassy when she is done, but not paler. Generally, my mother favors my younger sister, but she aggressively watches my sister, darker than I, for signs of *sallowness*. In that late-elementary-school time when we didn't always wash scrupulously, my mother takes a rough cloth to my sister's neck and scrubs as if that slightly darker ring is a pestilence to be *wiped out*, rubbed until my sister's neck is crimson.

My mother says the photographer tossed the tulle at her at the last moment because she would not lie smiling and naked on the white sheepskin.

She was to be the center cameo in the framed photos: her brother Howard, who would molest my mother; her sister Toni who would commit suicide; her brother Bob who would give her a massive collie dog won in a card game with a cab driver. My mother says she refused to lie naked on the rug. She says they were exasperated. In the sepia photo, her lip has only just stopped trembling and the tears would still be on her cheek if someone had not wiped them away. She clutches the tulle draped around her shoulders.

My mother says the echoing apartment near Riverside Drive was lonely. There is a photo of her on the sidewalk with a white fur muff, which my sister and I thought was a wonder. The sun glances off her, a little girl with her muff in a sheath of brightness. In the apartment, it was often just she, the fourth and much younger child, and the Irish women who worked there. Sometimes she went to Mass with these women. She made a red cross for herself out of sealing wax,

GRANDMA SPELLMAN DID NOT WANT MY MOTHER TO BE SALLOW, CODE FOR DARK AND NOT AMERICAN ENOUGH.

which enraged her mother. I imagine the Irish women as teenagers, not that much older than my five or six-year-old mother.

My mother says her father drank because her mother was so terrible. Every morning there was an empty bottle in his trash in the bedroom. How did she know? Youngest, alone, roaming the apartment? Dead-set against the mother who couldn't nourish her, the mother who believed the older, blue-eyed brother.

My mother says, her brother Howard, the Yalie in the days when Yale had such a strict

DAWN SURRATT earned her BA in Studio Art from UNC Greensboro. After earning a BA and MA in Social Work from the University of Georgia, she worked as a hospice social worker for over twenty years. Her work with dying patients in hospice settings is the backbone of her imagery combining photographs with photography-based book structures, installations, and objects as visual meditations exploring concepts of grief, transition,

healing and spirituality. Her work has been published in *The Hand Magazine*, *SHOTS*, and *Diffusion*, as well as on numerous book covers. She exhibits nationally, and her work is held in private collections throughout the US. She is a 2016 Critical Mass Finalist and a 2018 nominee for the Royal Photography Society's 100 Heroines. She is currently a full-time artist living in rural North Carolina with her husband. See more of her work on her [website](#).

Jewish quota that my grandfather applied for Howard's enrollment on the day of Howard's birth, this Howard who did the un-Jewish but very American thing of fighting in World War I, the Navy, forever on the armoire in black and white under glass in his uniform, that Howard *tried* to molest her. She says. Something about his trying to catch her in a corridor in that apartment. She says she escaped him. She never says, but I am sure she never told her parents. She says he tried, as if he didn't succeed, but I know in her lifelong terrors, her lifelong valor of a feist dog throwing itself at the churning tires of a moving coal truck, know in her anxiety, know in her marginality, that he, ten years older than the dark and fierce five-year-old, he succeeded.

And the merciful brother Bob saw or guessed, or she told him, and Bobby won the massive mahogany and cream collie in a card game and brought it home to his little sister and said, "Buddy sleeps in your room. Every night. Every single night."

I GAZE UPON A WORLD THAT I HAVE NO REASON TO FEAR.

I am ready. My eyes are big with astonishment at this place I have found myself, so recently seized from the womb while my mother was adrift in ether. My mother's dark hands, in the black and white photo are almost as big as I am, are bone and sinew, speaking of exhaustion. Because of her cough, my mother wears a paper mask to protect me. Nearby, a tiny glass bottle with a rubber nipple. In 1943, they thought this was best for a newborn. Maybe the ether, the mask, the glass bottle were the only way they knew to usher in, breathe the same air as, nourish, and protect themselves against their love for my life, which came from another place.

The neat folds in the white organdy dress are from the store box, a crisp grid down to my baby feet. I am less than a week old. My dark eyes open to this world and the fingers of one hand pluck at the organdy, the dress bought by my red-headed aunt, my father's older sister, who calls my mother, *The Jewess*, and will never call the name of my second mother, the mother I will choose for our

family, my chosen mother a New Englander like my aunt, but unlike my aunt and my father who trace their family to Dutch settlers, my mother Charity is the granddaughter of enslaved people.

I gaze upon a world that I have no reason to fear. Not quite the case, as I have made the birth journey in a 1940s hospital named Misericordia in the Bronx, territory unknown to my Manhattan parents, Misericordia, a Catholic hospital, where my parents fear if a choice must be made, the baby would be saved at the expense of the mother's life. During the birth my mother was knocked out by ether that straightened her wavy black hair for the rest of her life, severed the conscious connection between myself in her insides and her, my mother who had carried me nine months. The ether would have effected the flow of oxygen into my being, before I was yanked from her womb and down the birth canal. Five pounds three ounces, baby of a cigarette-smoking mother.

On that day resting on my silken pillow, resplendent in white, I am perfect, my parents' jewel in organdy dress with the department store folds, the little feet peeking from under the hem. I am perfect.

I am perfectly alone. My mother holds me, her shoulders high; she wears a pleated mask over her mouth; we cannot see her mouth – is she smiling? is she tight-lipped? She feeds me from a glass bottle. She rests me in a receiving blanket on my father's lap. His hand, resting lightly on my chest is even bigger than hers. The red and cream cocker spaniel watches over me. My cloth diaper, which my mother is still awkward in pinning in place, is wet. My mouth is a rosebud. My parents will panic when it crumples into a cry.

Still in pajamas, dopey with sleep, I come from the room where I sleep alone.

My parents' bedroom is disheveled. The rocking chair has been moved from the living room to my parents' bedside. The bedsheets are heaped here and there. The window shades have not been drawn open. There are garments on the floor. My father is in a bathrobe which hasn't been tied at the waist.

"Come." My father touches my shoulder. "The baby came last night." My mother bends over the crib.

For all my life so far, it has been the three of us. For all my life, it has been so lonely and frightening.

I stand by my mother's side next to the portable crib, peering through the slats. My sister.

Never only three of us again. Her backbone a universe. Her head no larger than my dolly Elizabeth's. My mother is oiling the baby's back. Standing above me, she pours oil into my hand. My hand is so small its entirety rests in my mother's palm. She places my hand palm down upon my sister's back. My sister sends heat up my arm. I like smoothing the oil on that squirming beadwork of her spine, and down the thin flat buttocks and chicken bone legs to the feet that are smaller than my father's thumb. I am touching a universe.

My mother wraps the baby in a white receiving blanket. The baby's head is in one of my mother's hands and the skinny bottom in the other. "Deborah," my mother says. The baby frowns, which makes me smile, unlike when my parents frown, which makes me go still. "Her name is Deborah," my mother says. The baby thrusts out one arm, a twig, the fingers stiff and going in all directions. She makes a kitten noise.

"Hi," I say and reach for her hand. I want to tickle her and make her play like a kitten. "Faith, be careful," my father says.

I ignore him, because I have fallen into the enormity of her, my sister, slipped through those quivering navy blue eyes into the heart of her. I say *hi* silently, because I understand that my parents think *Deborah* is fragile, but after that swift fall into her eyes, I know my sister is the toughest person I have ever met.

She is the music teacher at the school where my mother walks me every morning, and I go up flights of stairs to the very top, and I have a cubby and a pad for nap time, and we fingerpaint and play with blocks. A special thing that happens, some days our teacher Sarah says, *Children take off your shoes and socks and put your chairs in a circle.* We are very quiet because we *can't wait* until Charity arrives and we love the cool silky floor under our still-plump feet. We will sing and dance and play the tambourine and the Chinese gong and the rattles and we will feel happy the way Charity makes us feel. We will roll around on the floor like little brass wagons; in the sedate 1940s, even in Greenwich Village, this is wildly fun and naughty. We are all in love with her because she is Charity and because we are four.

We children wear dungarees and turtlenecks because our school is a Progressive School, but Charity – her wide skirt swirls like in a storybook and she laughs and we sing. She arrives, wheeling a cart. The cart doesn't make noise, but the effect on me, that small and timid child, is as if the auto harp were playing, and the guitar, and the red "Chinese" gongs shaped like dragons with bared teeth, and finger cymbals, and tambourines.

Hear the robin singing, as he hops along the windowsill and good news he's bringing, cheer up,

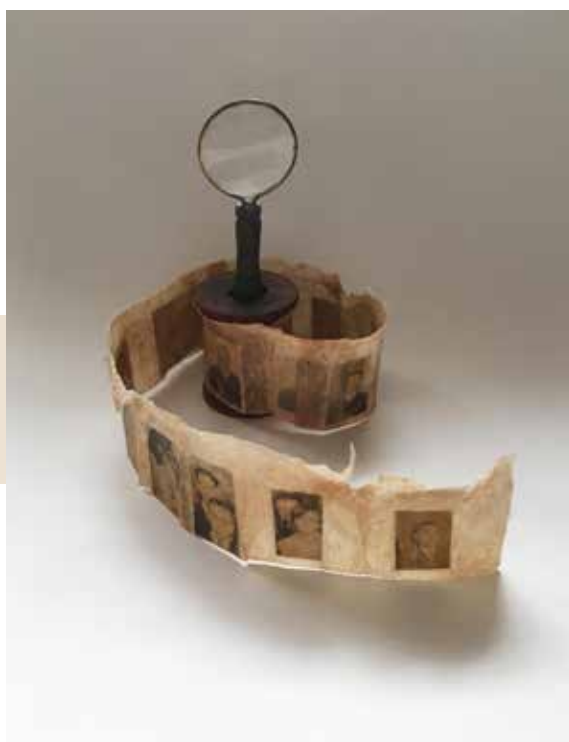


Childhood Narratives, 2016 (archival pigment print) by Dawn Surratt

cheerio. Ride her up and down in your little brass wagon, ride her up and down in your little brass wagon, ride her up and down in your little brass wagon, fare thee well, my darling. From the sky above, the leaves are falling down, slow they scatter on the lawn. . . . Schlaf mein fagele. She teaches us Hebrew words, one sound at a time, like my mother feeding the kitten with an eyedropper. I don't understand about the little bird in the song. *I gave my love a cherry that had no stone.* Charity strums an autoharp. *I gave my love a chicken that had no bone. I gave my love a baby that had no cryin'.* And Charity who opens her mouth to

sing like she is laughing, looks sad when she sings this and so we children in our dungarees and our turtlenecks fall still.

“Darling,” Charity admonishes me when I stand at her elbow. “Darling, I know you have more.” Standing by her slim brown hand resting on the guitar, hand close to my cheek, the shadowed opening of the curved instrument with its soft voice, I fall in love with her as four-year-olds do. And I do sing, though she has to bend to hear me.



As I Am You Once Were, 2018 (tea bags, wax, found photographs) by Dawn Surratt

When I go home, it is *Charity this*, and *Charity that*.

At the first PTA meeting, my parents tell her, “Faith is so infatuated, she wants you to come live with us.”

She said, “Do you have a room?” And they said, “Yes.”

It was 1949 or so. It was Greenwich Village. We were going on a big adventure, such a big adventure that our mother kept trying to get my sister and me to pay attention to a book about speaking French with stick figures that did not look at all

like people. We were going to live in Haiti for a year: my mother by birth, my mother by affection, my four-year-old sister, and me. My father had moved to an apartment on East Tenth Street. Charity had spent a summer in Haiti. I remember how endless the time she had been gone seemed and when she returned running across the tarmac to embrace her. I was six. I had no idea what a big adventure it would be. Although there was that Pocket Book about learning French, there was no Golden Book about going to live in Haiti. My mother, post-divorce, taking her two little girls on an airplane to live in the West Indies. Two women, taking two little girls. No man. A Jewish mother and her Jewish daughters. An African American woman, a music teacher with a degree from Juilliard. 1949. No Golden Book to tell that story.

My mother said, “Our plane will stop in Miami, on the way.” My sister and I knew there would be more. “Miami is in the South,” she said. We waited. She said, “In the South, Negroes are treated differently.” We did know about this word. Some Italian people had egged our stoop and slashed the hood of our convertible car because of Ethiopia. My sister and I knew about these things. “In Miami,” my mother said, “when a Negro is walking down the street and a white person comes walking in the opposite direction, the Negro has to step down into the street.”

“Will Charity have to do that?” we asked.

“Yes. It’s wrong, but –”

“Couldn’t she just –” we wondered.

“No.”

“And what would we do?”

“We would walk in the street with her,” my mother said.

Charity had gone on ahead. My mother, sister, and I flew to join her, my sister and I in matching navy blue dresses with full skirts and white trim, going out to the plane across the tarmac, which was night dark. We slept after take off. When I awoke, my sister and mother still slept. We were flying above a snowy layer of clouds. I thought we were flying above the sky, a thought so big that I just stared and stared while the others slept, just me, looking down on the top of the world.

Our plane was grounded in Puerto Rico and we were put up in a hotel with high beds. In late afternoon, as sunny rain swept past the hotel window, my mother called the airline. Again. Could we fly

out in the morning? Now I see her, my mother embarking on a life without her husband, with her two small daughters and Charity, a miracle who had come into our life. I see her, mirrored onto the tropical shower as she stared out the window. Grounded, she was at the mercy of frustration and nerves. Deterred from her new life for which nothing except her heart had prepared her, the youngest and most disobedient daughter of a self-taught lawyer and his imperious wife. She had rushed into the romance of it, going to meet Charity in Haiti, where we would speak French.

They would wear wide skirts with pockets, short sleeved shirts or peasant blouses, and sandals that laced from their toes to their ankles. Eunice who loved cars would drive the jeep Charity had bought, taking us into the green hills, to the ocean, to the outdoor market where we bought mackerel. She would be the boss of herself and that is how I would see her. She would have been excited, if a little afraid to have her two girls all to herself

Lovey as she always did and my mother would have been so happy.

In our Port-au-Prince house Debbie and I slept on the second floor in the only bedroom. We went to bed before the adults. Next to us, an enclosed sun porch, on which our mother and Charity slept. My bed next to the window; their bed next to the window, on the other side. Outer windows between us and the night. I loved the night in Haiti, a blackout from which sprang the crowing of roosters when the sky began to lighten.

The women slept in a single, narrow bed parallel to my own. Or were there two beds, one for each woman?

A moan. My mother lay on her back, Charity bent over her. My sister had crept into bed beside me, warm and solid. Debbie. Our mother cried out. Charity rubbed her forehead. My sister drew

SHE WOULD BE THE BOSS OF HERSELF AND THAT IS HOW I WOULD SEE HER. SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN EXCITED, IF A LITTLE AFRAID TO HAVE HER TWO GIRLS ALL TO HERSELF AND CHARITY.

and Charity. We, in the white-trimmed navy dresses with skirts so full that when my sister and I went through a phase of curtsying and saying *Oui, Maman*, as did our friends Fifine and Marie Denise, we could hold the hems in our hands and the skirts would form navy half circles. There would have been questions from her parents; she was leaving Manhattan with a *colored woman* and taking her children to a country run by black people. There would have been our father to deal with, his questioning her autonomy and if he had been more forceful, he would have taken us from her. The boundlessness of it, in 1949 taking her children to a Caribbean island to live a life she couldn't imagine.

Flying in from the white-laced turquoise Caribbean, flying into the green island, we flew so close, I felt I could touch this place where I was going to live. Within minutes, the door was flung open to warm air and we were walking down the metal steps and running across the tarmac to Charity, who waited for us, calling us *Darling* and

in her breath. Our mother tossed her head side to side. Deep shadow covered their bodies. My sister and I knew, so young, to be silent. Our schooling in silence was so deep that we didn't even speak to one another. Long after the two women had stilled, my sister went back to her bed and we all fell asleep.

We must have asked in the morning. We must have. Maybe not when all four of us were together, maybe I asked our mother, or my sister and I asked. We must have.

