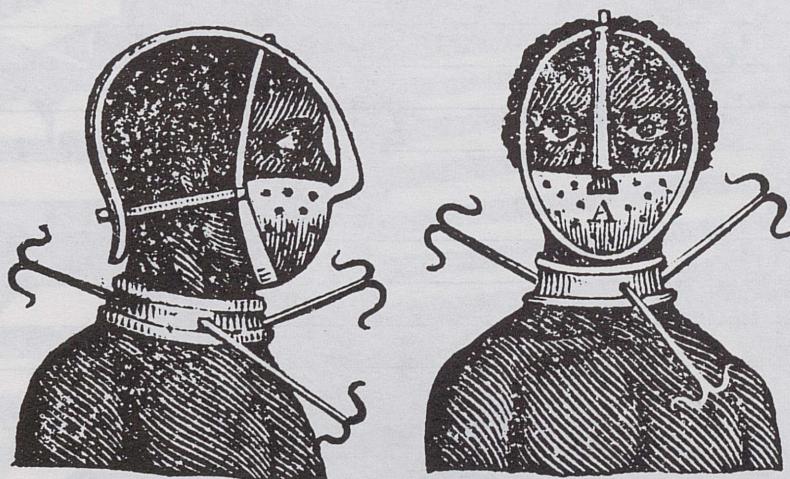




# ShootingStar

Black Literary Magazine

## BEHIND BARS



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AUTUMN, 1990  
VOL. 4, NO. 3

FEATURING  
Tina McElroy Ansa  
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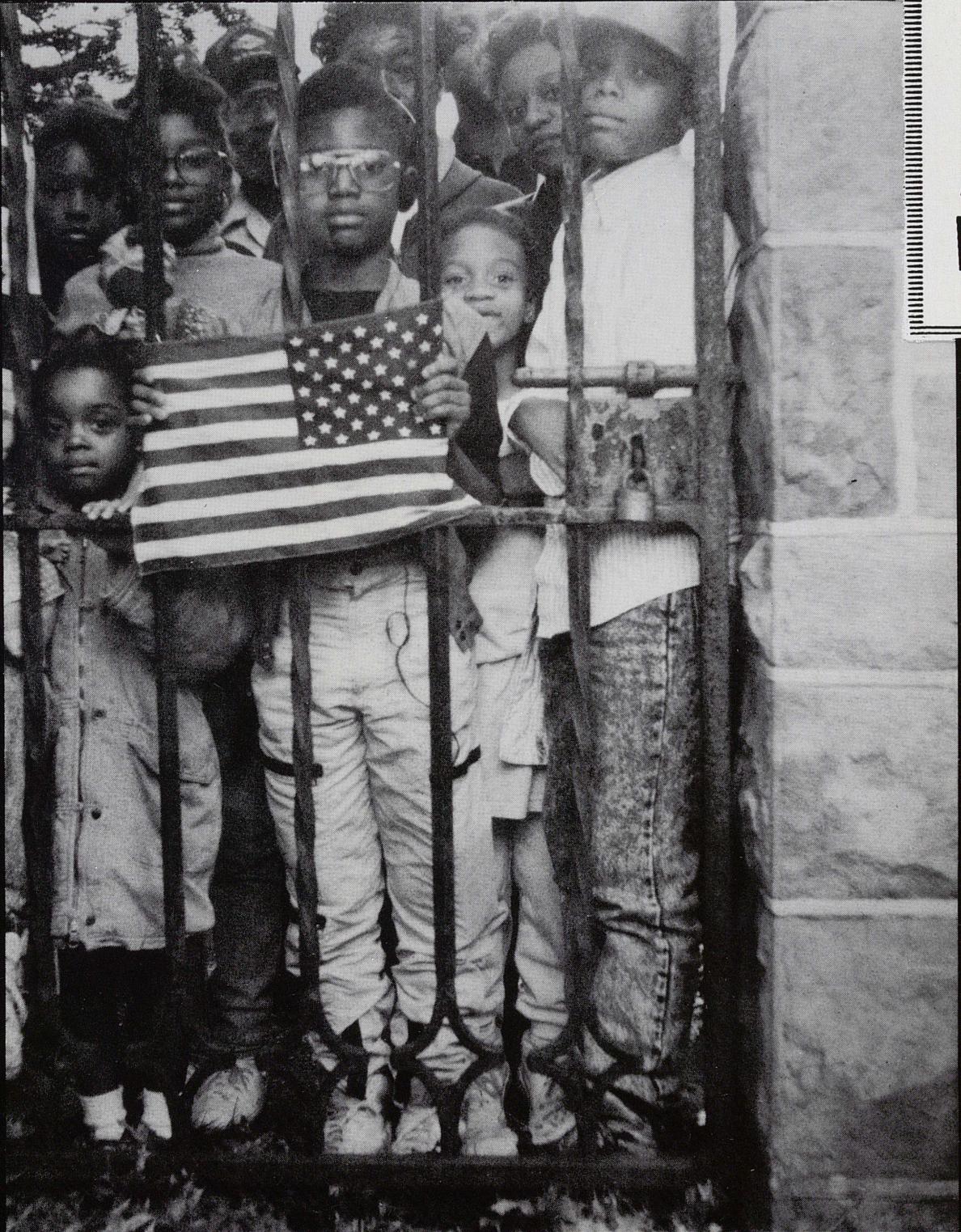
# ShootingStar

Black Literary Magazine

ISSN 0892-1407

BESTSELLING BARS

REVIEW



FEATURING

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Kristin Hunter

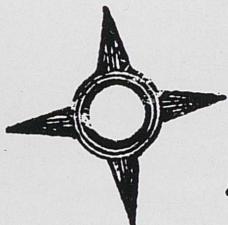
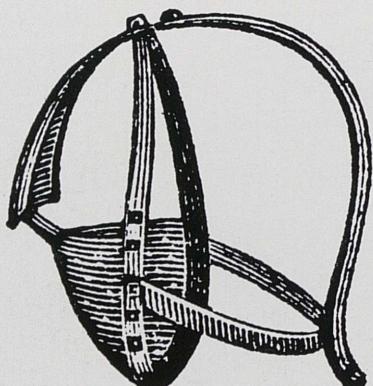
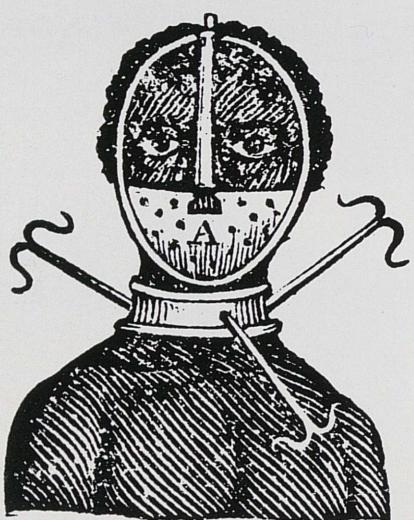
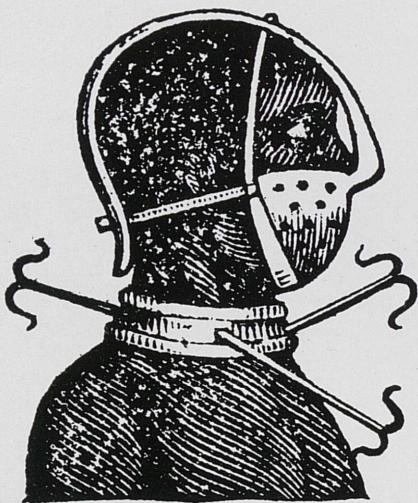
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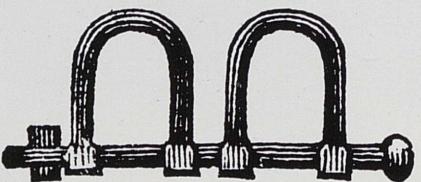
Start Your's This Holiday Season  
See Page 11