Here is what I imagine: in answer, our mother rubbed the bridge of her nose, her temple. "The neuralgia," she said, "was awful."

We may have asked why she didn't go to the doctor.

She would have said, "The doctor won't help." Debbie and I would have been silent by training. We didn't know *neuralgia*. How big was it? How could the place between her eyes, which our mother touched as she said *neuralgia*,

how could that make her moan in the night? The jaw she stroked with her finger tip. Thinking: would she die? knowing: *neuralgia* was not the entire answer.

We never got the entire answer, which opened the door to a realm of speculation.

The jeep had a canvas roof and roll bars. The doors were canvas panels with plastic windows that could be zipped out. My sister and I sat facing one another in the back, being drenched in the limey, white dust of the roads. Going into Pétion-Ville from our house, we drove through such a steep hairpin curve that my mother could almost have reached out across the curve to shake hands with the driver coming in the other direction. Because of the roar of the motor and because we were essentially out of doors inside a canvas shell, we could hear nothing when the car was in motion, my sister and I cut off from the two women in the front who would have been smoking their cigarettes. The four of us in the jeep, *les Américaines*.

I DO NOT KNOW WHAT WAS MINGLED IN MY TWO MOTHERS' LIVES AND WHAT WAS NOT.

One Sunday driving into Pétion-Ville, on the wicked hairpin turn the jeep was hit by a camion, or truck serving as an open air bus. My mother was thrown through her zipped-back door onto the side of the road. My sister cowered in the car. They were taken to a hospital and someone, perhaps the police, brought my mother and sister home. Gauze covered a deep gash in my mother's elbow, a gash which would become a scar like a strap. In court, my mother lost. Did she have to pay money? Or did she simply not receive compensation for her injury and the damage to the jeep?

She reported that her lawyer said she could not hope for a decision in her favor. Yes, she had been driving on her own side of the road. Yes, the camion had been driving in her lane.

"But," my mother said. "Darling, let it be," Charity said.

We returned to Manhattan. Jane Street, a Marc Chagall print hung in Charity's room. This was the only room in our duplex that my sister and I, and

probably our mother, knocked to enter. I sometimes sat in there and did my homework, while she wrote lesson plans or read *The Guardian* newspaper, or with her Parker fountain pen wrote out the lyrics and melodies of folk songs in her optimistic turquoise ink on blank sheet music. I remember the balanced perfection of her clefs. I do not know if she sent her bed sheets to the laundry with ours and don't remember if all of our dirty clothes went into the enormous cotton drawstring bag my mother carried in her arms to the laundromat.

I do not know what was mingled in my two mothers' lives and what was not.

My mother, sank bodily into the tub to wash her hair. Short and blue black, her hair licked through the water. Her toes, crowded by bunions, stuck out at the foot of the tub. Two fingers held her cigarette. She set the cigarette in a blue enamel ashtray, and soaped and rinsed her hair. Charity washed her own hair with castile soap cut from a long ivory bar she bought uptown in Harlem. Charity towed her hair dry until it stood out from her head. Then she sat with a white towel about her shoulders and my mother unfurled the cord of the straightening comb. Two fingers of pomade, and then the comb, drawn section by section from the scalp out to the end of the hair, and again from the scalp to the ends. My mother and Charity passed a cigarette back and forth with their conversation. The smell of cigarette smoke mingled with the creamsicle scent of the cream.

Charity's hair done, they opened the pine-smell nail polish remover. With cotton balls, each swabbed old polish off the other's nails, until there was a mound in Charity's trash can of cotton with gobs of polish. Charity shook the Dusty Pink by its white cap. My mother smoked and painted Charity's nails. Charity puffed her cigarette and painted my mother's nails. They waved their hands in the air to speed the drying.

When she had a car, my mother would drive us out of the city, north on the Taconic Parkway, to Hawthorne Circle and out a smaller road. Our visits may have been not-quite legal; she drove up a rutted dirt road and pulled over where there was no parking space. I may be imagining this,

but I think we had to climb under or over barbed wire to get onto the path that went beside a rocky, New England kind of river with boulders we could climb onto. This was not a wild and raging river, nor was it deeply broad and placid. It was more like a creek, but wider. I remember the woods around us as not being leafed out, so we must have gone there in the spring and autumn; also, I do not remember swimming or getting in the water, though I remember walking the river bed, making our way from rock to rock. My mother gave the impression of never being happier than when she was out in the woods, telling us about *Indians* (stereotypes we took in as The Truth) walking soundlessly without stepping on twigs and we kids in our Keds would try to do the same as we followed her down the familiar path.

Charity, who did not particularly like the outdoors, came with us in her mid-calf flared skirt and her clodhopper Murray Space Shoes. We brought our dogs, letting them run loose, which we children understood as quasi-illegal. Well, outright illegal, but allowed under our mother's code. We brought friends and classmates. I think we must have stopped going here when I was in elementary school or at the latest junior high, because the friends I remember in this spot are eager little girls in jeans and cardigans. We searched for limbs and kindling for the (illegal) fire. We searched for firm straight sticks for roasting hot dogs, which sizzled in their blackening skins and split, oozing fat. My mother didn't truck with the niceties of s'mores, but we roasted marshmallows, some of us gently heating marshmallows to honey brown on the outside and melty ooze on the inside; others going for the conflagration, letting the marshmallow catch fire, the flames licking, until the outside had turned to carbon, blowing out the flame, plucking the meteor of sugar off the stick, burning fingers and tongue.

My mother would tramp further back into the woods, where the path shrank to a trace.

Where we could hear water running, where water welled up between rocks, she would gently move the leaves aside. "Ahh," she would smile, pulling loose a few Irish green stems. "Watercress. Heaven," she'd say, nipping off a bit and chewing it. She would hand Charity a stem and Charity might say, "Very nice, darling." And then we kids could taste. Watercress. Pepper. Green. She would

smile her wolfish smile, settle back on the ground and light a Pall Mall. This is how I remember my mother happy, this back-in-the-woods, perhaps not legal, haven. This was where she let us as close to who she was as she could stand.

The used, tan Studebaker, the color of a battleship. It had protruding head lamps and in the middle of its front surface, a rocket-like protrusion with a medallion. Very modern. I don't remember my mother liking the Studebaker, but she tended it lovingly, carrying buckets of water



Heavy Lifting, 2018 (pigment print, matte medium, found objects)
by Dawn Surratt

from our second-floor apartment down to Jane Street to wash it, waxing it from the tin of Johnson's Paste Wax she kept in the trunk. In winter, she wore the ratty raccoon coat she had acquired somewhere, her embarrassingly clunky shoe boots. Like most of our cars, it was high maintenance: old hoses splitting, batteries spending their energy into copper green deposits; tires collapsing upon themselves.

On days my sister and I woke to the scrape of snow shovels on sidewalks, our mother would

clean off the snow and shovel the car out, though she worked at home and did not need to leave her parking space, but she needed to know her escape was in place. One winter, my mother was so sick, she couldn't tend to the car. Charity was famously a non-driver. It snowed so thickly I couldn't see the street lamp through the veil of flakes. Maybe my mother had what she called The Tail End of a Cold; maybe it was her teeth, which poisoned until they were all pulled one summer; maybe it was what she

car be hauled off by the City. She could not muster the money to retrieve it.

We were a family whose sidewalk was occasionally chalked by hostile neighbors, a Jewish and Black family which had lived together for a year in pre-Duvalier Haiti. Eunice produced an NBC children's show starring Charity. The show, teaching music through folk songs, rang with the sounds of guitar and autoharp, the Chinese gongs, the Haitian drum with its paintings on the side and stray hairs on its skin head, maracas, and tambourines. It was the first interracial children's tv show, was a blow for everything our family believed in and everything we had lived in our years together. In defiance of the culture around us, our family, there on the tv screen, ghostly and fleeting in black and gray, but there on the screens of New York. Sunday morning, our family was up early to go to the studio. Sunday night, dinner over, we sat around the dining room table and read and answered fan mail.

The network *expressed concern* that before World War II Eunice and Charity had been *prematurely anti-fascist*. Eunice thought it was those petitions she'd signed: *Lift the Embargo on Loyalist Spain*. Charity had *friends*. Talks in Charity's room from which my sister and I were excluded. Phone calls. A lawyer met with the network. The threat of losing the show went away. What I learned as a junior high school child: the terror in my mother's eyes, her fury that *they* were threatening her existence. Learned, there is a *they* and there is an *us*. That our family might have been small and isolated, that NBC could if it wanted cancel the show, but that we, not only our family of four, but those who were with us and like us, were right and true.

Charity's people in Rhode Island were descended of people who bought their freedom. Manumission papers: as a child I liked to say these words as if they were beads to count, or a small silk scarf I used to tie back my bushy pony tail. A green and white scarf: I chose it with Charity from a sparkling counter at B. Altman's on Fifth Avenue. No one else in our family, except for Charity, shopped there. Manumission Papers.

But I, Charity's daughter by affection, who chose her, knew nothing of Rhode Island, would

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Elegy, 2016 (archival pigment print) by Dawn Surratt

called "La Grippe," which would seize her and send her to bed. The snow fell. My mother stayed in bed while our school resumed and Charity went back to work; the dogs had to be walked, mounds of dirty snow or not. My mother kept saying she would move the car, but stayed in bed, smoking, eating little, smoking, sleeping. The neighbor came to say the City had ticketed the cars. He offered to move the Studebaker, but trudged back up our stairs to say the battery was dead. My mother wanted to move the car, if it killed her, she probably said, but for want of that battery and for want of the will to assure her escape should it be necessary, she let the

not see Rhode Island until decades after Charity's death. Rhode Island and Greenwich Village were not contiguous. Pinny, Charity's sister, lived in New Jersey for a while, working at a girls' school, maybe. Maybe Pinny was there for decades. At least once Eunice and Charity and my sister and I spent a weekend, or maybe it was a week, visiting Pinny in New Jersey. During the New Jersey days when nothing seemed to happen, my sister and I entertained ourselves by roller skating up and down the sidewalk in front of our house.

But Rhode Island and Greenwich Village never touched.

When Pinny died, Charity traveled alone, leaving a family vacation, to the funeral. I remember Eunice wanted to go, but Charity refused. She would bury her sister without us.

She was the daughter, or the granddaughter, of enslaved people who bought their freedom and moved to Rhode Island and when she was a little girl when her father took her to the farmers'

In our apartment, including her bedroom, there were no photos of Charity as a child or her family, except, maybe one photo of her sister Pinny.

In the 1990s, at a conference on Working Class Studies, I met a man who had learned guitar from Charity's brother who had lived in Brooklyn in the 1950s. "Are you sure?" I asked him. The man was very sure. This brother of Charity's had been important to the man I was speaking to. I had not known of this brother's existence. She had excluded him from our shared life. So conflicted, standing before this man because he had known more about Charity than I did. Years after her death, in my middle-of-the-heartland, middle-aged life, here was a man who knew who Charity had been.

I had known so little.

Charity gave my mother a pearl ring; my mother thought it too extravagant. Charity bought the ring because it was beautiful and because with Yankee frugality she had saved money to do so.

On a less exorbitant scale, my mother gave me a ring of Bohemian garnets set in gold. One of the stones, was different; it was higher by a small increment which I could feel with my

I KNOW FROM HER REMEMBERED EYES THAT THIS RING WAS FUTURE, MY FUTURE, HER FUTURE IN ME.

market he would sort through the corn, discarding cob after cob with the judgment, *For the horses*. He was a free man, free with his opinions.

She lived with us in our apartment in Greenwich Village. She came from Rhode Island.

She had lived in Harlem. No Greenwich Village landlord near the Little Red School House would rent to her. When we carolled family and friends on Christmas Eve, we would visit her friend Bobbi and a couple, I think the man was a judge, in Harlem. My mother drove Charity to Harlem to pick up hair products.

Once Charity's family visited us on Jane Street. I remember commotion. I think she was disgusted with a brother who *drank*.

Once when I was learning to read, she and I were looking through a *Look* magazine. There was a picture of a black man in a military uniform, with medals, as I remember. She said, "He used to be my husband," and turned the page. I put my hand on the page, trying to turn it back. "What do you mean, your husband?" But she wouldn't let me turn back the page, and said, "Nothing, darling."

finger tip, different because the maker had honored its inherent difference, not cutting the red stone down to mirror the other four. My mother would have had to pay for the ring over time. I know from her remembered eyes that this ring was future, my future, her future in me; college, a life free from debt, a *regular* life such as had eluded her. From the time I was sixteen until I gave the ring to one of our daughters, I ran the pad of my finger over that too-high stone, assuring myself that imperfection was still there. The ring disappeared in the next few years, and I mourned it. I still miss it, but I will always feel that higher stone in my imagination. Still there. As for the pearl ring that distressed my mother, I think she felt unworthy of its beauty, that slowly accreted beauty, which Charity had wanted her to have. I can imagine Charity saying, *Darling, you deserve it*. Half a century later, both women gone, the pearl ring persists, on my sister's hand, the slim aging hand of a woman older than either mother had been at her death.

My mother called me *hard* and *unloving*. I could think I was not *unloving*, not *hard*. I wouldn't have dared say it out loud to her. I said it in my clenched fist heart. Two words. *Am not*, despite my father who had long ago read to me on his lap, "There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very very good, and when she was bad, she was horrid." How I hated that word, *horrid*. I was the only member of my family to have curly hair, which was distrusted by my mother, who always kept my hair short, so it wouldn't be *unruly*. And I now hear in her words, *Semitic/foreign*. In the dark before I went to sleep, I'd mutter, *Am not*. Jewish child mothered by a mother who feared her own difference, which sometimes was called *semite*. No one said it, but *untrustworthy*. You know. Iago. Unloving and hard. *Am not*.

But, within years I happened. Me the teenage activist. The girl on the front lines.

MY MOTHER CALLED ME HARD AND UNLOVING. I COULD THINK I WAS NOT UNLOVING, NOT HARD.

We sat, a mother and her thirteen-year-old, my mother smoking in the rocking chair with the scrolled arms. My mind was full of secrets and transgressions into the Outer World: I was reading *The Borrowers*. I would have liked to tell my mother some of this, but I knew she might have reasons to find me guilty, as Arrietty had been in the book, of betraying our family by moving into the larger world. We had had enough of that: that week, my sister had announced that she was going to change her name. She was tired of being one of several *Debbies* in her class and no one would pronounce the more formal *Deborah* properly, with the stress on the middle syllable. My mother, smoke rising from the cigarette in her hand, sat in the rocker where she had held me as a newborn, my mother's large, veined hand holding a nipples glass bottle to my lips, my eyes fastened upward, her mouth and nose masked in white.

The warm winter sun made me woozy, a soft happy feeling to be inside the warmth with her, despite my moves out and away. She was planning

errands, a walk to the fruit and vegetable store on 12th, the dry cleaners on 8th Avenue, Nicky the butcher on Hudson. We would take the dogs.

Downstairs my sister called upstairs, wanting to know where her leotards were. My mother called down they were in the laundry bag. I breathed in the escaping cigarette smoke. Acrid and dirty-smelling, a flash of that week's scolding. My new black skirt, tight like the pretty skirts of the other girls in my class. *Vulgar to have your clothes touch you*: my mother. Arrietty-like, I existed in my mother's world, but plotted my venture outward.

I would take the skirt from my closet, and at breakfast, she would say something. But for the moment, she was sitting and talking to me, only me.

She lit another cigarette, sucking in smoke, hard. *Cancer Sticks*, my sister and I sometimes said to one another, but not to her.

My mother said, "You know my sister committed suicide."

I did know. She knew I knew. For crap's sake, I had known the word *defenestration*, before I left elementary school.

"Can Katie come over?" I asked.

She had been ten years younger than Toni, an adoring baby sister dressed in white flounces when Toni was wearing silks and damasks and a wide-brimmed hat with a ribbon.

"Don't you have to –" She was seized by a coughing fit. She struggled to catch her breath, but as she came out of it, she was striking a match and lighting up another.

"I want to go to the library with Katie."

"I thought you were running errands with me," she said.

"I've read the books I took out last week."

"Sometimes I wonder, about my sister –"

"Have you read *The Borrowers*?" I didn't really want to share the book, but I didn't want her to continue about her sister.

"It sounds charming," she said.

Charming turned me from her. The Borrowers were me, hiding within plain sight, clever, brave in the face of a wide and dangerous world populated by enormous big feet that could crush us in an instant. The Borrowers saw things.

My mother said, "I worry about your sister. I worry that she, too, will. You know. Like Toni."

"Ma."

I could not say, *You can't have her. My sister. Mine.*

I walk Charity to the elevator at Lenox Hill Hospital. "This is terrible. We have to consult someone," she rages. I am thirty-one years old and my mother has been dying for four months. I have been teaching in a two-room coalfield schoolhouse and mothering my little girl during the week and flying each weekend to be with my mother. "We have to do something," Charity rages. Friday and Saturday nights, my child is without me, and I am my mother's child, living like an interloper in her deserted apartment. I cannot say the words, "It's too late," to Charity. My mother will never see her apartment again. The next week she will move to a hospice named Calvary in the Bronx.

I am in my mid-sixties. She is by the ocean. Her bunion-knotted joints release themselves into the sand. Her smile is that of a woman all of whose teeth had been pulled in one summer week, when her daughters were in New Hampshire. A woman whose denture gums were as pink as a polite lie. She walks straight ahead. She wants no one to stop her.

I wouldn't recognize her face without its flicker of pain.

"Madre," I call, but she turns away. Although she had always been angular, except for the pouch that marked her two pregnancies, no nonsense and cheap in her clothes, this version of my mother, three decades dead, is filmy, more pastel than she would ever have tolerated in her denim blue and charcoal gray, but the woman walking in the sand keeps shifting, filmy by turns with seersucker.

"Madre," I call again, my voice taken into the calls of the gulls.

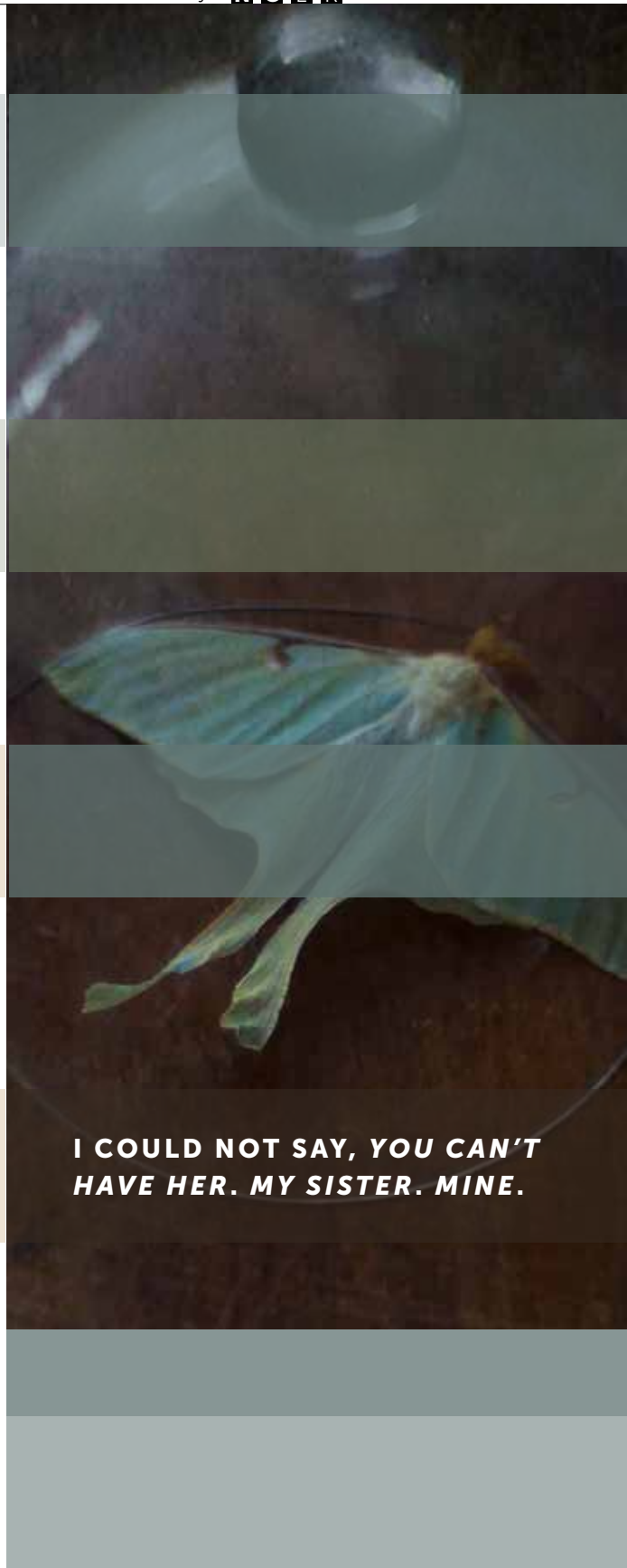
She keeps walking. She has a dog. Of course she has a dog. She and I had piled the two city dogs into her beater car, to run the dogs in the dawn, joyous and illicit on this very beach. "It's illegal, you know," she used to say with such satisfaction.

My filmy mother is now farther away from me.

There is another person, but she has no body. She says, "Go ahead, Faith darling, call her back. Don't let her keep going."

A breath, a breeze at my back, and then Charity, too, is gone.

I am alone, my mother Eunice receding down the beach. ■



**I COULD NOT SAY, YOU CAN'T
HAVE HER. MY SISTER. MINE.**

THE SACRED STRANGENESS OF THE MOTHER

a review by Helen Stead

Samia Serageldin and
Lee Smith, Editors.
*Mothers and Strangers:
Essays on Motherhood from
the New South.* University of
North Carolina Press, 2019.

HELEN STEAD earned her PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee, where she served as Editor of *Grist*. She now serves as an NCLR Assistant Editor.

SAMIA SERAGELDIN is the author of several books, including *The Cairo House* (2000) and *Love Is Like Water and Other Stories* (2003), all published by Syracuse University Press. An editor of *South Writ Large*, she lives in Chapel Hill, NC.

LEE SMITH is the bestselling author of over a dozen books, most recently *Dimstore: A Writer's Life* (Algonquin Books, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017). Read an interview with her in *NCLR* 2016 and essays about her work in *NCLR* 1998, 2008, 2014 and *NCLR Online* 2015. She lives in Hillsborough, NC.

They are the know-it-alls, they are the dementia sufferers, they are the ones who sit above paradise and fib about childhood flings, they sidesaddle the butter churn, they were wild once, and, when they are dead, they are sacred. *Mothers and Strangers*, a collection of creative nonfiction (and poetry) edited by Samia Serageldin and Lee Smith, asks: "What do we not know about these most intimate of strangers, the women who raised us?" (1). These works explore the elusiveness of mothers' identities distinct from their caregiver roles: their secrets, their deteriorations, their misgivings and obsessions. The pieces are arranged into seven sections by how the authors portray their mothers: Angels, Strangers, Manners and Mores, Career Women, Legacies, Secrets and Lives, and Indomitable.

When describing mothers, many of the essays felt too safe, and the discovery of the mother characters lacked a level of intimacy and revelation I was hoping for. The introduction is organized with a run-down of historical contexts that, in doing so, assumes that readers can't extrapolate the context for themselves. While there are stellar pieces in this collection, Marianne Gingher's "A Beautiful Mother," Omid Safi's "From Tehran to Florida: Pouri Joon's Fierce Love," and "Child Bride" by Daniel Wallace, to name a

few, there are also some essays that lack organization. In "This Is Your Mom," Elaine Neil Orr uses a story of running over a rabid dog in Nigeria to show inevitability, but this forced frame is too pat and awkward. Clyde Edgerton's "My Mother, My Muse" is missing connective tissue in its epistolary form as it doesn't incorporate a broader narrative, scattering the meaning of the piece. And still other essays heavily self-reference previous works or feel rushed and unfinished.

However, one of the most enlightening aspects of this collection is how the authors' roles as storytellers complicate their familial roles. Serageldin's own essay, "The Curse of Living in Interesting Times," explains that as a writer, she is "the keeper of memories in [her] family, the sentimentalist, the fabulist, the weaver of stories. There is one in every generation" (182). This burden of the writer-child is a theme that is woven throughout the collection. In "The Good Fight," Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains that she "aspire[s] to a more mortal form of writing: writing that admits its own limits, writing that respects the integrity of one's subjects rather than treating them as extensions of oneself, writing that – like memory, like [her] mother's last words – keeps the blessed conversation between the past and the present, the dead and



COURTESY OF BARBARA TYROLER

the living, alive" (123). And she wants to relay this truth of her mother, without the intrusion of her own perspective as a daughter, in order to sustain the purity of those moments.

Many of the subjects in this collection are no longer living. Smith opens the foreword, "Mama," with the fact that the writers' "parents are gone, leaving [them] motherless, or fatherless, or, often now, *orphans* – suddenly out in the world alone" (xi), and the writers want to know, really know, their mothers. This exigence leads to a recurring concern of the writers to detach mother from child in the retelling of the stories. And evident by the stunning heartbreak of a poem "i want to undie you" by Jaki Shelton Green, which is a standout piece in this collection:

"from somewhere far beneath the hearts that love you the memory of you / dances across a threshold of stardust. your heart sings forth a new face./ how does a mother continue to sing // how does a mother continue to whisper the story of a daughter's death" (54). Green echoes the loss of words, "how does a mother continue to sing," and grapples with the inability to "whisper the story" as the memories are deep down, "beneath the hearts that love" her daughter. This highlights that very difficulty of separating grief, and person, from oneself in the retelling of the story.

Sally Greene, in "Estate Sale," explores this separation grief from a daughter's perspective: "It's impossible to disentangle her condition of loss from my own. My mother is disappearing.

Her mind is disintegrating. What part of me is disappearing in the process?" (117). Greene's own identity is inextricably connected with her mother's own fractured memories and identity, and this terrifying realization is echoed in many of the pieces.

Mothers are the home where life begins. The incubators. And the nurturers, perhaps. Adrienne Rich opens *Of Woman Born*, by the universal truth that "the one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman's body."* Everyone is "of woman born." The idea of the mother is, therefore, sacred, and this concept is echoed in the collection in the Islamic tenet that paradise lies at the feet of mothers. And mother is also very physical, "the most intimate of all physical relationships" (xi), which is why mothers are hard to define, and why we cannot separate ourselves from them, even in death.

While this collection does successfully reflect this sacredness and connectedness to our mothers, a portion of the essays lack organization, are tedious to read and often self-aggrandizing. Perhaps this is because writing about one's dead mother is trespassing a sacred space: How could we marr our mothers' memories? How can we do the moments justice? How can we separate ourselves from the body from which we unfurled? ■

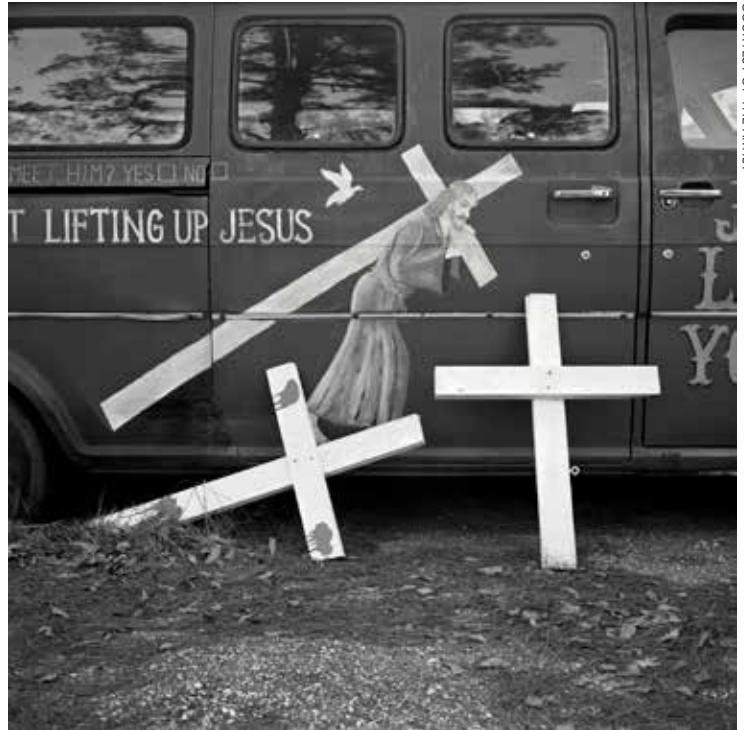
ABOVE Award-winning *Belle*, from the Writers Gallery Series, *Mothers, Daughters, and the Writing Life* (multi-image composite collection inspired by *Mothers & Strangers*), by Barbara Tyroler (See more in this series [here](#).)

* Adrienne Rich, Foreword, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 1995).

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY EMILY BANKS***Credit Where It's Due*

Most of the time, saying grace is just a way
to thank a man for what a woman made.
I mean, go ahead and thank Jesus
for your salvation if you want, but not for standing on his feet
over a hot stove, chopping carrots, stirring herbs, pouring broth
into a pot. Women were on that long before
his storied birth. They say Mary could make a stew
so thick and tender it would seduce God himself.
Don't they say that? I wasn't raised to say grace,
but I was raised to thank my mother.
I was raised to secrete the burnt bits and tougher parts
of vegetables into my mouth before serving a meal.
So if a woman swallows every imperfection
in the world to make your table look
like something Jesus himself would have set, if he ever set
a table in his life, thank her. You never know
how it will all spill out. What if one day she opens
her mouth to speak and a life's worth of scraps
she hid inside herself come pouring out?

EMILY BANKS is the author of a book of poems, *Mother Water* (Lynx House Press, 2019), and her poems and essays have appeared in *The Fourth River*, *New South*, *Superstition Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Yemassee*, and other journals. She received her MFA from the University of Maryland and her BA from UNC Chapel Hill. She currently lives in Atlanta, GA, where she is a doctoral candidate at Emory University. This is her first NCLR publication.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Lifting Up Jesus, 1993 (photography, 10x10) by Carolyn DeMeritt

In Florida, my aunt asked us to join hands and hang our heads. I was a teenager and snuck my eyes open. It made me nervous, keeping them closed as she extolled the Lord for his bounty. What was I not supposed to see? Outside, the Virgin Mary kneeled in sand, surrounded by the rotting of small oranges. My aunt knows where to find the photo of her husband in Vietnam in bed next to a naked local girl – how old? I'm sure not old enough to say no to a man who could make her eyes burn with tear gas then come home and make his wife cry alone once she'd performed the proper accolades. We thank Jesus because a good man always looks like a miracle. We thank Mary for making a good son because we know damn well he didn't come from any man.

CAROLYN DEMERITT is a photographer and videographer, born in Charlotte, NC. She has participated in numerous solo and invitational exhibitions across the US. Her work is included in museums, corporate, and private collections, including the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the North Carolina Museum of Art, and the Bank of America collection. She worked on an Emmy-nominated documentary of an AIDS activist's death entitled *Just As I Am* (1993), with the late Stuart Grasberg, an award-winning producer. She also collaborated with Frye Gaillard on the book *As Long As The Waters Flow: Native Americans In The South and East* (John F. Blair, 1998). See more of her work on her [website](#).

A TRUE SPECTRUM OF QUEER NORTH CAROLINA WRITING

a review by David Deutsch

Wilton Barnhardt, Editor.
Every True Pleasure: LGBTQ Tales of North Carolina. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

DAVID DEUTSCH is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Alabama. He is the author of *Understanding Jim Grimsley* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018; reviewed in this issue) and articles on queer American fiction. As part of a new project on post-WWII queer American fiction, he is working on a book tentatively titled *Bad Beatitudes: Queer Angels in Post-WWII American Fiction and Culture*.

WILTON BARNHARDT is the author of four novels, including *Lookaway*, *Lookaway* (St. Martin's Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014). He is a Professor of English at North Carolina State University.