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# ★ STRUGGLING



I wondered why I was  
always dealing with Black Men  
who were struggling,  
with themselves, with life  
with simply trying to be alive  
I thought  
it was because of their youth  
but found the old ones  
struggling,  
hiding behind their years  
I thought it was because they were poor  
but found the rich ones  
to be the most impoverished  
I thought it might be  
because they hadn't had  
a lasting relationship with a good woman  
but most of them  
had had their share  
of all the women  
During one of those selfishly  
pensive moments  
an image surrounded me  
so that I felt  
a warming sense that Black Men  
are always struggling,  
and will always  
be struggling,  
in order to be  
a part of life  
to be alive  
to be  
Black Men



Images reprinted from the  
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the New York Public Library.

Dolores Y.S. Jenerson  
Fullerton, CA

# SHAKE DAT CHAIN

*Make some heavy noise boys  
every day is just the same  
let the bossman hear you rattle  
or he'll scratch your name*

*Gotta shake it in the bushes  
gotta shake it behind the tree  
gotta shake it all the time  
so the boss wont shoot at me*

*Gotta shake going to bed  
gotta shake it when you eat  
gotta shake it all de time  
and shake it with your feet*

*Keep shaking that chain boy  
shake it loud and clear  
let de boss know we're working  
and aint thinking of leaving here.*

Waldo Phillips  
Waco, TX



"Ghetto Voice"  
Clay, 14"x14"x5"  
Willis Bing Davis  
Dayton, OH

Photo by Jerry Anthony



# FOUNDER'S STATEMENT

This Behind Bars issue was initially conceived as a way to open Shooting Star readers to the ways lives are sometimes less than lived. Because the main value of art is that it keeps us human, we also wanted to awaken reader sensitivities to the bonds that bind in human possibility, sometimes gently and sometimes cruelly.

This "Behind Bars" issue also represents a commitment to continue publishing Shooting Star despite the loss of production services. And, although space does not allow us to present all of the excellent material received, what we offer here is rich food for thought.

Most important, though is recognizing that finding cures for our shortfalls is far more satisfying than complaining. Realizing that unity and a willingness to promote and celebrate our culture and heritage is critical to our success, The Middle Passage Commemoration is offered on page 11.

Enjoy!!

Sandra Gould Ford  
Founder & Publisher  
Shooting Star Productions, Inc.

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For information, contact:

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Shooting Star Productions is a non-profit corporation that exists to promote artistic and educational outlets for the expression of Black culture through publications, video and other media.

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ISSN 0892-1407

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Shooting Star Review  
ISSN 0892-1407

AUTUMN, 1990  
VOL. 4, NO.3

*Shooting Star Review* is published quarterly.

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Single copy \$3  
One Year Subscription \$10  
Institutional Rate \$15  
Overseas Airmail \$25/year  
Overseas surface \$17/year  
International checks must add a  
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#### SUBMISSION POLICY

FREE Submission Guidelines with helpful information, including upcoming themes and maximum word counts available with SASE. All submissions must include a self-addressed envelope with sufficient return postage.

*Shooting Star Review* is completely free-lance written and open for graphics, photography, illustrations, short fiction, folktales, essays, reviews and poetry.

Written work must be neatly typed, double-spaced and legible. Send poetry and fiction in separate envelopes. Artists submitting material for publication can come from any cultural background, but all work must relate to the Black experience.

Shooting Star Review  
7123 Race Street  
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# Contents

BOOK LIST ..... 28

#### ESSAY

STONE WALLS by Dr. Maghan Keita ..... 6

#### FICTION

MARVELLA by Joanne Zimmerman .....	8
HERO RETURNS by Kristin Hunter .....	12
HAIR by Tina McElroy Ansa .....	16
THE SLIM by Curtiss Urness .....	22

MIDDLE PASSAGE COMMEMORATION ..... 11

#### POETRY

STRUGGLING by Delores Jenerson .....	2
SHAKE DAT CHAIN by Waldo Phillips .....	3
TIRED by Fenton Johnson .....	6
LONELINESS by Kevin Powell .....	8
TODAY A STRANGER MADE ME FEEL by LaBruno .....	10
DEE by Stanley E. Banks .....	14
WORDS by Maurice Hundley .....	15
THE INTERVIEWEE by Fr. Benedict Auer .....	20
DISAPPOINTMENT IN DEE by J.E.M.Jones .....	21
FOR A SISTER CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE by Carol Dixon .....	24
SHE WHO BEARS THE THORN by Terri L. Jewell .....	25
TO MY FATHER FOR MYSELF by Carol Dixon .....	31

#### COVER ART

The cover photograph was shot by Shooting Star's Founder and Publisher, Sandra Gould Ford. Several years ago, while developing a photo-essay on Homewood Avenue, she discovered this old gate with rusting lock at the entrance to the Homewood Cemetery. Homewood Avenue, by the way, is barely one mile long but crosses every socio-economic and racial composition line, from all white with steel baron wealth to racially mixed middle class to all Black, poor and even homeless. Astute Shooting Star readers may have noticed the same gate in an earlier issue, sans people. Many of the models behind these bars first met the photographer moments before when they were taken by surprise at a nearby child care facility. Their graciousness and good humor about posing behind bars in a cemetery is very much appreciated.



# STONE WALLS & IRON BARS

Resistance as a Way of Life

by Dr. Maghan Keita

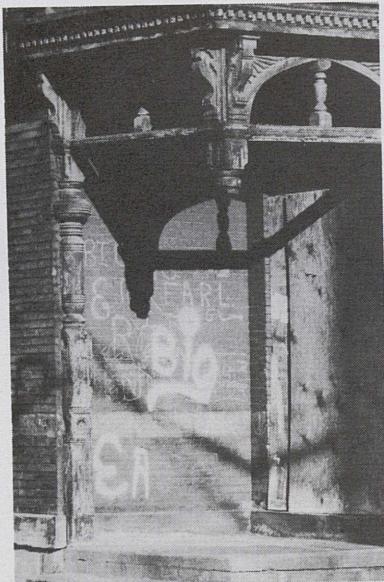


Photo (c) Andre Mosley

An extremely difficult proposition for the black community to grasp in light of several centuries of stones and bars in America proper. Even more difficult to deal with when faced with the fact that there are more young black men in prison than in university and ratio is still growing in favor of incarceration.