OPPOSITE Wilton Barnhardt and Zelda Lockhart at the Regulator Bookshop, Durham, NC, 11 Apr. 2019

Every True Pleasure: LGBTQ Tales of North Carolina, edited by Wilton Barnhardt, offers a welcome addition to contemporary queer literary anthologies. In his introduction, Barnhardt sanely declares “the Age of the Spectrum” and his careful inclusion of fiction and nonfiction from a variety of authors lives up to this declaration (1). “Gayness,” he observes, “is more than whether a certain sex act took place; it is a whole complex of love, lifestyle, and sensibility.” To evidence this point, Barnhardt has selected stories that represent diverse races, sexualities, and genders and that make the case for investigating “a whole complex” (3) of queer life in both North Carolina and in the US at large.

While Barnhardt has chosen pieces by writers who are “natives of, residents of, or connected strongly to North Carolina” (2), the value of *Every True Pleasure* is not limited to its reflections of queer life in one state. As queer Southern studies of literature, culture, history, and sociology flourish, readers will be particularly interested in volumes that are set in specific regions while also illustrating the complexities of queer culture more generally. Usefully then, this volume nods both explicitly and implicitly to regional specificities while acknowledging a queer complexity that expands beyond regionalism and a Southern exceptionalism to offer larger observations about queer culture in the US.

Particularly of note are the volume’s memorable chapters that acknowledge the hardships

of trans individuals but that focus on their intellectual, social, and romantic successes. In an excerpt from *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman*, Newman offers a heartrending story of secrecy and self-discovery merged with the value of successfully pursuing an education. She describes her early life with her family and her time as a black gay effeminate male student at Wake Forest, from which she eventually graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology. Newman recalls her early encounters with less fortunate women in local trans communities and notes that in her own process of transitioning she too would end up “selling [her] body just to exist and survive, taking female hormones, and injecting [her] body with silicone” (48). Newman refuses to shy away from recounting these hardships, but her story remains one of survival and eventual success.

While Newman offers a first-person portrait of a young black trans individual, Belle Boggs presents an older white couple dealing with a husband’s transition in “Jonas.” Boggs filters the short story through Melinda, who accepts, in a caring and compassionate fashion, her husband Jonas’s transition into Joan. While the couple has difficulties with Jessie, Melinda’s daughter and Joan’s stepdaughter, who has gotten married to a “hell-bent Baptist minister,” Boggs highlights her characters’ small

COURTESY OF TONI NEWMAN



RIGHT Toni Newman at the International Transgender Day of Visibility, San Francisco, 31 Mar. 2019



COURTESY OF ZELDA LOCKHART

everyday successes, such as a party with their extended family and outings to Walmart, Ponderosa, and an art exhibit (124). Although it remains important to advocate for trans individuals experiencing hardship, these stories valuably celebrate the achievements of strong-minded queer individuals in a largely hostile world.

Of equal value are stories that portray diverse tensions in queer life, particularly where same-sex desire is not the chief anxiety or source of conflict. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara's short story "Love the Soldier," for instance, follows the college-educated, former WNBA star Keisha Caldwell as she prepares to leave her current job as a police officer to serve in the National Guard in Fallujah. In the midst of this upheaval, Keisha juggles an incipient relationship with an attorney, "a princess, the type who'd been president of her AKA chapter at Duke" (62), and information that her brother might have been killed due to racial profiling by Keisha's own

police partners. This well-told story offers suspense, social critique, and romance in Raleigh.

A different sort of romance and suspense appears in Arron Gwyn's short story "Courtship," which follows Jansen and Wisnat as they grow into two middle-aged men in Perser, OK. Jansen clearly pines for Wisnat who himself desires a beautiful woman who has recently moved to their small town. Wisnat convinces Jansen to put a hairgrowth pill in the woman's drinks until she grows a mustache and Wisnat, himself now balding and portly, feels comfortable enough to talk to her. Wisnat and the woman marry leaving Jansen alone and pining for Wisnat, filled with guilt and regret for having drugged the woman. If Henry James had been born and raised in small-town America, he might have written a story such as this, but it's Gwyn's story and he does a fantastic job with it.

In a sign of changing times, Barnhardt includes several stories of same-sex parents and

their children. In Kelly Link's "The Lesson," Than's and Harper's faltering sixteen-year relationship centers on the difficult pregnancy of the woman carrying their child. In "Favorite Song," Emily Chávez explores the hardship of staying in an abusive relationship because you love your partner's child. Leaving or staying offers no easy answers here when court systems have not yet found satisfactory ways of dealing with abusive heterosexual families and parental rights, much less with the intricacies of queer families. The pleasure in this story, though, comes from the parental intimacy between a woman and her lover's daughter. From a different angle, Zelda Lockhart's autobiographical "Without a Word" recalls growing up in an abusive family, her powerful relationship with her gay brother, and her assertive desire to create a safe, affirming space for her own children. These stories are not romantic and they are not easy, but they reflect important and complex relationships in twenty-first-century queer literature and culture.

Overall, the collection provides a valuable insight into contemporary queer literature. If some established North Carolina authors are missing, perhaps most notably Jim Grimsley and Reynolds Price, Barnhardt makes sure to include valuable new voices, such as John Pierre Craig and Alyssa Wong. The result offers a true reading pleasure. Volumes such as this reinforce the true diversity of Southern states, despite how large-scale statewide and national politics certainly and too often adversely affect queer lives. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY ERIC TRAN***Treatise on Whether to Write the Mango*

A missionary's pitch was to ask if my grandma was planning on Heaven
and I was holding a box of mangos

when I couldn't think of a response more than yes and slamming the door
with my right hip because a box of mangos

can jump from your arms so eagerly, like during a fight with my mom at the store
that smells like fish and she says *forget them*, the mangos,

because now they're sullied by ever-wet foot paths and my ever-shitty teenage
attitude (*American!*), never clearer when I woke wanting mangos

instead of the rubbery jackfruit my mom woke at dawn to peel away
from the thin white casing and so of course mangoes

she had waiting for me, chilled in the fridge after I missed family dinner
sliced tic-tac-toe because only mango

flesh can yield so readily to a blade or my grandma's gums, teeth lost
to the war, her skin hued and mangoed

ERIC TRAN is a resident physician in psychiatry in Asheville, NC, and received his MFA from UNC Wilmington. He won the 2019 Autumn House Press Emerging Writer's contest, and his debut book of poetry, *The Gutter Spread Guide to Prayer*, will be published in 2020. His work appears in *RHINO*, *32 Poems*, *Missouri Review*, and elsewhere.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Tradition Transformed (acrylic, oil, watercolor, ink on canvas, paper, 48x48)
by Kenny Nguyen

with lack, with utter wanting for home and the fist-sized
yellow mangos,

though I (*American!*) prefer the red-green ones the weight of an unwell heart
which is not the metaphor for mangos

you wanted right, you're used to small, gentle breasts, juicy for your mouths
or some shit, but advice about mango

consumption: they're plucked raw, inedible, and turn against you while you sleep,
to mush and mangle.

KENNY NGUYEN was born and raised in South Vietnam. He earned a BFA in Fashion Design from Vietnam National University of Art and Architecture and was an assistant fashion designer in Ho Chi Minh City before moving to the US in 2010. He lives in Charlotte, NC, where he earned a BFA in painting at UNC Charlotte. His works have been exhibited at Czung Institute for Contemporary Art, Katzen Arts Center at the American University, and the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, among others. In 2016, Nguyen received an Excellence Award in the Asia Contemporary Young Artist Award exhibition from Sejong Museum of Art. He has been awarded artist residency fellowships, and he is the recipient of a 2019 Charlotte Regional Artist Project Grant and the 2019 Denis Diderot A-i-R Grant. See more of his art on his [website](#).

STORIES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE IN UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS

a review by James W. Kirkland

George Singleton. *Staff Picks: Stories*. Louisiana State University Press, 2019.

JAMES W. KIRKLAND has taught in the East Carolina University Department of English for over fifty years. His reviews and articles on subjects ranging from Melville's literary uses of tall tale tradition to composition pedagogy and magico-religious healing traditions have appeared in *English Language Notes*, *Medium Aevum*, *Western Folklore*, *North Carolina Folklore Journal*, *Tar River Poetry*, and other journals. He has co-authored or co-edited seven books, including *Writing with Confidence: A Modern College Rhetoric* (Heath, 1989), *Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today* (Duke University Press, 1992), and *Concise English Handbook*, 4th ed. (Houghton, 1997).

GEORGE SINGLETON has published stories in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *Zoetrope*, *Georgia Review*, *Southern Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Oxford American*, *Kenyon Review*, *Epoch*, *Glimmer Train*, *Mid-American Review*, *Ontario Review*, and *New England Review*, and they have been anthologized in nine editions of *New Stories from the South*. His short story collections include *These People Are Us* (River City Press, 2001), *The Half-Mammals of Dixie* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), *Why Dogs Chase Cars* (Algonquin Books, 2004), *Drowning in Gruel* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006). He holds an MFA from UNC Greensboro.

In his latest book, *Staff Picks*, George Singleton follows closely the model that has worked so successfully in his previous collections, combining in a single volume a group of previously published stories loosely linked by characters, settings, and themes. Yet in more fundamental ways, it is strikingly new, reaffirming Singleton's reputation as one of the most talented fiction writers of our time: a humorist with a tragic sensibility, a Southerner whose stories transcend the boundaries of a particular place and time, and a consummate craftsman, well versed in all aspects of the narrative art.

Singleton's comedic virtuosity is on display in story after story, beginning with the lead story, "Staff Picks," which is also the title of the collection as a whole and the subject of an inside joke that Singleton shared with fellow fiction writer Frank Reardon in a recent *Bull Magazine* interview: "The title story just came around with that woman named Staffordshire, named after a dinner plate, and then how she had to keep her hand on an RV, and I thought – because I ain't got anything else to do in South Carolina but think up scams – hey, maybe if I call a collection *Staff Picks*, unsuspecting bookstore browsers will see the title and say, 'It must be good! The staff picked it,' et cetera."¹ *Staff Picks* is in fact good enough – and funny enough – to make the book a legitimate "staff pick" in any bookstore. In the thirteen stories that follow the title story, we meet many other quirky characters with incongruous

names and equally strange physical features and personality traits.

Renfro Truluck, the narrator of "Columbus Day," spends most of his mornings doing laps around the Steepleburg mall (known to locals as "the track" because it attracts more walkers than shoppers) and his afternoons and evenings worrying that his wife Lissett's obsession with "Killer" TV shows about "fratricide, matricide, filicide, sororicide, and . . . mariticide" (20–21) means she's planning to murder him by feeding him a poisoned pastry from her Pure Tarts bakery.

Preston Hewitt, the narrator of "Hex Keys," tells the story of a 1972 Father's Day excursion with his dad, Buck, who introduces him to a series of comically named ex-girlfriends including Arlene and Varlene – two waitresses at the Mama's Nook café (which Buck jokingly refers to as "Mama's Nookie") – and Rayelle, who lives in a trailer park just down the road with her husband Floyd, a man so mean he "got kicked off the football team for beating up a trumpet player in the pep band he thought blew off-tune" and "could headbutt a Coke machine into spitting out bottles" (41).

Odum Tobe, the narrator of "Trombones, Not Magic," concludes that he was "named for a dead rooster" his father was attempting to kill when he accidentally chopped off his ring finger, an incident that becomes the focus of a family joke about why he waited so long

¹ Frank Reardon, "George Singleton," *Bull* 8 Apr. 2019: [web](#).

to marry: "During the *Star Trek* craze, he could never play Spock. He could never wear a wedding band correctly. . . . most women he met held traditional notions concerning all the vows and impedimenta of betrothal, and the rest of them plain got freaked out by a nine-fingered chicken-killer" (63).

Vietnam vet Cush Truluck and his nephew Drum, the two main characters in "Linguistic Fallacies and Facial Ticks, Sex Ed and Death," attend an Optimists Club meeting at the Poke Pancake restaurant in search of information about the recent arson at his brother Neeley's home and encounter some of the oddest of Singleton's oddball characters, including the club's one-fingered president Marty Cromartie, a chaplain with "a comb-over on par with a wheat field during gale season" (88) and a flock of deceased, sick, or wounded members with names like Lloyd Snoddy, "a good Optimist with us from 1963 until the Carter administration," and Billy D. Bobo, who "was always first in line at our annual barbeque" (91).

And we could easily add to this list the names of numerous other characters, including Morning Woody, Crazy Ned-Ned the Pumpkinhead, One-Stroke, Cyclin Mike, and Hellbent Heidi," the five zany deejays in "Staff Picks"; Dickie Land, the overzealous evangelical in "Glory Land," who has spent the past thirty years of his life transcribing the entire bible on two eight-foot pegboards, which he can display only by standing on nine-foot tall stilts; and Samantha Gowdy-Bright, one of the secondary characters in "Eclipse," who in her spare time makes chipmunk fur coats for Barbie dolls. These



COURTESY OF THE UNC GREENSBORO MFA WRITING PROGRAM

characters are among the many who share Singleton's fondness for witty one liners, puns, parodies, and various other forms of word play.

Staff, the narrator informs us, "most of the time" wore an expression "a mother rat snake might display while regarding her hatchlings" (2), and her new boyfriend, Landry Harmon, "had one of those unfortunate bald patterns with a small island of hair at the top of his forehead, surrounded by scalp" that reminds her of "a period surrounded by parentheses" (8). Cush Truluck's Fu Manchu mustache, according to his nephew Drum, was so long, he "draped it above both ears at meal-times," making it appear that he was "sporting hirsute oxygen-supply nostril tubes" (86). Dr. Nancy, a "traveling euthanasia vet" in "Probate," seemed "calmer than a golf announcer on CBS, or someone trying to coax fish to the shoreline" (130, 136). Jackie, the angry, misanthropic narrator of "Gloryland," says to his co-worker Dickie Land, "How long have you been acting like you had the IQ of one of the lesser-used Monopoly

pieces?" (78). And Arlene, the second of Buck Hewitt's ex-girlfriends he introduces to his son Preston, wears her hair in "tight pin curls" that remind Preston of "a vegetable scrubber we had under the sink" (36).

Odum Tobe jokes that "no one in my home town thought it hilarious when we said something like 'I live in Testate'" (65). And there are lots of others with a similar sense of humor, including Renfro Truluck, who provides a brief tongue-in-cheek history of the decline and fall of Steepleburg, closing with an anecdote about how he "got hired one time to help remoniker the place, and the only thing I could come up with went 'We Don't Blow' because city employees worked rakes instead of the leaf blowers used in every nearby southern town," including Atlanta, which had "gone past leaf blowers into the realm of giant detritus-gathering vacuums, which made me think how Atlanta might consider 'We Suck' instead of 'Empire City' or 'Hotlanta'" (22).

Complementing what one critic aptly describes as Singleton's "five-laughs-per-paragraph" style of humor are

other forms of comic discourse in which characters engage one another in verbal battles of wit or speak directly to the reader in self-conscious or unconscious parodies of everything from pretentious poets to racist Optimists.² When Margarite, one of Staff's rivals in the RV contest, makes fun of her name – "Staph! . . . Like the infection?" – Staff replies, "'Yeah, like the infection,' . . . hoping to cause the woman to release her hand prematurely. Staff sidled a half-step in Marguerite's direction. 'My brother's named Mersa'" (3). Equally skilled in the art of the comic comeback is Alicia, an ex-audiologist with an ear for (un)grammatical language, who gets the best of young Carnell Henderson, Jr., the leader of the obnoxious group of drunk frat boys staying at the house across the lake, in this verbal exchange in "Flag Day":

[Carnell]: We own this house and the one across the way. . . . Me and my brothers got that house for the week. Daddy lets us have it twice a year. We put up our car keys, you know, so we don't drive nowhere. Me and Pierpont over there have to run the weed-eater at some point before we leave, to pay for it all.

[Alicia] Me won't drive drunk, either. Me one time hit a pebble with the weed-eater and shattered a window. Me missed grammar class and missed out on pronoun usage. (113–14).