The stones and bars of American society have become that much more evident since the Reagan presidency. They have also surrounded the entire African-American community without regard for class. From Supreme Court decisions to welfare to housing and homelessness to blatant, physical violence, we can witness the imprisonment of the African-American society. Yet, aside from the obvious, this imprisonment presents another problem which John Blassingame, writing in the Slave Community, alludes to when he talks about the symbiotic relation between slave and master, and prisoner are not totally dependent. Both have the ability for independent action, albeit, within the

confines of their bondage. However, if I read the history correctly, the ability to take independent action in the context of bondage; the ability to resist, is what makes history and humanity.

In too many cases, however, we have failed as a community and as individuals to resist the elements which oppress us. In many instances, in symbiosis, we actually apologize for them; we rationalize them; we aid and abet them in our own oppression. In the predicament of victims, we sometimes victimize ourselves. Barrels and crabs.

Without worrying about the ubiquitous transgressions of the white community, we need to be

---

## Tired

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody  
else's civilization.  
Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.

Fenton Johnson

cognizant of the crimes we commit against ourselves. Again, the most obvious is the fact that most of the criminal activity within our community is committed by us against us. But what does the physical trauma say of the psychological and spiritual injury done to us as individuals and as community? How do these, in combination, rob us of our potential?

We have, historically, become a community of reactionaries. Reactionary in that we are continually on the defensive; in that we hardly initiate actions, we simply respond to them. Our old people, in grieving the violence, no longer call for the young to save them; they cry for them to leave them alone:

'Young people today, you can't talk to them about life. They just cause heartaches, troubles and problems.

Of course, our response, has been to lay this, like all other problems at the foot of racism. And while it is a problem of racism, how can we logically expect the system that has created it, to be the system that will solve it for us. It doesn't make sense. Nor does it make sense to condone antisocial behavior anywhere, simply because its roots are based in inequity and more specifically when it is directed at those of us who are oppressed. There is a clear demarcation between activities that are antisocial on one hand, and which define real and creative resistance on the other. The inability to differentiate between the two makes us accomplices to building and reinforcing our own prison cells.

The same has to be said in our dealing with public officials. Let's accept the premise that our officials are indeed targeted by the government and other powers who are interested in their downfall. Does this mean that our officials should be any less accountable to us? Does their danger, and therefore ours, mean that we should demand any less of them? In perilous situations, it is argued, that more, not less, is expected of us if we are to survive. While we should not allow those who seek our continued oppression to define the terms of our resistance, we can not, by the same token, allow those who are to serve on our behalf, to betray our trust through their own personal gain or the weight of their own personal vices. Neither they nor we should condone activity which raises one stone or one bar higher in restricting this community.

Stone walls do not a  
prison make, nor iron  
bars a cage.

Our community is, in many ways, besieged, assaulted, imprisoned. Yet, we need to remember that communities are groups of individuals. And those individuals are trapped by their own inaction as well; trapped their own inability to initiate action on their own behalf. In many ways this resembles a "Catch-22". The community is imprisoned because its inhabitants are prisoners; its inhabitants are prisoners because the community is a prison. Where is the big break out; the big break in? Where are our masterminds plotting the great escape; or the insurrection that will resurrect a community and its people?

There are those of us who have been defeated; let there be no doubt about that. Their prisons have become very personal, sometimes impermeable cells. They cannot act; they will not act. In many cases, they are surrounded by walls and bars that we could never hope to break down. Yet, their plight should be the point at which we rally. Just as we should resist the physical manifestations of this imprisonment, we should also resist the psychological and social damage that it does to our community. Our resistance must be multifaceted: how can we expect a community where our elders are respected and protected when our youth are taught to respect no one? Why should we expect our women and children to be safe, even among us, when our most popular cultural devices encourage their abuse? In that regard we must demand accountability--accountability to one another.

From some vantages, the question seems painfully simple: are we should we begin, very seriously, channeling our energies towards the "big break out/break in"? All with the understanding that our resistance, as usual, will signal a turning point and the further liberation of American society as a whole. The only question left is "When?".





# MARVELLA

## Loneliness

a swollen spirit wishing  
desperately

to be recognized, clung to,  
loved;

yet paralyzed from descending

its solitary perch

for fear that

any hands which offer

to nurture

will be the same

to destroy

Kevin Powell  
New York, NY

By Joanne Zimmerman



hit my Mama. I knowed I hadn't  
oughtta... I knowed she'd be angry with  
me. And now Preacher Banks is angry  
with me, and them honkies she worked  
for calling up and chewin' my ass.

And I reckon God is angry with me, too.

But the Lord knows she hit me aplenty. When I was a  
little thing, and all the time I was growin' up. But I'm  
hers, and I reckon she had the right to do what she  
wanted with me. She tried to bring us up proper; Angela,  
Tonya and me. She always said so. Me bein' so much  
older, I been like a Mama to them, and they loves me. My  
Daddy run off before I was born, and Lord knows where  
they Daddy be!

I've always been a trial to her. So she says. So she  
always said.

Then the Carter came to live with us, and a passle  
of his brats. Randy run off, but Venita and Tommie just  
stayed home and cried all the time. Sleepin' in my bed  
with me, peein' in the night, so we all got up to go to  
school smellin' like a fox and be laughed at.

Then Carter beat on me, too, and he ain't none of my  
Daddy. One time--Oh, Lord--he beatin' on me she got the  
wrench from out back of the stove, and come at him with  
that. Oh, it were somethin' to see! She say, "You got  
one woman, and that's me!" I weren't but about 11 then.  
The next time he come at me I was bigger'n him, and I  
laughed. And I looked down at that little ole fella, his  
ole dirty clothes pulled around his little red ugly  
eyes, and that ugly thing.

Bigger'n Mama, and able to go out to work. I didn't  
do much in school. I could put down what they was  
sayin', but it didn't stay in my poor head. I was  
lackin' the glue. That's what they said. It went in, but



Photo (c) Lonnie Graham

it didn't stay there but for a little while. So they had me learnin' sump'm else. Like how to work. How to work at a job that don't take figurin' or writin' or much readin', which I can't do, only but a little.

I could cook them french fries! I got to wear a red jacket and a little silly hat on my big head. Ever' payday, here come Mama with her hand out, ready to take it away from me. And she always knowed how much it ought to be, better'n me. Argued with the man once, and she was right, and got some more, but I got fired. I didn't care. It was hot all the time there. The heat made me sweat. Made me feel faint, big and strong as I am. And I was tired of it. Tired of the smoke and grease, workin' into the night, and not to keep one red cent. I decided I wasn't goin' to do that no more.

But Mama said I was her girl, and I didn't mind eatin', did I, or bein' took care of, and so on. She found me another job, at the nursin' home and I was real good there. I liked it a lot. I liked the food--all I wanted to eat every day. I could lift them old people and carry them about. I could give them baths, washin' their wrinkly old skins, soft as cotton. And clean up after them. Lord, whatever they do feed them, it sure was a mess sometimes, but I didn't mind. They liked me. Some of them would ask for me special, and sometimes give me money. I never took any otherwise. Not any I wasn't entitled to.

Mama took my paycheck ever' two weeks when we was paid, and she wrote my name on it because I don't write so good, and took it to the exchange for cash. She said I wouldn't know what to do with it. Wouldn't know how to figure, and be cheated again. So she spent some of the money, and put some by. Spent it on her. Spent some on food and such, and spent it on the Carter--new suit, new boots for him. Lots of times I wanted a little something. Something to wear. New shoes. A new dress

I felt a hand on my hair,  
yankin' me up. "What you been up to, you bitch?  
What you been doin' with my car?"

last winter. "Whatever you need it for?" she said. "You just go in that place and put on your uniform, that's all. You ain't goin' no place else."

One time one of them old honkies give me a little change, I spent it on a record of the Supremes. Mama say, "Where you get that at?" and I say, "Them old white folks give it to me," which ain't no lie, speakin' truly, because they give me the money and I just went and spent it.

So when there was a new car at the door, I figured that was where my money went. I knowed it wasn't none of the Carter's, poor as he is, not workin', and drinkin' regular. Not a new car of this year, but a new car for us, bought with cash money down, and monthly payments to be paid. A blue Buick. Baby blue and shinin'. I love that car.

Turned out that Mama didn't know nothin' about drivin', but I do, still from high school where they taught us all. I remembered drivin', but I couldn't do the writin' part. Mama say, "That's all right." I could do the drivin' and if they stopped us, she'd do the writin' part.

Oh, I liked that! I got to drive her around any time he Carter weren't there. To church on Sunday. To the store, and to the shoppin' center, fillin' up the back seat with packages, even a little somethin' for me sometimes. Way I figure it, it were my money payin' for it, for some of it, I deserved the good time I was havin'.

I reckon I figured I deserved more than that. I wanted to drive that car some place besides to the store and to church on Sunday. I wanted to drive it some place that would be fun for me, maybe at night, maybe a dark place, music playin', I don't know.

# MARVELLA

from previous page

So when Mama went off with the Carter and locked me in with the little ones, like she did, I washed them good, and fed them, and put them to bed. Then I climb out the window and got into the car. For a long time I just sat in the seat. I had my hand on that nice wheel and turned it slow this way and that, thinkin' about things. I had the key out of her purse, but I didn't study on drivin'. I only took it to open the door to get me into the car. But here I go puttin' that key in the slot, and listenin' to the motor purr. Then I see myself little by little startin' off, down the dark street. I didn't have no idea in the world of where to go, so I just drove and drove. I drove from one end of this town to the other, past the supermarkets all lit up, past the busy corners where the men hang out, laughin' and jokin'. They called to me, but I wouldn't stop there. I drove down the streets where the honkies live, black shadows from the big trees, goin' from street light to street light and nobody walkin'. I be scared to live there. I thought to visit Little Ma who is no kin to me, but nice to me. She gives me presents like soap or a hanky on my birthday. But I didn't go by her house either. I was afraid she'd tell Mama and I'd get it then. I'd really get it.

One little stretch on the edge of town, I put my foot all the way down on the pedal to see how it feel goin' really fast. I never could do that before, with Mama in the car sayin', "Slow down, you fool." Then after that I felt satisfied and I turned around and headed for home. You see, I meant no harm. I was meanin' to put that car back where it was and go to bed. But when I came to coastin' into the project, the space I left was filled. Some other big car takin' my space. I stopped and looked at it for full a moment. Then I figured I better not be sittin' there when Mama and the Carter come back, so I parked up the street a little. Not far. My head was buzzin' because I couldn't think what I was goin' to say. Maybe nothin', I prayed. Maybe they wouldn't notice, drunk as they be's when they gets home. Maybe they'd think this was where they put the car before they went out.

I climb in the window again. I saw to it that the children was all sound asleep, and covered up and warm. I undressed, and I got into bed with them. I figured that if I was asleep they wouldn't wake me, but let me sleep, and that in the mornin' I'd have somethin' to say. I'd sleep on it, and figure somethin' out.

No such luck. I felt a hand on my hair, yankin' me up. "What you been up to, you bitch? What you been doin' with my car?" Smell of whiskey almost made me sick. I was cryin' before I was awake. I was ready to tell her, and take my licks. She was already gettin' the ironing cord.

But she said "...my car," and like I said, I figure it was my pay that put the down payment, and was makin' the monthly payments on that car. God knows what got into me. The devil himself. I said, "I just figured to take my car out for a drive."

Oh, then she was mad! She was so mad! She raised the ironing cord over her head to bring it down good and hard on me. The little ones was wakin' up and cryin'. By this time I was out of bed and ready to run, or dodge and hide.

Like I told you, I been growin', gettin' strong carryin' trays, scrubbin' floors, liftin' them old folks and all. I'm too big and strong for the Carter to have his way with me any more. And I suddenly seed that I was lookin' down on her. Not standin' on anythin' either but my own two feet. And I thought, "This is goin' to end. Right here and now."

I only hit her with my hand. Nothin' else. But she fell and hit the side of her head on the corner of the bed. Plain wood it is. She went down like an ox. Lay there on the floor moanin' and tryin' to put her hand to her head like, but couldn't move. Then I seed the blood tricklin' out. The Carter took off like a scared rabbit. If it's the last we ever see of him, that's a good thing. That's the only good thing, though. The children was cryin' and hangin' on to me. I had the devil's own time to get next door to the telephone.

Now if she'll just be all right, I'll be good, Lord. Soon as I get out of here I'll go home and be a good girl forever. I'll take care of the little ones and she can go out to work so's I won't get in trouble again. Preacher Banks tells me I'm damned, and I'll scorch in hellfire throughout eternity. Sweet Jesus! Oh, Lord, make my Mama get well. Because if she don't, I'll never get out of here, and no place to go if I do. Who'd have me now anyhow? Who'd have a big ole ugly girl who hit her Mama, exceptin' her Mama?



## Today A Stranger Made Me Feel

Oh, wonder of explaining  
twelve years celibacy  
an unwilling participant  
with desire's, one more  
timing it, snuggled-warmth,  
welled inside me  
as delicious as sleep  
in cold damp's coil  
three woolen blankets deep,  
two smuggled, for comfort  
like the fire of hell.

La Bruno  
Trenton, NJ

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

*Shooting Star Review* is starting a LETTERS TO THE EDITOR page. We're interested in sharing your thoughts about current events in Black culture and the arts as well as what you like, don't like and would like to see in this magazine.

Letters should be less than 200 words and may be edited by *Shooting Star*. All letters must contain the writer's name, address, phone number and signature.

Write to:

Letter to the Editor  
*Shooting Star Review*  
7123 Race Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15208

Recently, three insightful women explored the importance and need for culturally-relevant rituals and traditions. These ceremonies would affirm important aspects of the Black experience and provide a system for transferring information across the generations.