Even funnier are Jackie's parody version of what he describes in "Gloryland" as "that losing Confederate anthem" – "Look away, look away, look away – Dickie Land" (73–74) –



COURTESY OF THE UNC GREENSBORO MFA WRITING PROGRAM

and Drum's deadpan rendition of Marty Cromartie's story about the misfortunes of fellow Optimist Pete Peterson, which is actually a tall tale masquerading as a personal legend:

Last week Pete . . . slipped up there at Table Rock and fell some ninety feet, but only broke his back, both knees, both hips, his pelvis, his neck, one elbow, five fingers, and a wrist. Y'all remember that Pete lost his arm in a thresher machine two-three year ago. In a way, I'm thinking having only one arm might've saved his life. One more broken bone might have tipped the scale when it comes to pain tolerance, you know. (92)

However much we might laugh at the absurdities of Optimists, "Pokers," and their kin, we're constantly reminded, too, that – as Singleton observed in the interview with Frank Reardon – "'Comedy is serious.' Plain and simple. On the page, it's not slapstick. It's what Aristotle pointed to when he wrote about catharsis, and what Mr. Beckett meant when he espoused how there's nothing

funnier than human misery" (8). The humorous anecdotes Odum Tobe relates about his chicken-killer father and his own experiences as a one-trick magician/con artist mask the deep loneliness he feels as he stands in an empty South Carolina Amtrak station on Valentine's Day watching his seventeen-year-old son board a train to New Orleans to visit his dying mother. David Morgan joins Timbo for lunch at Simple Simon's diner in "Resisting Separation" for what turns out to be a surreptitious job interview, during the course of which Morgan is reminded of his recently deceased wife Val and "the day when Val met me at the door with a pair of panties that weren't hers, and the day a few months later when she met me with a stack of papers from her oncologist" (127–28).

The Optimists that Cush and Drum encounter in "Linguistic Fallacies" are not just stereotypical "Pokers" but unreconstructed racists: "six men who totaled at least 420 years in age" (87),

² Ed Tarkington, "Got a Story About That, Too," rev. of *Staff Picks*, by George Singleton, *Chapter 16* 17 Sept. 2019: [web](#).

sang “Dixie” while “gaping at a Confederate Flag they’d brought into Poke Pancake, hands over pacemakers” (89), and claimed as one of their own a Klansman by the name of R.V. McKinney, who attempted to kill Drum’s parents. As Ted and Alicia plot a Chappellesque prank against their “Flag Day” adversaries across the lake, Alicia tells the story of Ms. Young, an eighty-eight-year-old woman who was so traumatized by the murder of her husband that she asked the doctor at the clinic where Alicia was working at the time if he could “do something about making her *more* deaf. She said she constantly heard her husband screaming. Inside her head. She wanted to know if there was a procedure that could stop sounds from ever entering” (113).

And both the Optimists and the Hendersons serve as contemporary reminders of the violent racial history depicted in “Eclipse.” Like many of the stories preceding it, “Eclipse” begins with the comic misadventures of a down on his luck ex-college teacher – in this case a geologist named Tommy, who finds himself at the Willie Earle Community Center on Cinco de Mayo serving “salmonella-worthy” (143) tacos to the staff and clients of the No Stigma mental health organization. The story takes a surreal turn, however, when he meets one of No Stigma’s “star pupils” (146) William, whom Tommy believes to be the ghost of Willie Earle, murdered decades earlier by a white lynch mob in Pickens County, South Carolina, and learns that

William – who was born blind but regained his sight by staring at a solar eclipse – plans to re-blind himself at the next eclipse because, in his words, “I’m tired of seeing nothing but bad, bad, bad. Poverty. Killing. Illiteracy. More poverty. Next eclipse? I’m going to stare right up into it, get rid of what I don’t want to witness” (158).

As powerful as this story is, our journey through Singleton’s fictionalized version of upstate South Carolina does not end in the liminal space occupied by Tommy and William but back in the ex-mill town of Steepleburg, where we meet once again the kind of characters who, as he says in an interview, appear in “90% of my stories”: “everyday men and women stuck in an uncomfortable situation.”³ Here, though, the characters, situation, and overall tone are quite different from the earlier stories. All the action, except for the final scene, takes place in one of the greenhouses at the Foothills Farm and Garden store, where a group of characters more diverse and harmonious than any we’ve met thus far come together for a long-running event called Thursday Night Poker. Among them are the store owner Lou and his wife Starla; their longtime friend and employee, Marvin Freel; fellow employee Miguel, known for making up imaginary card games with outlandish names like “Nicaraguan Surprise and Five-Card visa;” and two other regulars, Dave and Vicki.

There’s plenty of comic relief, as in this artfully paced conversation between Miguel and Vicki:

Miguel said, “Okay, this one is called Seven-Card Dominican Baseball. Threes and nines are wild, plus you need to catch the card when I deal it to you, or else you get an error. At the end of the game, whoever has the least errors wins, no matter what. Even if you have a royal flush.”

Everyone anted up. Vicki said, “Wait. You’re dealing. You won’t have to catch a card.”

Miguel said, “Sí. I win.” (188)

But the main focus of the poker table conversation is not on the names of the games or the winners and losers but on Marvin’s recent bouts of memory loss and other signs of sudden onset dementia. The cause, his friends believe, is the recent death of his beloved wife, Lillian, but, as he confesses to Lou at the end of the story, the real reason for his current troubles is that he can no longer bear the weight of a long-kept secret, that more than thirty years earlier he had an affair with another of Lou’s employees, Greta.

It is a shocking revelation in light of the public perception that Marvin and Lillian “shared a love unmatched by their friends” (193), and it is a final reminder that the human comedy takes many forms, and George Singleton is adept at them all, whether he is recreating in the language of fiction the oral performance style of Rodney Dangerfield, Bob Newhart, and the many other comedians he admires, or channeling Aristotle and Beckett, or inviting us to participate vicariously in a game of Thursday Night Poker, where “everything’s wild.” ■

³ Caleb Bouchard, “Ampersand Interview Series: George Singleton,” *Arts & Letters* 17 Apr. 2019: [web](#).

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY BETTY RITZ ROGERS***Mount Zion Cemetery**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept,
when we remembered Zion.—Psalms 137:1*

Dug into the hillside,
ramshackle and random
as the houses that lean
toward the run at its base,
Mount Zion Cemetery holds
the mortal remains of the spirits
that hold him still.
Each spring and summer he comes
in his second-hand Buick
with pushmower, clippers, and watering cans
to tend the graves –
mowing, clipping,
planting the petunias
as soon as May promises
no more frost.

White – no color, all color –
for his father the old judge
whose taunts once made him
threaten to jump off the roof.
Purple for his mother
who died blind, mourning
for the man her husband was,
the man her son would never be.
Pink and lavender for his sisters:
Sarah died first – only five
when an idiot boy pushed
her into the reservoir.
They said the old judge,
a champion swimmer,
dove and dove until he found her,
cold and still in the dark water.
From that day, his hair was gray.
Virginia, the sister barely grown,
died of Spanish flu,
just eighteen years into a hard century.

David, never called by that name,
never found his Zion.
Sent to buy the whiskey
they thought might preserve
the family from contagion,
on the trolley car home
he emptied a bottle
and began a thirst
that he could never slake –
not even at the cemetery spigot
where he washed the dirt and grass
of their graves from his hands.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

*Cracks* (copperplate photogravure, 14x14) by Angela Franks Wells

ANGELA FRANKS WELLS earned a BA in Studio Art and Psychology from Scripps Women's College of Claremont, CA, and she earned an MFA from Arizona State University. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Photography at ECU in Greenville, NC. For more information and to see other samples of her work visit her [website](#).

BETTY RITZ ROGERS is a retired public health nurse living in Greensboro. She studied English literature at West Liberty State College in West Virginia and at UNC Greensboro. She has published poems in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Pinesong*, and *New Letters*. She also received the prize for poetry from NCSU in 2014, the New Letters Prize for poetry in 2018, the Poet Laureate Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society in 2018, as well as a Pushcart nomination.

FINDING HOPE AND GOODNESS AMONG LIFE'S TWISTS

a review by Barbara Bennett

Belle Boggs. *The Gulf: A Novel*. Graywolf Press, 2019.

Kathryn Schville. *What Luck, This Life*. Hub City Press, 2018.

BARBARA BENNETT received her PhD in American Literature from Arizona State University and is an Associate Professor of English at NC State University. She has written *Smoke Signals from Samarcand* (USC Press, 2018), *Scheherazade's Daughters* (Peter Lang, 2012), *Soul of a Lion* (National Geographic Books, 2010), *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), and *Comic Vision, Female Voices* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998). She is a regular reviewer for *NCLR*.

Author Lee Smith has said that writers have their first twenty-five years to write their first novels, and then publishers want the second one in six months. Both authors reviewed here, Kathryn Schville and Belle Boggs, have taken full advantage of those early years and written their first novels with the style and substance that indicate they have taken their time and done it right. While these are vastly different novels in form and content, they both show talent indicating that second novels should be on the way.

Life can change in an instant, a cliché that becomes very real for the town of Kiser in East Texas in *What Luck, This Life* from **Kathryn Schville**. The debris of the space shuttle Columbia, destroyed during re-entry in February 2003, rains down on the town and the surrounding area. The wreckage does not burn up during the process but lands in pieces, everything from computer parts and foam lining to human remains. Suddenly, the lives of everyone in this town are divided into before and after this horrific event, some lives being changed forever in ways they could not imagine until the debris began falling.

The structure of the book makes the tale even more interesting, bringing to mind such books as *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Olive Kittridge*. Each chapter is a separate story about a different character in the town, but stories tend to overlap and interweave, characters reappear and disappear into obscurity, and the horror of the event grows in impact as each story is told. The setting of the second chapter, after the short first chapter

describing the event, is a fitting beginning to the book: a convenience store called Bostic's where locals come to buy their day-to-day necessities. Roy and Carter Bostic run the store, and, in this chapter, we are introduced to, among others, Grady MacFarland, the deputy Cecil Dawson, and Newland Sparks. By beginning with this setting, these characters and a variety of others, who will be visited in later chapters, appear, and Schville sketches a larger picture of this small town and how it works.

Sparks, for example, comes into the store daily, mainly to sexually harass Carter. Carter tries to ignore it, and other shoppers do their best to distract him, but Sparks is from a rich and powerful family in town. He gets away with the disgusting behavior because no one wants to cross his family.

Grady McFarland's brother Wes shows up in the next story, "The Road to Houston," perhaps the most intriguing story in the collection. Wes is gay but hiding it, and this is his story as he plans to escape to Houston so he can live an honest life. In this chapter we meet his son Frankie who discovers the torso of a body in a tree, and Wes has to be the one to retrieve it because his job is with a tree service. While Frankie seems untouched by the discovery at the time – curious, as most young men would be, to the point of getting binoculars to see the remains better – questions later in the book arise about the event's impact on this young boy. An implication that Frankie tries to commit suicide when he's older makes the reader ponder the real impact of having falling bodies land in your yard.

The time varies in the stories, from the immediate days after the explosion to present day, when the impact is still felt. The voice also changes from first to third person, but the quality of the stories is consistent. Schwille's stories nearly always engage the reader from the first paragraph of each. Sometimes stories seem unconnected to the shuttle disaster and then, suddenly, there it is again, the violent collision of past and present, and the long-term effect of being the epicenter of such a disaster.

The only two chapters that are slightly different are the first and the last. The first, "FM 104," describes the breakup of Columbia from the perspective of the media and the people on the ground, and the last chapter, "At the Window," depicts a hopeful astronaut as he takes

off on the mission looking out the window of the shuttle at the "sliver of moon" and the beautiful view of earth that he has been waiting so long to see long before the disaster occurs (201). These bookends significantly set the scene for all the stories in between. In "At the Window," the astronaut Michael Kirkland, whose torso is later found by Frankie hanging in a tree, reflects upon all that has had to happen to make this trip a reality, and he utters the title words, "What luck this life" (202). What he doesn't realize, of course, is that luck comes in two forms: good and bad.

Much of the luck in this book is just random – what pieces of the flight survive, who finds them, how the tragedy affects different people – and leads us to an overwhelming question: just how much control do we

actually have over the events of our lives and deaths? As one character says about important events in life, "significance can be less distinct, or even invisible, until an unfamiliar critter pokes its head into a certain slant of light and a man sees how, on a particular day, the balance of his world was altered" (152). Yes, this life is full of luck, some bad and some good, and the accidental way that our lives proceed seems monumental and terrifying when put in the context of this disaster.

Belle Boggs's first novel, *The Gulf: A Novel*, is very different from Schwille's but powerful in its own way. It is a satire about for-profit education, right-wing Christians, and writers of the barely-known kind who are willing to do just about anything to be able to keep writing and make a living. It is gentle, not cruel satire, making fun of the believer and the non-believer alike. Neither is a villain. The closest thing to a villain in this novel is undoubtedly God's World God's Word, the national organization that sets up unaccredited schools for Christians, taking their money while offering them a substandard education, all in the name of God.

GWGW's scheme is similar to the one created by the main character, Marianne – who "wasn't cheap; she was just a poet" (7) – and her ex-fiancé, Eric. In order to finance their own writing, they open up The Genesis Inspirational Writing

PHOTOGRAPH BY DALE NEAL; COURTESY OF MALAPROP'S



KATHRYN SCHWILLE's fiction has appeared in *New Letters*, *Crazyhorse*, and other literary journals. Her stories have twice received Special Mention in the Pushcart Prize anthology. She was an award-winning newspaper reporter before moving to North Carolina to become an editor at the *Charlotte Observer*. A graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, she lives with her husband in Charlotte, NC, and is on the regular faculty at Charlotte Center for Literary Arts.

ABOVE Kathryn Schwille at Malaprop's Bookstore, Asheville, NC, 4 Oct. 2018



COURTESY OF QUAIL RIDGE BOOKS

Ranch, or The Ranch for short, in order to attract Christians and their money, Christians who will all be looking to make a buck writing chaste vampire novels and poems about God's love. Christians, they believe, will be an easy target, and Marianne thinks she can pull their scheme off with little to no guilt. As Marianne reminds Eric, "We're not serious about what we're doing. We're . . . taking advantage of certain expectations. We're exploiting certain ideas" (84). So they set up the low-residency school in a refurbished motel in Florida and start taking applications.

The problem – or perhaps the saving grace – is that Marianne does feel guilt. She gets to know the students, like Janine, a writer who pens verses about Terry Schiavo's fight to stay alive. Janine, Marianne finally admits,

is "a totally normal person," and she tells Eric, "I don't think I can take advantage of them. I don't think I can screw them over while I'm living with them" (130). Boggs highlights one of the problems this country is facing in fact: the gulf that threatens to destroy America. We believe the stereotypes of the Other, without bothering to get to know those with opinions different than ours. But if we took the time to understand those Others, we might find, like Marianne does, that "There's something honest and on the surface about them and the fact that they know everyone is here for the same purpose" (135).

GWGW, on the other hand, fails to see the sin in exploiting others, and, when The Ranch has to turn to them for funding, the action becomes as chaotic as the hurricane that threatens

the school in the final pages, and, as is usually the case, money wins out over idealism. Marianne comes so far in her transition to a decent person that she even wonders if the storm is a punishment from God, coming to destroy the sham of a school that she had helped create.

It would have been easy for Boggs to turn this into a liberal rant about gullible religious people who believe writing will be easy and profitable, especially if God is on their side, but thankfully, she resists. Early on, Marianne considers the students "arrogant" because they "picture a god placing them on Earth like chess pieces" (105), but, when Janine thanks Marianne for the school and the guidance she is receiving, she admits it "was a remarkable thing . . . to deliver someone to her purpose, especially if that purpose was not quite what you intended or even believed in" (117). Boggs doesn't go so far as to turn Marianne into a believer, but she softens toward her students and toward her own sister, whose life is heavily steeped in religious fervor.

In the end, both novels leave you, if not happy, then wondering about the twists and turns of life and the possibility of hope and goodness found in others. While very different books, the two first-time novels show quality in both style and substance, and we can only hope the authors will come up with their next novels sooner rather than later. We will be waiting not-so-patiently. ■

BELLE BOGGS received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the North Carolina Arts Council, and the Bread Loaf and Sewanee writers' conferences. Her stories and essays have appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Orion*, the *Paris Review*, *Harper's*, *Ecotone*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She is an Associate Professor of English at NC State University, where she also directs the MFA program in creative writing.

ABOVE Belle Boggs at Quail Ridge Books, Raleigh, NC, 18 Apr. 2019

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE
BY ANNA LENA PHILLIPS BELL

At Carolina Beach

Over the rail, after supper, they gleam,
so we step down stairs to the night-dark sand
to look at the fireworks,

dandelions, starbursts, shattered between
the pier and beach and one more thing we're bound to
look at: the moon –

huge, orange, emerging from clouds over ocean,
over two girls by the shore doing handstands.
"Look at the fireworks!"

A grown-up nearby cannot condone
any not looking at what they'd all planned to
look at. "The moon,

though," says one girl, closer to wave and to sheen –
impossible not, when it's one made of blood, to
look at. The fireworks

ANNA LENA PHILLIPS BELL is the author of *Ornament* (University of North Texas Press, 2017), winner of the 2016 Vassar Miller Poetry Prize. Her work has recently appeared in *A Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia* (University of Georgia Press, 2019) and *Counter-Desecration: A Glossary for Writing within the Anthropocene* (Wesleyan University Press, 2018). She is the 2019–2021 Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet for Eastern North Carolina. She teaches in the Creative Writing Department at UNC Wilmington, where she is the editor of *Ecotone* and the magazine's sister imprint, Lookout Books.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLUE SPIRAL 1 GALLERY

Dandelion, Late Spring (incised aluminum panel, 47x47) by Mitchell Lonas

unceasing, like war, but don't let that thought in,
 think stem and strange aster, think comet – then turn to
 look at the moon –

standing in secret, in public, unseen
 in the shadow and spectacle, holding your hand to
 look at the fireworks,

which sometime must end, in smoke that cocoons
 the beach and the long traffic jam leading inland, so
 look at the moon,

how it rises on, fading, its peachiness gone
 to pearl as we lean back one last time to
 look at the fireworks! look at the moon!

MITCHELL LONAS lives and maintains a studio practice in Asheville, NC. A Tennessee native who studied art history at the University of Tennessee, he was a respected portrait painter before transitioning to his current style. The artist's work has been widely exhibited in galleries such as Callan Contemporary and Gallery Bienvenu, and is featured in notable private, public, institutional, and corporate collections, among them a series of large-scale commissions for Nordstrom department stores. See more of his work on his [website](#).

NO OTHER STORIES LIKE THESE: THE LIMINAL LIVES OF OTHER(ED) WOMEN

a review by Savannah Paige Murray

Mesha Maren. *Sugar Run*.
Algonquin Books, 2018.

Etaf Rum. *A Woman Is No Man*.
HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.

SAVANNAH PAIGE MURRAY is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric & Writing at Virginia Tech. Her writing has appeared in *Appalachian Journal*, *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, and *Journal of East Tennessee History*. A native of Asheville, NC, she is a regular reviewer for *NCLR*.

MESHA MAREN'S short stories and essays can be read in *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *Crazyhorse*, *TriQuarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Ecotone*, *Sou'wester*, *Hobart*, *Forty Stories: New Writing from Harper Perennial*, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of the 2015 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, a 2014 Elizabeth George Foundation grant, an Appalachian Writing Fellowship from Lincoln Memorial University, and fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and the Ucross Foundation. She is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Duke University.

ETAF RUM is the daughter of Palestinian immigrants. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. She has a master's degree in American and British literature, as well as undergraduate degrees in Philosophy and English composition. She and her two children live in Rocky Mount, NC. *A Woman Is No Man* is her first novel.

"You've never heard this story before. No matter how many books you've read, how many tales you know, believe me: no one has ever told you a story like this one" (1). So begins Etaf Rum's 2019 novel, *A Woman Is No Man*. After reading Rum's remarkable debut novel, I can say I've never read this exact story before, a perception that easily extends to Mesha Maren's 2018 debut *Sugar Run* as well. Throughout both of these novels, readers follow the lives of complex female characters as they navigate their traumatic pasts, which quite simply will not stay in the past. As William Faulkner's famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."*

In both of these novels, readers are thrust into the past in a series of interlocking chapters set decades apart. In *A Woman Is No Man*, half of the chapters center around Isra, a Palestinian woman who marries a Palestinian-American and immigrates to Brooklyn, NY, in the late 1990s. The remaining chapters in Rum's debut follow Isra's oldest daughter Deya as she comes of age and begins receiving numerous marriage offers from young, eligible Palestinian-American bachelors in her neighborhood. In *Sugar Run*, readers follow Jodi, a young woman from West Virginia who, in the modern chapters set in the late 2000s, has just been released from an eighteen-year stint in prison for a gun accident involving her former lover, Paula. *Sugar Run* focuses largely

on Jodi's pre-prison life, as she galivants around the country, and even into Mexico with Paula as a teenager, falling in love and serving as Paula's "good luck charm" as she gambles and plays poker to fund their lifestyle. While these novels share a deep, entrenched connection to the past, their originality rests in the ways in which so many of these characters must struggle with their complex identities.

We first meet Isra of **Etaf Rum's *A Woman Is No Man*** as a young woman living in Palestine, welcoming in suitors and daydreaming about what her future life as a wife and mother may hold. When Isra is courted by a young Palestinian-American man named Adam, she starts to wonder if "she could have the love she had always dreamed of," living in "the land of the free," where perhaps, she "could lead a better life than her mother's" (21). Isra finds the idea of leaving Palestine, the only home she had ever known an exciting possibility because she mostly "didn't feel [like] she belonged in Palestine either, where people lived carefully, following tradition so they wouldn't be shunned." Isra longed for a home where she was "not being forced to conform to conventions" where she could have "adventure" and "most of all, love" (9).

But for Isra, a life full of love and freedom in America is not easy to find, in no small part because of her Palestinian heritage. Shortly after arriving

* Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1950, Vintage, 2012) 73.

OPPOSITE TOP Etaf Rum during her interview on North Carolina Bookwatch, Research Triangle Park, NC, 16 July 2019; OPPOSITE RIGHT Mesha Maren during her book reading at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, NC, 7 Feb. 2019



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY O DAVIS, COURTESY OF UNC-TV

in Brooklyn, Isra's new husband, Adam, cautions her against wearing her hijab in public, fearing she might incur physical harm based on the bigotry, hatred, and xenophobia of others. Adam tells Isra, "We have to live carefully here, . . . we could live here for the rest of our lives and never be Americans" (56). Isra finds herself "torn between two cultures and struggling to start anew" (58).

Although Isra had hoped her own children would have an easier, more idyllic life than her own, her daughter Deya feels similar cultural tensions, realizing, "She had lived her entire life straddled between two cultures," feeling "neither Arab nor American" (28). While these feelings of not belonging, of questioning one's own identity, are incredibly daunting for the characters at the heart of *A Woman Is No Man*, they certainly offer a nuanced representation of these characters for the reader. As we encounter the liminal identities of the women in Rum's novel, we find ourselves coming to a greater understanding of these characters, relating to their perceived "otherness" and sympathizing with their efforts to

carve out their own place in an often scary, threatening world.

As an ex-convict, a West Virginian, and a queer woman, the protagonist in **Mesha Maren's *Sugar Run*** works to navigate her own life in intersecting identities of marginalization. When readers first meet Jodi, the tension and trauma of her life is palatable, as we envision her exiting her cell for the last time and walking into a new life of some sort of freedom. Maren writes, "Jodi took one step and stopped. She could feel the treacherous edges stretched across that open door. Eighteen years. She'd tried to stop counting but could not. More or her life had been lived inside than out" (4). The weighty, beautiful prose featured here continues throughout *Sugar Run* as the

"treacherous edges" of Jodi's life continue to unravel (4).

While *Sugar Run* features chapters set back in time, focusing on Jodi's life before being sent to prison, the more contemporary chapters, covering Jodi's life after release also contain vibrant flashbacks, help us understand the complexity of not only Jodi's past but also her identity. In one of these flashbacks, we learn of Jodi's wishes for her relationship with Paula, including her desires for people to accept their relationship:

If [Jodi] could just line up the way the world must see their love with the way all this feels, then everything would come into clearer view. If she could push back the words – *dyke*, *queer* – then everything would make sense and turn out all right. Sometimes, though, the terror of it grips her, the knowledge that she is not seen at all, or only seen backward and out of focus. It is a feeling she is sure will crush her someday. (60)

Reading sentences like these, with their elevated language at its purest, I wondered if Maren has notebooks full of her own poetry at home.

Perhaps my favorite part of reading both of these novels is embracing the various escapes the characters build for themselves, pastimes to help them temporarily avoid the painful



COURTESY OF QUAIL RIDGE BOOKS

complexities of their lives. In *A Woman Is No Man*, both Isra and Deya develop a love for reading novels. As Isra's life changes dramatically, her love for books remains steady; she hides books under her bed and in her closet, quickly finishing chores and reading quietly during the day. After Isra and Adam's untimely, unexpected death, Deya and her younger sisters are raised by her paternal grandparents. As an escape from her strict homelife and a refuge from her unanswered questions about her parents' lives, Deya clings to books like her mother once did. For Deya, "Books were her only reliable source of comfort her only hope" because "They told the truth in a way the world never seemed to, guided her the way she imagined Isra would've had she still been alive" (38).

While Deya seeks peace and truth in the words of others, Jodi, in *Sugar Run*, looks to the natural world to escape her complicated past and present. Maren's gift for language shines particularly bright as she discusses Jodi's beloved landscape, as she writes the following: "On the far side the view was nothing but ridgelines, the craggy silhouettes rising up against the night sky like the body of some dormant god" (92). Jodi's contemplation of the mountains seems to calm her, as she "closed her eyes and pictured her mountains and how before the mountains were mountains they were at sea. An ancient weedy sea, crawling with centipede-like beings. And water over all of it. The rush and purr of giant waves" (58). In both *A Woman Is No Man* and *Sugar Run*, readers see the protagonists carving out their own escapes from the

madness of their worlds, and even if that relief is as temporary as a passing thought, their love of reading still contributes to the rich character development found in both of these texts.

As I hope my review thus far has indicated, I enjoyed both of these novels immensely. However, no book is perfect, and thus the book review genre mandates at least some sort of critique. In *A Woman Is No Man* readers are very frequently reminded of the inequity between women and men in Palestinian culture. Both Isra and Deya are constantly reminded that "A woman is not a man" (94). At times, I found myself feeling a bit brow-beaten by this consistent degradation of women, and I predict that other readers may feel the same. However, to poke holes in my own argument, I do see the purpose of this reinforcement; it serves as a reminder to the reader that we are learning about a culture likely different from our own. Further, this insistence is a reminder of the book's opening lines: we've "never heard this story before" (1).

While I felt some themes were too repetitive in *A Woman Is No Man*, I found other key issues underdeveloped in *Sugar Run*. Namely, it seemed odd to me that a woman like Jodi, who has just been released from nearly two decades in prison, does not reference being in prison more often. It seemed like her new found "freedom" was at best a passing thought to Jodi, as indicated here: "There was so much about life outside of prison that she had forgotten or maybe never really known" (89). Removed from its broader context of the novel, this quote

shows Jodi's awareness of how much her life is changing, but this is one of the only instances of such reflection and introspection about her new freedom in the book. I admit that I am rather ignorant about the prison system and life after incarceration. However, I would imagine more of a sense of shock than Jodi demonstrates in *Sugar Run*.

Despite my meager qualms discussed here, both novels, *A Woman Is No Man* and *Sugar Run*, are well worth careful, close readings. Throughout both novels, none of the characters fall flat. In one moment they may frustrate us, infuriate us, break our hearts, make us laugh, yet as we learn more about them, about the struggles they have faced, we find that these books inspire in us what the best fiction does: empathy, empathy for people we may not know, for lives we may never lead, but nonetheless for people with whom we share a nation and an ever-changing culture. Reading these books can help us become better Americans in a time when we need to reevaluate our citizenry so very badly, when our democracy is plagued with xenophobia, hatred, and heinous "othering." Despite the hardship and heartbreak found within these novels' plots, the reader will also find hope.

Both of these authors, Etaf Rum and Mesha Maren, teach undergraduate English at various schools in North Carolina. If their teaching is anything like their writing, their students are lucky to be around them, undoubtedly soaking up a tremendous amount of solid writing tips and lessons in crafting complex, memorable characters. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE**BY BARBARA CAMPBELL***The Tender*

She couldn't have known,
 bless her heart,
 but my daughter-in-law
 brings me a bouquet
 of fresh-cut flowers –
 mums, roses, zinnias –
 before she and my son
 say what would be
 their last goodbye
 to his dying father.

Here's the truth
 about cut flowers –
 they make me nervous,
 their death sealed
 with that first scissored
 clip and strung out
 over days as water
 turns foul and murky.
 I triage the unredeemable
 but still snip
 remaining stems
 and plunge them
 into fresh water
 as if they had a chance.

I rub my husband's feet
 and his skin is soft,
 silky as those rose petals
 I just discarded.
 His dwindling brain,
 scarred lungs will have
 their way with him
 soon enough. What I dread
 is the onslaught of wreaths,
 sprays, bouquets –
 all left here for me.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Juxtapose Rose (acrylic, wire, thread, sculptural organza on canvas, 30x40) by Jane Cheek

BARBARA CAMPBELL lives in Charlotte, NC, and has had poems published in *Rattle*, *Kakalak*, *Journey Within*, *Pinesong*, and *The Southern Poetry Anthology, North Carolina*. This is her first poem to appear in *NCLR*.

JANE CHEEK lives in Raleigh, NC. She received a BA in Visual Arts Applications from NC State and a Visual Arts Teacher Certification from ECU. She has exhibited her art throughout the Triangle, including at 311 Gallery, ArtSpace, United Arts Council, and The Arts Center. See more of her work on her [website](#).

SENSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO DISCOMFORT

a review by *Laura Sloan
Patterson*

Maura Way. *Another Bungalow*.
Press 53, 2017.

Laura Sloan Patterson earned her PhD in English Literature from Vanderbilt University with areas of specialization in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, Southern literature, women's literature, and feminist theory. Her poetry has appeared in *Sugar Water*, *Rust + Moth*, *HOOT*, *Not One of Us*, and *Mom Egg Review*. Patterson's poem "Delaware River," a finalist in the James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition, was published in *NCLR* 2017, and she has reviewed frequently for *NCLR*.

Maura Way was born and raised in Washington, DC, and now lives in Greensboro, NC. Her poems have been featured in numerous magazines and journals including *Verse*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Drunken Boat*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Chattahoochee Review*. She has been a teacher for over twenty years, most recently at Summit School in Winston-Salem and New Garden Friends in Greensboro.

In *Another Bungalow*, Maura Way often adopts a confessional tone, introducing the reader to a variety of uncomfortable situations: wearing too-tight pants, getting two haircuts in one day, feeling trapped in an endless seminar on common core standards for education. Remembered instances of discomfort – of the body and the mind – create the essential experience of this collection. At times, one instance of discomfort bleeds into another through memory's bodily cues and triggers. The tight pants lead to thoughts of publicly exposed underwear and the mild unease of watching someone use a mobile phone earpiece while speaking a language other than one's own. One bad haircut begets another and morphs into troubling and exclusive hair advice ten years later. The entrapment of a banal recertification seminar brings up questions of career fulfillment and what education means, in a darkly funny way: "Expo markers smell like sadness."

In "Our Town," *Another Bungalow's* lead poem, students learn from a new drama teacher that they have regional accents. The poem creates a call and response between the students' words and phrases – "ornch drink," "di-ent" for "didn't" – and the teacher's insistence on "could *have* / would should *have*." Here, Way's poetic persona explicitly names the darker side of [re]education in the poem's powerful one word last line: "ashamed." Way's

two decades of teaching experience seem to give her a particular sensitivity to the plight of teacher and student, who are constant learners, sometimes working against the planned curriculum. These poems have a particular knack for understanding young voices, both the poetic personae's younger selves and contemporary young people.