Wouldn't you agree that it is essential that we find ways to extend past defeats and triumphs into building blocks for the future? The Juneteenth celebration from Texas was probably the first, and it should be observed in every community in this country. The seven-day Kwanzaa event brings marvelous opportunities for renewal. The Odunde festival celebrating the Yoruba goddess Oshun offers rich cultural benefits. Let us suggest another that could become to Thanksgiving what Kwanzaa is to Christmas:

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## Middle Passage

COMMEMORATION

### Host Items needed:

Bowl or pan filled with (sea) salt water [representing the Atlantic Ocean]

Small (to fit in bowl) boat or floating vessel

Silver [representing the sale of our forebears into slavery]

Chains made of rolled cookie dough [chains that bound us into slavery]

Rocks, grass and dirt [spiritual repositories]

Matches [for fire to convey awareness and vitality]

These items should be displayed in a specially prepared space

### Participants should bring:

Items that can be used to build an artwork [paper, fabric, etc.]

White candle [for bones of the millions who perished]

Covered dish representing food enjoyed by a forebear [a sampling of each item to be placed on special platter in honor of the ancestors]

### Ceremony:

- 1) Gather around the salted water.
- 2) Libation is offered to the ancestors.
- 3) Light all candles.
- 4) Prayers for the ancestors and to our forebears seeking guidance.
- 5) "Sail" a "vessel" across the water to remember the free exploration of this hemisphere by Africans who made Columbus' trip possible.
- 6) "Sail" again to memorialize the centuries of African slave trade.
- 7) Extinguish all but one candle (for cultural and spiritual losses).
- 8) The lit candle begins the relighting of other candles.
- 9) Prayers to guide and protect the young and unborn who follow us.
- 10) The "chains" are broken and consumed.
- 11) Making a joyful noise [songs as suits the occasion]
- 12) Rejoining activity [beginning or completing a quilt or collage or other artwork built by contributions from each participant].

Write and let us know about your experience with this Commemoration. It's hoped that this occasion (by reminding us of who we are, where we've come from and the future we can create) will be among the keys that permanently unlock our spirit and potential.

# HERO RETURN'S

By Kristin Hunter

**i tell you, I was about to explode, I was so excited when I heard my big brother Junior was coming home.**

Junior spent eighteen months in the House. He took out a long stretch, cause somebody shot off a gun the day Junior and his corner boys held up the Kravitz's ice cream store. Nobody got hurt, but Mrs. Kravitz hollered like somebody had killed her. The others got away, and Junior caught the whole blame. It was enough to put him away for a long, long time.

My corner boys were real impressed when I told them. Course they acted like it wasn't nothing, like any one of them could do eighteen months standing on his head. But they were impressed right on, and jealous besides, not having a brother like Junior or anybody else famous in the family.

I remember the headline--"Aging Couple Robbed"--and Junior's picture in the paper. I cut it out and saved it. It's still in my snapshot album that I never did put any other pictures in cause I never got the camera. My brother was big stuff. Front-page stuff. And now he was coming home.

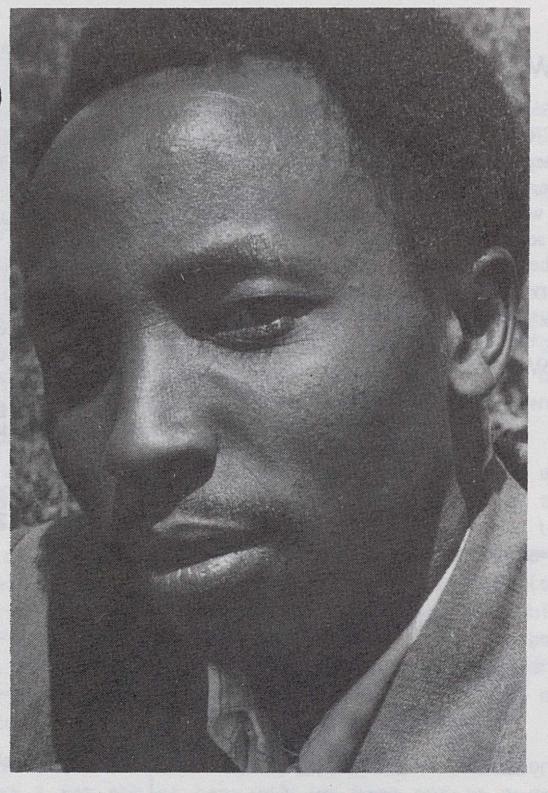


Photo (c) Lomie Graham

Josh he acted like it weren't nothing. "Eighteen months?" he said. "What's that? I hear you get your own TV in the House, and your own room."

No ghetto kid has his own room, except me after Junior went away. And now he was coming home, and me glad to share it with him again.

"Yeah," says Marquis, "I hear tell they have ice cream every night up there. Double scoops on Sundays. And people come around and give them cigarettes, things like that."

We only used to get ice cream when we found enough soda bottles to return to the store. And now they got those No Deposit No Return bottles, we don't hardly ever get none unless somebody's Mom gives

him a dime. If she does, you got to run all the way home to eat it by yourself, else fight some bigger kids for it. And even if you get past the big guys, there's your boys, Josh and Duke and Leroy and Marquis, all wanting to take turns licking off your ice cream cone.

"Man, I ain't studying no ice cream," said Leroy. He acts like he's the baddest thing on McCarter Street just cause he's thirteen and the rest of us is only twelve. "I could use some cigarettes, though."

This was one time I was with Leroy. I don't think about ice cream much no more cause I don't like to go in Kravitz's store since it happened. I favor my brother in the face, and old Mrs. Kravitz might start yelling her head off again. You can get cigarettes anywhere.

But we don't never have enough money, unless King or one of the other big-time hustlers on the corner gives us some to run an errand. The other hustlers only give us fifty cents, but sometimes King gives a whole dollar. I seen him take a roll of money thick as my fist out of his pocket plenty of times.

We were standing around that July morning, waiting for King to show up, hoping he would give one of us something to do. We all want to be hustlers when we grow up. A hustler is somebody who lives by his wits, you might say, and King was the king of them all.

It was hot enough to boil water on the sidewalk that morning, and my foot was blistered from a hole in my sneakers. I was thinking, maybe when Junior gets home he'll pull off another job and get me a new pair, when King glides up to the curb in his white air-conditioned Hog.

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**"Yeah, I'm a man," Junior said disgustedly, "and ain't a thing in this town I can do."**

---

The Cadillac was about half a block long, and a sharp fox in a blonde wig was sitting beside King. He looked cool as an ice cube in there, his wavy hair shining and diamonds flashing on his hands.

"Hey, you boy. Come here!" He flicked a little button in the Hog, and the window slid down easy as greased silk. Josh and Duke and Leroy and Marquis all hit the sidewalk, but I had a head start in my sneakers, hole and all. I got to the car a full three feet ahead of them.

Then--man!--King shoved the girl out of the car and held open the door for me. I hopped in and closed the door, and we eased away from the curb. Leroy and Josh and Duke and Marquis were left standin' there with their mouths hangin' open.

"Have a cigarette, kid," King said, and handed me a pack of Marlboros. The paper was pink and it had been rolled by hand.

King handed me the dashboard lighter. I lit up and held the smoke in.