Concerns about technology abound here, especially the use of technology by young people. "Netted Gems" begins, "Pull all the kids off the internet / Put them out on hot concrete porches." While this beginning could easily slide into well-worn territory about porches, air conditioning, and storytelling, it doesn't. Instead, "Netted Gems" recommends giving the kids knives and cantaloupes and allowing them to "hack, scoop" and "stab" into a visceral, sensual cure for the heavily mediated "fun" of the internet. In a similar vein, "Modern Warfare" contrasts scenes of gardening with the video games being played indoors, and "Feedback" rejects technology's siren song: "the promise of customizing." This poetic voice doesn't condemn technology; it explores other options with a contemporary agrarian and philosophical bent, all in the vernacular: "no use in swooning / over cameras in pens no more."

A strong dose of resigned humor gives these poems an earthbound feel. "Sound



PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN MORGAN WATSON

Advice” counsels substituting medical scrubs for other types of comfortable clothing, especially pajamas, which don’t garner respect: “If you find a few sets of realistic and well / made scrubs, you may never have to really / get dressed again.” The good advice continues with warnings about what to do if there is an emergency and you are expected to help. In short, lie or run.

Other poems in the collection feel more personal and situational. “Second Acts” and “To Eating Alone” broach divorce and life change. “Second Acts” portrays a very specific feeling, a sensation of emptiness and mask-wearing that becomes tighter and more binding the more one struggles against it. The image of a fly struggling against worn flypaper recurs throughout the poem. The final line – “That show is over. I stand to be unmasked” – offers relief without emotional

catharsis or false hope. Finality is its own reward, and there are no promises about what comes next. “To Eating Alone” offers a more lighthearted take, a love letter to a familiar restaurant that becomes the backdrop for important moments: “You were a milestone / thirteen years later while I waited for / the divorce to be final.” The poem’s speaker knows from experience that this restaurant and her love for it will not last forever, but she accepts it as a temporary source of comfort.

Another Bungalow moves beyond personal discomfort to address broader cultural discomfort as well. “New Souths” draws sharp contrasts between suburban and urban environments for children in alternating stanzas. Instead of using the expected pastoral and gritty tropes, Way notes the structured and isolating nature of suburban life (a lone child swinging on expensive play set) and the communal and creative nature of urban childhoods: “They have made / something out of nothing. This/ world has not been childproofed.” The blame for these separate worlds lies squarely on the adults, and what is needed are more “adults who/ can stand being around other adults who / they have not hand-selected for freshness / and quality.” A short poem, “A Choosing,” comments subtly on the racism embedded in American history, and the need to investigate all attitudes and beliefs.

The strength of these poems lies in their constant surprises: an opening that feels comfortable but leads to a unique perspective and then a sharp turn, often in the final stanza or line. The title of this collection might lead the reader to expect a meditation on homes or families. Instead, it seems that “another bungalow” might stand in for “another memory,” “another body,” or “another way of being.” A feeling of inhabiting a bungalow that does not fit or is not *quite* right pervades these poems. There is a constant sense of purposeful discomfort, but that discomfort is tempered by a focus on the sensual world – literally, the world as perceived through the senses. Way’s poems are deeply embodied: they are inhabited by a distinct voice, and they are thick with savory foods, lush plants and gardens, and a sense of things left overgrown or ready to burst. Even forms of bygone technology, such as the smell and feel of a payphone, are lovingly described. On the surface, these poems might read as somewhat disconnected; however, they are intimately connected by a simple proposal. Way seems to be arguing that the solution for bodily, emotional, and philosophical discomfort lies in the physical world. If we are isolated by technology, suburbia, or resistance to common core standards, there is always a garden, a restaurant meal, or a knifed cantaloupe to bring us back into our senses. ■

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE
BY JOHN FRANK HAUGH

Baba Yaga After a Bad Tinder Date

In raven robes, she stands
in a wide wild field as twilight
hints of sister-black on the far horizon.

She gyres hands, chants polyglot commands,
stalking toward his home, as winds grow for her,
pull bramble-roots that weave with grasses.
She throws both hands out
like parallel knives.

Living ropes fly straight,
clunk into his mobile home's baby blue vinyl siding,
coil like restless serpents in great spirals.

He is yanked out by ropes the color of November,
wearing a torn Ed Sheeran tee shirt,
root-fingers bind him to his front porch, dig
deep into his house's thin walls.

JOHN FRANK HAUGH's poetry has been published in *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Old Mountain Press*, *Camel City Dispatch*, and elsewhere. He won the Nancy J. Heggem Poetry Award, Winston-Salem's Poetry in Plain Sight, and Greensboro's Visual Poetry Walk. He is working on a book tentatively titled "Conversations about mixtapes, red clay and repurposed ghosts."

**FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE
BY MICHAEL GASPENY**

On the Demise of a Bibliophile

The darlings on your shelves lose themselves:
Marlowe, steaming down the Congo after Kurtz,
hears the message from the drums, bellows, turns back.
Emma Bovary, swirling at the ball, feels you shudder
in the strings, flies from the viscount's arms into fidelity.

In your most cherished scene, so often read aloud,
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on your lap,
Colonel Sherburn, with chilling condescension,
kills the harmless village sot, then scorns and scatters
the lily-livered lynch mob. Now without your rasp,
tongue-tied Sherburn slips the noose around his neck.

At your obsequies, Marlowe and Madame hold
Huck's hands, as Kurtz from the wisteria cries,
How dare you do what I should have done?

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Bibliophile, (carved and painted mahogany, yew wood, mica, nails, handmade paper, tintypes, bones, Ethiopian and Coptic bindings, 15x11x5) by Daniel Essig

DANIEL ESSIG lives in Penland, NC, and is a sculptor, painter, and woodworker. He earned a BA in photography at the University of South Illinois at Carbondale. His work has been included in *500 Handmade Books*, Volume 2 (Lark Books, 2013), *1000 Artist Books, Exploring the Book as Art* (Quarry Books, 2012), *Masters: Book Arts: Major Works by Leading Artists* (Lark Books, 2011), and many others. See more of his work on his [website](#).

MICHAEL GASPENY is the author of the chapbooks *Re-Write Men* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), and *Vocation* (Main Street Rag, 2013). He has won the Randall Jarrell Poetry Competition and O. Henry Festival Short Fiction Contest. His verse has inspired a sculpture and appeared in a florist's window. His poems have been published in *Tar River Poetry*; *Brilliant Corners: A Journal of Jazz and Literature*; *Cave Wall*; and *Kakalak*; his fiction in *storySouth* and *The Greensboro Review*. For hospice service in Greensboro, he received the North Carolina Governor's Award for Volunteer Excellence.

**"WE WILL NEVER
FORGIVE ONE
ANOTHER / FOR
BEING HUMAN"**

a review by Hannah Crane Sykes

Emilia Phillips. *Empty Clip*.
University of Akron Press, 2018.

Kevin Rippin. *Amber Drive*.
Main Street Rag Publishing, 2018.

HANNAH CRANE SYKES is a native of Western North Carolina but currently lives in the Piedmont region. She earned her BA from Western Carolina University and her MA from UNC Greensboro. She teaches at Southwestern Community College and is a regular reviewer for *NCLR*. Her review's title comes from Phillips's poem "On Receipt of a Dick Pic."

EMILIA PHILLIPS is the author of two other poetry collections published by the University of Akron Press: *Groundspeed* (2016) and *Signalitics* (2013), and three chapbooks, most recent *Hemlock* (Diode Editions, 2019). Her poems and lyric essays appear widely in literary publications including *Agni*, *American Poetry Review*, *Boston Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. She is an Assistant Professor in the UNC Greensboro MFA Writing Program and Department of English.

KEVIN RIPPIN earned an MA in writing from the University of Pittsburgh. He has worked as a corporate editor and writer and currently teaches writing at NCA&T State University in Greensboro. He has published articles, reviews, and poetry in numerous magazines and journals, including *Southern Poetry Review*, *Poetry East*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*.

One might suggest that the tendency of good poetry to expose vulnerabilities is one reason why readers are drawn to verse. Two contemporary collections, *Amber Drive* by Kevin Rippin and *Empty Clip* by Emilia Phillips, expose the vulnerabilities of their readers and speakers with confrontational poems that cut to the core of today's concerns.

In *Amber Drive*, Kevin Rippin presents blunt, fleshy poems that inspire the reader to pause to consider carefully the raw images and the feelings they invoke. The collection is divided into five unnamed sections that follow thematic patterns. Sometimes the themes are quite evident, as in the section about Amber Drive and people who live there; other times the themes are more abstract, all bound by the realistic voices presenting these lines.

Even "love" poems in *Amber Drive* are singed with the raw feelings: of first love, for example, as in "Lilac," which imagines the speaker's parents perhaps driven by the scent of lilac infused and embedded in their memories of new love as the catalyst for their marriage. The mind willingly relents to the risk of love: "The mind does not care about the future // . . . / . . . Everybody there / knows it's too late, there's nothing anybody can do to rescue them." On the other end of the emotional spectrum, loss is given the same raw treatment, softened only by Rippin's ability to turn a phrase. "Pheasants" draws a heart-wrenching dichotomy of depravity and plenty. The speaker reports,

Some lunatic, crazed over a minor indiscretion
or drunk after his exhausting day in the bar,
blew away his wife and little girl. Christ,
Christmas is coming and we are hungry
for the slightest morsel of love we can find.

Our plush tables overflow with fowl.
We feast until we're stuffed, famished again
in an hour, never satisfied. Everything connects.

The rawness is felt especially in poems like "Deer Hunting in Girty." Hunting season arrives with the tension of "your boy" dressed in his fluorescent kit and

the city men . . .
. . . .
trying to recapture their animal instincts,
their nerves frayed from the city,
their Winchesters polished, their safeties off.

COURTESY OF CHRIS ABBATE



The speaker admits that the son will be killed by these hunters mistaking his movements for the game they seek. The final stanza of this poem begins, “All of our sons are lost.” Look at us, look at our culture, the poem says. Due to the poem’s brevity, the reader isn’t given the space to turn away.

Near the end of the collection, through the appropriately named poem “Witness,” Rippin acknowledges our vulnerabilities and the surveillance he has enabled. The speaker guides the reader through tragedies and miracles, directing with

... don’t touch

a blessed thing . . .
 . . . You can’t save it
 your hands are slow and clumsy;

don’t touch. Your calling’s to freeze
 on each periphery like statuary,

... and tell
 the story later . . .

The speaker seems to echo back the lines from Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” reminding the reader that our task is but to kneel in prayer or tell the story as best we can, as witnesses to this thing called life. Though Rippin is confrontational in his poems, his speakers stand next to the reader as we gaze into the mirror; we are each vulnerable, whether alone or together in our vulnerability.

Emilia Phillips’s collection *Empty Clip* holds up a mirror for readers’ reflection as her speakers expose their own hearts. Like Rippin’s collection, Phillips’s work doesn’t shy away from the pressing issues of today’s headlines. The first poem in the collection, “This is How I Came to Know,” takes the reader straight into a sexual assault victim’s heart; the victim is a child, and the perpetrator is a school employee. The school denies the victim’s story, and so begins this gaping-wound collection. Phillips will allow the voices of

survivors, witnesses, those contemplating suicide to pour onto the pages of her poems.

Reminiscent of the violence of “Deer Hunting” and “Pheasants,” *Empty Clip’s* “Campus Shooter Powerpoint and Information Session” describes what has become a routine part of all back-to-school faculty meetings. While the speaker, a teacher, is listening and watching the presentation, the reader is privy to her thoughts, the distractions and the fear inspired by the presentation. The speaker remembers her dad, who sat on guard outside her first workplace and the suggestion of security is in the remembrance; however, the speaker returns to the “so on” that the presenter relies on, wondering what is left out when the “so on” is used. We are supposed to feel reassured during these sessions, but the speaker becomes the voice for all of us as she confesses an uncertainty, calculating steps to safety in the event of an active shooter crisis. We’re reminded of the victims of Rippin’s poems, and it seems like the poems are all asking us

PHOTOGRAPH BY GABE NELSON



to consider who we gave over control to.

The poem "Fingers in Throat" gives readers an opportunity to experience Phillips' understanding of how poetry can sound as well as how poetry can look. An "open wound" poem situates the readers in the stall with the bulimic student; she has learned the patterns of other girls because she spends so much time waiting for them to leave her alone:

... When
someone else
comes in
the girls'
room, you
hold
the retched-up
in your mouth
until it sours
your nose.

While the descriptions are sensual, the appearance lends itself to understanding. Most lines are only two or three words long, and they coarse down the page, slender and flowing.

Titles in *Empty Clip* include "To the Neighbor Boy with His Father's Hunting Rifle, Begging the Police to Shoot," "On a Late-Night Encounter with a Barefoot College Student Wearing Only a Party Dress and a Man's Blazer," "One Year After Contemplating Suicide," and "The CIA Live-tweets the Assassination of Usama Bin Laden Five Years Later." These poems capture our culture and the moments in time that are very real to us, and they speak to the fear and anger and humanity that persists across our history.

Rippin's collection deals with the grit of Amber Drive and memories of family, while Phillips tells stories of loss, assault, and despair, and the two collections seem to speak to each other, teasing out the implica-

tion of a line from Phillips's "The days that were have now": "The truth is / a broken bone that can't be / set." These poets remind us of the vulnerability in trying to collect in verse what it is to be human. ■

Call for Submissions

**NORTH
CAROLINA
LITERARY
REVIEW**

for the JOHN EHLE PRIZE

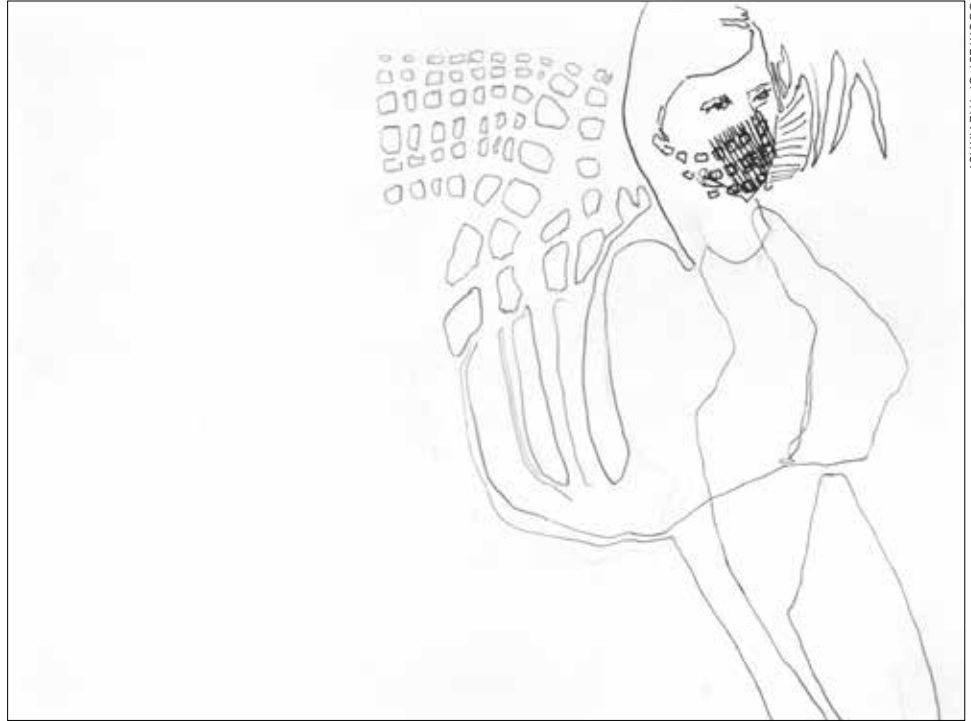
**\$250 given annually to the author of
the best essay on or interview with
a neglected or overlooked writer
accepted for publication in *NCLR*.**

Sponsored by Press 53 of
Winston-Salem and Terry Roberts

**SUBMIT BY August 31 annually
to be considered.**

For more information, writers' guidelines,
and submission instructions, go to:

www.nclr.ecu.edu/submissions



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Speak: Refrain, 2015 (ink on watercolor paper, 6x8) by Taylor O. Thomas

I was not mentioned
when he did not testify.
He tried to make me disappear.
I cannot wear leather belts anymore.

He wasn't the one
to leave my body as evidence.

TAYLOR O. THOMAS's paintings have been exhibited across the US, and in Italy, Spain, and China. She received a BA in Studio Art from Davidson College in 2012 and was awarded a graduate fellowship by the University of South Florida, where she earned her MFA in 2019. Thomas is the recipient of an inaugural Innovate Artist Grant, a Peripheral Vision Publication Fellowship, and a Regional Artist Project Grant by the Arts and Science Council of Charlotte, NC). She received a residency fellowship to attend Benaco Arte in Sirmione, Italy (2017), and two artist residencies, Deli Grocery New York and MassArt: Art New England. Thomas lives in Tampa, FL. See more of her work on her [website](#).

THE MEMORY OF OBJECTS

a review by Joseph Mills

Mark Cox. *Readiness*. Press 53, 2018.

Holly Iglesias. *Sleeping Things*. Press 53, 2018.

JOSEPH MILLS received a BA from the University of Chicago, an MA from the University of New Mexico, and a PhD from the University of California-Davis. He has published six volumes of poetry with Press 53: *Exit, Pursued By a Bear* (2016); *This Miraculous Turning* (2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016); *Sending Christmas Cards to Huck and Hamlet* (2012); *Love and Other Collisions* (2010); *Angels, Thieves, and Winemakers* (2008); and *Somewhere During the Spin Cycle* (2006). Read more about him and a review of his first collection of fiction in the Flashbacks section of this issue.

Categories can be useful. Who wants to go into a store and have to sort through random piles? We organize the world, in part, to be able to locate things efficiently, and, roughly speaking, certain categories work well. We'll find *Moby Dick* in Fiction and *Paradise Lost* in Poetry. Although a book like *Wolf Hall* could be considered a beautiful long prose poem, it's probably best to shelve Mantel close to Melville. There are, however, works in the middle, away from the poles, where distinctions become more ambiguous and less useful. At some point determining whether a piece is a prose poem or flash fiction is a little like, as the group Del Amitri sings, "trying to divide ice from snow."¹ Not only is it difficult, but why does it need to be done except for shelving purposes?

And yet, it can be instructive when writers compose works of ambiguous genres to consider what they emphasize and how they achieve their effects. If "poets," they have deprived themselves the power of line breaks and line lengths, stanzas and other structuring mechanisms. If "fiction writers," they have denied themselves the ability to stretch out and take time to set-up characters, narrative arcs, and plots. Although some might regard this as being "liberated" from genre conventions, the writers are, in a sense, constraining themselves, or, at least, turning away from certain

standard elements, ones that help orient a reader. After all, even those who say they "hate poetry" recognize a sonnet; it takes its place in a familiar lineage, and people have likely been taught how to "read" one. But a single paragraph? What are readers supposed to do with that? They have been denied traditional contextual frameworks (which is what some categories provide), and this is precisely what makes such pieces powerful. These pieces meld the concision and compression of poetry with the accessibility of prose, and yet they require a reader's engagement in their refusal to be easily slotted or defined.

Two books by North Carolina publisher Press 53, *Readiness* by Mark Cox and *Sleeping Things* by Holly Iglesias, demonstrate the power and range of "prose poetry." Both are products of disciplined, probing writers, both center on the nature of memory, but each is distinct in its achievements.

***Readiness* by Mark Cox** consists of narrative pieces, usually long single blocks of text, that meditate, as perhaps all poems do, on the nature of time. Throughout his book, Cox examines old photographs to consider how things were at a particular moment, how unexpected life has turned out since then, and how difficult it can be to assign meaning.

¹ Del Amitri, "This Side of the Morning," *Waking Hours*, A&M Records, 1989.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL TAUBE

"Knossos" opens with "I can still see us there, laughing, all five photographing each other photographing each other, our faces masked by the cameras aimed at one another, and there in the far background, the ruins of ancient Greece." In this single sentence, Cox deftly puts into play the past and present, the personal against the "historical," the desire to record a moment, and the sense of joy and absurdity in doing so. These are the ongoing themes of the book.

In "The Springs," which is also the title of the book's first section, the poem begins with a description of "young people . . . gathered in the narrows of the river. They are like seals among the rocks, or like mermaids surrounding shipwrecked sailors, in varied poses of relaxation and leisure." He later admits, "Some feelings wait years to be loosed, to be finally written. I have retained this image for decades, unable

to decode it. Nearing sixty, I still don't know what it means. I know the river rushes past on every side." We cannot decode the images that haunt us. We write to try to figure out our lives even as we know that may be impossible.

Pieces in the second section of *Readiness* consider the importance of writing, not as a generator of products, but as a practice:

I am blessed to have this art, this ritual, mornings, which begins each day centering what is most myself. The only constant, year by year, making sense when little else does; I am here, it tells me – another day and you are still here. It has never been, as I once thought, about having something to say. It has always been the listening, the recognition of something hinted at, but as yet unheard; some clue as to the shifting ontological coordinates at which I exist.

Again, in this passage from "The Page," there is the revealing "as I once thought." We change and grapple with what that change means. In other poems, Cox recognizes there are other activities, besides writing, where we attempt to exert some type of control. A woman in "Devil's Food Cake" sifts and mixes ingredients, liking "the way the beaters blend it all together and smooth it out. You can't do that with the rest of your life. Real life, everyday living, is lumpy and never quite gets the ingredients right. One phone call from an old boyfriend and the

world gets tilted on its axis. One missing spark plug wire and you can't drive anywhere."

In the book's title poem, "Readiness," the narrator both tries to figure out his life and recognize the dangers in doing so. He speaks of a dream of ironing shirts of family members, and yet he hesitates to pursue an over-easy interpretation: "There is no deep meaning to be mined. I am not preparing for some gala event. I am not re-envisioning my life. I am just steaming and pressing." The poem ends, "And yet this dream resonates in me like few others. The shirts hung in the shapes of persons. Those shapes hung collectively in the colors and postures of a family. Whose is not important, the dream insists. There is no such thing as emptiness. There is only being ready."

The poem and the collection take their title from Hamlet's "the readiness is all," and yet how difficult, if not impossible, it is to be ready. Who is ready for what will come? For our lives, our deaths? How can we be ready when we have no way of knowing? The opening of "Apples" asks:

Who is to say which moments your kids will look back on, which photograph will be etched in air for the whole of their lives, a touchstone they'll return to when thinking of you or a particular tenor of day or light. . . . Who could have predicted how important this would all be, that the clouds would be amassed in just this pattern, just this once, ever, in a billion

ABOVE Mark Cox reading at UNC Wilmington, 12 Oct. 2017

MARK COX teaches in the Department of Creative Writing at UNC Wilmington and in the Vermont College MFA Program and has served as poetry editor of *Passages North* and *Cimarron Review* and as Poet-in-Residence at The Frost Place. He has published several volumes of poetry, including *Sorrow Bread* (Serving House Books, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2018). His numerous honors include the Whiting Writers Award, a Pushcart Prize, the Society of Midwest Authors and Oklahoma Book Awards, and a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship.



years, and their reflection mirrored on the water would seem a double negative of sorts, pooling, about to run over the spillway and into the turbines of the teeming present?

Readiness is a preparation, an impossible preparation, for the leaving of this life. Towards the end of this collection, the poem "Ladder on the Ground" begins:

I am painting my house for the third and last time. Before this weathers, I will be in an apartment or in the earth. There comes a day, as my granddad warned, when the field is too long to plow. You have a way of life, but can't do it justice. All the chores that defined you as a father and husband, all the sheer sweat labor of maintaining a home, all the tools you accrued, the knowledge – every bit is unnecessary.

Is there any way we can prepare? Perhaps by watching others.

In "I Love You, Boy" the narrator notes, "At ninety, my father has one last lesson for me. It is called dying and he has decided, without saying such, to show me how it's done." Towards the poem's end, the narrator realizes, "The lesson's more what we do, though, than what we say. And I think I'd like to live this way – each morning a gift one wakes to, a scattering of seeds under the trees, simple chores."

And what of afterwards? What do we hope for when we're gone? A shelf of books? A memorial or monument? In "The Journey to and from Is Neither" the narrator realizes, "You hope to have done your adequate part. You hope to be genuinely

mourned and missed. You hope the world is no poorer for your having lived."

In Cox's poem "History," the narrator says, "Jack, there is so much I no longer need to know, yet can't forget. In *Sleeping Things*, Holly Iglesias considers the "things" we can't forget. For some people, "things" is a word that teachers would have struck out of their essays as too vague, too abstract, too much like "stuff." For Iglesias it's an acknowledgment and awareness of both mystery, something that is not quite named or nameable, and concreteness, something that exists. In the poem "In My Day a Penny Went Somewhere," the poet says, "How I love the

ABOVE Holly Iglesias at Malaprop's Bookstore in Asheville, NC, 6 May 2018

HOLLY IGLESIAS has taught at UNC Asheville and the University of Miami. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Angles of Approach* (White Pine Press, 2010) and *Souvenirs of a Shrunken World* (Kore Press, 2008), and she writes about prose poetry in her critical book, *Boxing Inside the Box: Women's Prose Poetry* (Quale Press, 2004). Her poems have also appeared in many journals and in anthologies such as *Sweeping Beauty: Contemporary American Women Poets Do Housework* (2005), *The House of Your Dreams: An International Collection of Prose Poetry* (2008), and *Nothing to Declare: A Guide to the Flash Sequence* (2016).

phrase *things were different then*, mostly for the *things* part but also for the *then*." The word "things" rings throughout the collection from the chosen quotations that refer to "invisible things" and "hard things" to titles "Shadow of All Things" and "La Charada Cubana: A World of Things" to the poems themselves from the first pieces to the last one, "Nothing to Declare," which refers to "things of the past." The book is, as the poem of one title puts it, an "Epic to the Material World" and as another "The Fruits of Prayer Are Many, the Fruits of the Flesh Are Few," notes, "The body sojourns but briefly in the material world." In these pieces, there is a relentless focus on physicality, on "a world of things."

The first piece of the collection, "Sturdy Child," opens "St. Louis spring – cloth coats unbuttoned, cotton socks, oxfords, galoshes," and this immediately introduces the reader to Iglesias's primary technique: she uses lists, catalogues of this world, both present and past. These are litany poems. As she says in "Talking in Italics," "Lists are safe – *jamón, leche, pan* – sentences fraught." This is the technique of Carolyn Forché in "The Colonel."² Specifics. Declaratives. This is one way to deal with both trauma and the inevitable elusiveness of language.

In "Hiroshima Flats," Iglesias catalogs a neighborhood

destroyed by a tornado and bulldozers:

the rubble that once had been sweet
shop shoe shop barber shop millinery
grocery tavern church school tene-
ment house doctor's office dentist's
office funeral parlor chili parlor bakery
union hall beauty salon drugstore five
thousand structures twenty thousand
souls set again upon the migrant's
path carts piled with quilts and chairs
and pots and pans and cardboard
boxes of photographs and baptismal
records the highway cutting through
what had been their neighborhood
Novas Bel-Airs Fleetwoods Falcons
Galaxies Country Squires choking the
lanes the air fouled with exhaust.

In this single sentence there are multiple lists, and they move from generic nouns to specific ones, from the wiped-away past to the current state, and back to a specifically remembered past. It is a poem and poet concerned with how we think about and name "things," things that are ongoing and overwhelming.

Iglesias presents a table-of-contents in the two poems called "A Child's Book of Knowledge." What does our education consist of? "THINGS" first off, then "PEOPLE" and "PLACES" and the need to categorize them: "Mothers and Daughters . . . Secretaries and Nurses . . . Virgin Martyrs . . . Stigmatics." These pieces suggest that in learning to catalogue the world we learn to circumscribe it. We are educated and mis-educated.

Sleeping Things could have as an alternative title "Catholicism

and the Cold War." These are the two defining, shaping forces of this remembered childhood. Poems refer to nuns, priests, saints, parishes; as the poem "Parochial" explains, "We were a system, a sociology, a discipline of black and white." This specificity, however, doesn't limit these poems; it's the key to their effectiveness. It is a specific childhood resonating against a specific historical moment.

Unlike Cox's pieces, Iglesias's works are short and tight. They are cryptic rather than discursive. Although they have moments of wry humor – "Each night I pray one Hail Mary for good grades, one for a vocation, and one for miniature golf" ("Small World")– Iglesias refuses to be sentimental or nostalgic about the past. She is trying to remember clearly and think seriously about education, language, culture, and how these shape our relationships with one another.

Both *Sleeping Things* and *Readiness* demonstrate the power and necessity of a collection. The pieces become greater than the sum of their parts, accumulating a remarkable resonance and richness when read as sequences. Each book also has a physical presence and asserts itself as an object worthy of attention. Each is something to be held. Something to behold. A beautiful thing in this world. ■

² Carolyn Forché, "The Colonel," *The Country Between Us* (HarperCollins, 1981).

FINALIST, 2019 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE
BY JONATHAN GILES

My Life in Shreds

I started with finances: shredding bills and receipts—
groceries and gas, electricity and mortgage payments,
a trove of credit card and bank statements. But soon
I moved to holiday cards and notes from old friends,
pictures of babies, children, and summer vacations.

On a whim, I shredded the contents from my wallet:
my driver's license and insurance card, my debit
and credit cards too, and the endless cards I rarely used –
drug stores and pet stores – and, yes, masticating the plastic
photos of my wife and daughter and our long dead dogs

was hard, but when I opened the filing cabinet and found
baby footprints, our wedding certificate, and photographs
of our marriage, dating, siblings, growing up, our parents,
our first cars, our first Christmas, and our first prom,
I found I could shred all of these memories just fine.

JONATHAN GILES began his writing career in the Performing Arts, working for PlayMakers Theatre Company, a professional choir, and with performance artist Meredith Monk. He currently hosts two bi-monthly critique groups in fiction and poetry in Durham, NC. His poems have appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *Avalon Literary Review*, and *Better than Starbucks*. This is his first time in *NCLR*.



COURTESY OF DAUM MUSEUM OF ART

Release (solid-cast porcelain) by Thomas Schmidt

I attacked my writing, hundreds of poems and stories,
 a trunk of pieces from graduate school and college –
 all pressed into a blizzard of white confetti, old trappings
 before I came to believe what I had become, back when
 I carried the burden of a vision I wanted to be.

I turned to my suits, dress pants and starched shirts,
 jeans, old tees and shorts, running gear, underwear
 and socks, all of it slowly sucked into the machine, turning
 it all back into what it was, wasted spools of dyed thread.
 The mirror was hard, but it went through, so did our bed.

I inserted everything I had to say and thought too.
 The sights I saw and heard in a life I no longer lived.
 My shredder was amazing; I highly recommend it.
 A finger, a fist, a foot, a penis, a nose, a lip,
 it wasn't long before I was only bits of bits.

THOMAS SCHMIDT attended Loyola University in Chicago, then trained at Alfred University in New York State. He is an Assistant Professor at UNC Charlotte. His work is in collections including the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art in Sedalia, MO; the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza, Italy; the Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art in Alfred, NY; and a forthcoming acquisition by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Learn more about Thomas Schmidt's work on his [website](#).

ISSN: 2165-1809

NCLR 2020

NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

ONLINE



HOW MIGHT YOU HELP *NCLR* TODAY

- Yes! I'd like to support another 30 years of this award-winning publication for North Carolina writers and readers everywhere.

[Click here](#) to see a list of *NCLR*'s Friends.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Design

Adobe Indesign CC 2018 on Macintosh computers

Type Families

Museo Sans, Adobe Caslon Pro



**North Carolina Literary
and Historical Association**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF
NORTH CAROLINA PRESS**