King lit a real Marlboro and leaned back, steering

the Hog through tight traffic with one hand. "Kid," he said, "you got to the car first, so you must be the most ambitious one on the corner. You want to get ahead in this world?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak cause the smoke had me all choked up inside.

"Well," King said, "how'd you like to be my right hand man?"

"Yes!" I cried.

"All you got to do," King said, "is pass this stuff out among the kids." And he pulls a plastic bag out from under the seat. "When they want more, you come back to me. I'll tell you what to charge 'em."

And then King pulled that big old wad out of his pocket and plucked off a crisp new five and handed it to me. My eyes popped. But I didn't lose my cool. Just sat back and inhaled that pink cigarette like a man.

It was making me feel like a man too. Like I could do anything. I put the five in the pocket of my jeans and sucked in the smoke and held it in like I seen Leroy do one time. I felt ten feet tall, higher than high. Way above the funky scuffling people we were cruising by on Madison.

"Man," I said to King, "this is some good stuff."

"Oughta be. It came all the way from Panama," King said. "Listen, kid. The cops don't exactly dig this action, you understand?"

"I'm hip," I said.

"Don't let any of 'em catch you with it. And don't smoke it all yourself, neither."

"Don't worry, King. I'll take care of business," I told him.

"Good," King said and grinned. The wrinkles in his handsome face sank in and made it look like a skull. "You were the one I wanted, kid, you know that? I just didn't know your name."

That made me feel good, but at the same time I got a funny feeling in the stomach. Like when I've had some corn chips and a cherry soda and Mom puts a big platter on the table and I can't eat.

King was waving at people and honking his horn. Everybody stopped what they were doing and waved back. King's the biggest man in town. Everybody wants to know him. And there I was, riding right beside him.

Then we turned sharp into McCarter, and there on the corner was Junior. Thinner than when I saw him last, and with dark smudges under his eyes. But he was home.

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**"Kid," he said, "you got to the car first, so you must be the most ambitious one on the corner. You want to get ahead in this world?"**

---



**DEE**

In a bright T-shirt  
tight fitting red shorts  
and stilt high heels,  
she wears a red rose  
in her short cut Afro.

At thirteen  
she's got stretch marks  
on her belly.

She's black,  
breast pointing sharp,  
finger nails an inch long.  
Eyebrows highlight  
the gaze in her eyes,  
rousing men and boys,  
stumbling by.

They imagine sliding their tongue  
across her smooth burgandy lips  
set to kiss.

She rents her body,  
thirty minutes at a time,  
but she still tosses pennies  
in mud ponds,  
chews bubble gum,  
smiles for free.

Stanley E. Banks

"I got to get out now, King," I said. "That's my brother over there." Junior looked up and saw me.

"Jody!" he cried and took a step toward me. I had meant to shake hands, the way men do, but instead I flew at him and we hugged right there on the street. My head used to just hit the middle of his chest, but now it touched his chin.

We stepped back, kind of embarrassed, and shook hands like I had meant to do in the first place.

"Boy," he said, "you must've grown a foot. Keep it up, you be tall as me."

And he laughed and rubbed my head. But his eyes were all squinched up like he was trying to keep tears back. I didn't like to see him looking like that, so I started talking fast.

"Did they treat you all right at the House, Junior? I bet you made 'em respect you. I bet they knew you weren't no one to mess with. Didn't they, Junior?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. "What were you doing in that car?"

The big Hog with the special-made front license plate, K I N G, was still parked at the corner.

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I remember the headline--"Aging Couple Robbed"--and Junior's picture in the paper. I cut it out and saved it. It's still in my snapshot album that I never did put any other pictures in cause I never got the camera. My brother was big stuff.

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"Tell you later," I said, though I was busting to tell him then "I want to hear how you made out in the slammer."

"Let's get home," he said. But before we could, Duke and Leroy and Josh and Marquis came running up. They surrounded us and pelted Junior with questions.

"Did they give you a TV, man?"

"How was the food? Good?"

"Who'd you meet in there? Any of the big cats?"

"Yeah, I bet you got connections now. I bet you ready for the big time."

Them guys. Sometimes I wish they would leave a guy alone. But they my boys, and they was as excited to see him as I was.

Junior just kept steady walkin', his mouth set in a tight line, saying nothing to the guys until they gave up and fell back. We got to our building. And there over the door was a big cardboard sign Mom had lettered in crayon: WELCOME HOME SON. Just like they do for the heroes that come back from Vietnam.

Junior stood and stared at the sign for a minute. Then he stepped over the kids that are always hanging around out front and yanked the sign down. He ripped it in four pieces and dropped it in the gutter.

"Junior!" I hollered. "What you want to do that for? You'll make Mom feel bad."

"I already made her feel bad," he said. "Come on." He pushed me head of him into the hallway.

"You didn't even speak to nobody," I complained. "Josh and Leroy and them, and your old ace Tom Cat, and old Mr. Baltimore. And Mrs. Walters. She was sittin' in the front window like always. You didn't even speak to

**Hero** Continued

her. They all want to see you Junior. They been askin' about you while you been away."

"I spoke to you, didn't I?" he said. "Which door is it?"

Our building has so many apartments in it I lost count. Still, it was kind of a shock that Junior didn't remember his own apartment door. Made me realize how long he'd been away. And how far, even though you can reach the House by the number 14 bus.

"One more flight up," I told him. When we'd got there I didn't have to give him any more directions.

Mom was standing in the door with her arms held out in welcome. Junior tried to push past her and get inside, but she had to give him a hug and have her a cry right there. People from the other apartments were watching. I was embarrassed, so I pushed between Mom and Junior and got through the door. That separated them.

**WORDS**

entrapped	tongue tip labels prison's deeds determine action "black" like me staircased fate ghetto's steps, grasping hand out rails tentaments of phrases housed the lack of heat boiling blood racism flows through hallways history repeat hypodermic needle. burnt spoons of harlem existence runneth over: spilling soiling dreams rooted american's "Gay Tales" told by skeleton's men who think Ray Charles put soul into "America the Beautiful": all men all created equal ...just that some men are more equal than others.
chained	love more than ever now: "blacks" needs self love must be beautiful: like revenge we must be magnificent remove the blindfold from lady ... everminded of Ray Charles <u>seeing</u> Justice of beautiful ...poems must be sung WORDS must justify the beginning the means and the end In the birth there was only the scream and the word was Love

Maurice Hundley  
Lansing, MI

Mom stepped back into the apartment. Junior followed her and shut the door real quick behind him.

He locked all the locks, the bolt and the chain lock and the police lock that goes right down into the floor. Like he didn't hardly want to ever let anybody in again.

"Lord, child, let me look at you," Mom said when she had dried her eyes on her apron. "Looks like you didn't hardly get enough to eat in that place."

That bothered me some, to tell you the truth. It wasn't at all like what Leroy and them had been saying. But maybe it was just that Junior had lost all his baby fat and was getting lean and hard.

He stood there in the middle of the floor like he hadn't really come to stay and was planning to leave any second. It kept Mom from fussing over him anymore. She started fussing over the stove instead, measuring rice and stirring the chicken and okra. Man! It sure smelled delicious. Suddenly I was real hungry.

"Stewed chicken and okra tonight, honey," she said to Junior. "Your favorite supper. And later I got some people coming in who want to see my son."

"I don't want to see any people," Junior said. "I'm kind of tired. I'm going to take me a little rest."

And without another word he went into our room and shut the door.

"Anything you say, son," Mom said. But he didn't hear her. He had already slammed the bedroom door.

Pretty soon she started crying again. I couldn't stand that, so I took a beer out of the ice box and went to the room and knocked.

"Is that you, Jody?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

"I thought you might like a beer," I said, shutting the door behind me.

"Thanks," he said and took it. He didn't say any more, just lay on his back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. I sat on the edge of my bed and watched him for a while. The room was getting tenser by the minute.

"Planning a job, huh?" I finally said.

"I can't get a job. I've got a record."

"I mean a big-time job," I said. "Like you pulled off at Kravitz's, only bigger."

He rolled over and looked at me for the first time. "You think I'm a hero, don't you?" he said. "A big-shot crook. Like in the movies."

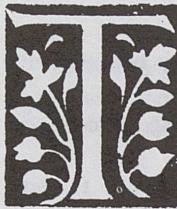


# HAIR

by Tina McElroy Ansa  
from her book BABY IN THE FAMILY



Lena never had known the wild abandon of running in the spray of a garden hose without hearing her mother or grandmother calling from the house or garden, "Lena, if you don't get your little butt out of that water, you better." Or, "Lena, you get that hair wet and you and me gonna have it out. . . . No, little miss. Get your ass out that water."



The summer vacation that took Lena and her brothers Raymond and Edward, her parents, her Aunt Sister, Uncle Jack, cousins James Junior and Jackie from South Carolina, and the family friends from Atlanta, the Stevenses, across the state

to the Georgia coast the year she was 7 could have been called Colored Folks Going to the Beach, like a painting. That's what her grandmother called it: Colored Folks Going to the Beach. She said it all month long as her family undertook the massive preparations for the two-week vacation. And she always sucked her false teeth in disgust when she said it.

"Colored folks going to the beach, pshhht."

She said it when Lena's mother came into the house carrying big thin brown paper bags filled with new shorts sets for herself, terry cloth playsuits for Lena, swimsuits for the both of them, swimming trunks for Lena's father and brothers, and new white cotton undershirts and drawers and brightly colored towels for everybody. Her grandmother just watched the boys and Lena tear into the sacks of beachwear while they were still in Nellie's arms and muttered, "Colored folks buying beach towels." Then she sucked her teeth.

When her mother rounded up everyone in the house the Monday before they left, to go downtown to Dannenberg's department store to purchase sandals--Red Goose for the children--her grandmother went along for the ride but refused to accompany the family into the shoe department. Instead she wandered through the sewing and notions section picking up spools of thread and cards of bias tape and putting them back while the others tried on white leather sandals and light brown ones with wide straps and chunky brass buckles. Every once in a while the old lady muttered to herself, "Colored folks buying beach shoes. They'll ruin those children's feet. Nellie ought to know better, ought to know those children's feet are still growing. They need support, not some little flimsy strap."

When the saleswoman in notions approached her grandmother suspiciously, Lena saw the old lady give her such an evil look that the pale white woman with the beginnings of a hump back actually edged her way back to her station at the big brown cash register without turning around to watch her step.

Most everyone in the house knew enough not to mention the trip directly to their grandmama. But Lena thought she was special, so later that week she ran to her grandmother in the sewing room to proudly display her new pair of red-and-white rubber flip-flops purchased expressly for the trip. The old woman was too outraged to speak right away. She just reached down and grabbed the rubber thong off Lena's feet, flipping the child on her butt on one of her rag rugs, and flounced out of the room in search of someone

who had "a little damn bit of sense" with whom to commiserate.

She found Imogene at her usual station above the ironing board in the kitchen and conferred on her the honor of a little damn bit of sense.

"Will you look at this little piece of shit Nellie bought to put on her child's feet, her baby daughter's feet! Now, is that crazy? Psshht, colored folks going to the beach."

Imogene, not wanting to jeopardize her job that only entailed some light cleaning, which she hated, and some heavy ironing, which she loved, just frowned without saying a word, spit snuff juice into the Maxwell House coffee can resting on the windowsill, and went back to ironing one of the boys' plaid cotton short-sleeved shirts and moving her feet to Ray Charles singing "Baby, What I Say" on the tiny transistor radio that hung around her neck on a string. That infuriated Lena's grandmother even further, so she flounced out of the kitchen, too and, on the way back to the sewing room, threw the flimsy shoes as hard as she could under the long picnic table in the breakfast room.

Later Lena didn't dare ask her grandmother what she had done with the shoes, so she had to search the house for an entire day before she found them wedged between the deep freezer and the breakfast-room table.

Her grandmother had no intention of being part of Colored Folks Going to the Beach. That spring, when she had heard her son and daughter-in-law discussing the idea of the trip, she let them know right away not to count on her going along.

"No, thank you very much," she told them very politely, "but I'll just stay here and have a vacation from foolishness."

Lena couldn't for the life of her understand why her grandmother would not want to go on vacation to the beach in the first place, and why she was so vehement in her conviction that no other black folks had any business there either.

"Grandmama acts like she takes it personally that we're going to the beach," Lena told her mother, whom she found at the big white metal kitchen table shucking long ears of sweet white Silver Queen corn. Her father could never get enough sweet fried corn in the summer when it was plentiful, cooked just the way Nellie did it: First, holding the corn upright on the pointed end, she went over the outside of each shucked ear with a very sharp butcher knife, barely shearing off the very tips of each kernel. Each of the firm pieces of corn fell into the bottom of the big black iron skillet with a little plink. Then she went back over each ear with the flat side of the knife, scraping the cobs dry of all their milky juices.

"This is the only way to fix fried corn," her mother told her as she spit a long strand of silk from her mouth over her shoulder. The smooth reddish-brown skin on her

face, chest, and bare arms would be dotted with spatters of corn juice. It seemed to Lena that her mother was polka-dotted with bits of corn milk all summer long.

"Now, you watch how I do this," her mother said as she added a handful of flour to the corn, washed the remaining flour off her hand into the mixture with about a cup of water, turned the whole thing around in the big black skillet with her fingers, and put it over a low flame on the stove. "Heaven help you, you may get a man who loves fried corn the way your daddy does."

Finally she poured some hot fatback bacon grease into the corn, where it sizzled, and covered it with a big lid.

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**"When I looked at you laying in my arms the first time, I knew all this damn hair on your head would be the death of me ..."**

---

"I'm watching," Lena said as she sat with her chin on the table watching a fat green worm inch across the surface. But she persisted, "Mama, why is Grandmama so mad about us going to the beach?"

"What makes you think she's mad?" her mother asked innocently.

"I don't think, I know she is. She even tried to throw my new flip-flops away when I told her they were for the beach," Lena replied.

"Well, Lena, your grandmama's old, well older than the rest of us. Don't say I said she was old. And sometimes older people have different ideas about things than we do."

"Why?" Lena wanted to know as she made drawings in the layer of flour dusting the table.

"All kinds of reasons. Mostly because they grew up in a time different from ours. When your grandmama was little there were all kinds of things she wasn't allowed to do that you can do, like go into the stores downtown or to the county fair in the fall. Colored folks still can't do a lot of things, but you do more than she ever thought about."

"What's that got to do with a vacation?" Lena wanted to know. "Seems like that would make you want it more."

"When your grandmama was coming up, and even when I was, the beach was one place that was just for white folks, not for colored unless you were taking care of somebody's white baby. It just wasn't for colored folks."

"Why?"

"Oh, you know how when white folks have something good, they make like it's no good for black people. Shit, you even hear colored people doing the same thing when somebody says,



let's go to the beach. 'I'm black enough,' they say, or, 'Colored folks and water don't mix.'

"When you been kept from something so long, sometimes you don't know how to act when you get to it."

"Oh," Lena said slowly as she trailed her finger through the flour.

"Do you understand, baby?" Lena's mother asked as she wiped up the child's picture from the table's surface with a damp dish towel.

"I think so," Lena answered and walked out of the kitchen to go sit with her grandmother in the sewing room. She loved her grandmama and didn't want her to think that she was being disloyal by going to the beach. But she had no intention of missing out on this opportunity. This trip was the first time in her life Lena would ever experience real freedom around water.

It wasn't fear of drowning that made her mother scream like banshee every time Lena went near a body of water that was not in bathtub or sink. It was fear of the child getting her hair wet, nappy, and tangled.

All Lena's life her long thick wiry hair had ruled her. It shaped what she was allowed to do, where she could go, how comfortable she was with her surroundings, what she did, how free she felt.

**... the next morning Gail Goode drove up to their house in her loud raggedy Chevrolet. She had come to comb Lena's hair ...**

One of her earliest memories was of her mother combing her hair as gently as she could imagine anyone possibly doing it, cooing soothing words in her ear to distract her from the pain of the tugging and pulling it entailed. Until she was 4 years old, her mother sometimes combed her hair while she slept. She would go to bed, her long, brick-colored hair freshly washed with coconut-oil shampoo and standing all over her head, and wake up with it smoothed and molded into four neat symmetrical plaits. Her mother told her it was magic that caused the transformation. All Lena knew was the "magic" gave her terrible dreams in which strange creatures chased her and cut off her head and swung it around in circles by her hair as they danced and shouted.

Ever since her birth, when she had come into the world with a head full of tight bright curls, soft and thick like the wool on a baby lamb, her hair had been a major topic of discussion, in her family and out.

"When I looked at you laying in my arms the first time, I knew all this damn hair on your head would be the death of me," her mother fussed and fumed as she sat on the edge of

her bed and tried to pull the big black comb through Lena's shoulder-length nappy red hair.

"Owww!" was Lena's reply as she sat on the floor of her mother's bedroom, her little shoulders clamped between her mother's skinny knees.

"I'm so sorry, baby, I'm doing my best not to hurt you But you know how your hair is."

"It's not my fault it's long and nappy like it is," Lena said with her bottom lip trembling.

"Of course not. I just wish it didn't hurt you so much to get it combed."

"Me, too. Oowwwww!"

"Sorry," her mother said automatically and kept on combing, bearing down on the job to hurry and finish. For as long as Lena could remember, and even before that, as she saw from her early pictures, she had had her hair combed in one of two ways. Either it was parted straight down the middle then divided again across the crown of her head into four equal parts that her mother braided into four plaits--this was her everyday hairdo. Or, on Sundays and other special occasions, the hair from the two top braids was combed together in one big pretty barrette and braided to fall down the side of her right cheek. The other two plaits were left to hang down her back.

"Whew, long-assed nappy red hair just like mine used to be before it all broke off when I started having you children," her mother kept muttering. "I feel like getting a pair of scissors sometimes and cutting it all off."

"Yeah, Mama, do that. Cut it off like Raymond and Edward's, real short."

"You mean to tell me you want me to cut off all your pretty long hair?"

"Yeah, real short too. Give me a skinny ball like the boys. Then I won't even have to see a comb. I can have me a little brush like them and wear a stocking cap to bed. Cut it off, Mama."

"Aw, but then you won't look like my little girl, you'll look like an old boy," her mama said, wrinkling her pretty nose at the last two word, then laughing at the thought of her baby without all her long rusty colored hair.

Her grandmama, who could hardly stand to be in the same room when Lena was being put through the torture of getting her hair combed, was once walking by on the way down the hall to her own room and caught a snatch of this conversation. She came barreling into the room.

"Nellie, don't tell me you are actually considering cutting off that child's hair. I never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life. Cutting off that baby's pretty hair," her grandmother huffed.

Her mother resented the intrusion.

"Well, Miss Lizzie, my daughter and I were just having a private conversation of what if. But you're a fine one to talk, you who never lifted a comb to try to rake through all this hair."



"Now, Nellie, you know good and damn well I'd do anything I could for that child--she's my heart. But I can't stand to see her hurt and crying the way she gets when you try to comb her hair."

"Oh, that's right, make me the mean one, the one the child hates for hurting her and trying to make her look nice and neat," her mother said, her voice rising and cracking as she worked herself into a tizzy over something that had been decided years before.

Lena's mother swore that she hadn't had the luxury of expressing her true nature ever since she had had the responsibility of children--that she was sensitive, high-strung, and prone to be excitable, and had been ever since she had been a girl herself.

"Well, if you would just warm the child's hair out a little with a hot comb, it would be a lot easier to handle," Lena's grandmother would counter. She had no other retort and was on the defensive. Even before the suggestion was out of the old woman's mouth, she knew what Nellie would say.

"Warm it out? Warm it out?" her mother answered incredulously. "Shit, Miss Lizzie, you know as well as I do that the reason I don't straighten this child's hair--and God knows she could use it--is because of your son and his ideas."

"You goddamn right, you won't straighten that baby's hair because of me," Lena's father yelled from down the hall on his perch in the bathroom. No one knew he was even in the house. He liked to slip in and out unnoticed. Nellie said it was to hear what was said about him.

"Any fool knows you'd stunt the girl's growth of hair if you apply heat to it too early. Any fool knows that," he said. Her father was sure about everything he said, Lena had noticed.

"Yeah, any fool," her mother repeated.

"What's that, Nellie?" her father asked as he cracked the bathroom door another eye's width and threw his adventure book on the linoleum floor.

"I just said 'uh-huh,'" her mother replied with sour meekness.

"When the girl gets to be 9 or 10, that'll be plenty of time to be straightening her hair," Jonah said, ending the conversation with a slam of the bathroom door.

Lena's grandmother felt somehow vindicated, and she strutted out of the room and down the hall saying, "Hell, cut off that child's hair--see what'll happen."

Shit, I'd cut it off myself if I didn't think they'd all kill me, Lena thought as she squirmed between her mother's legs while the woman tightened her grip and went back to the unpleasant task.

Despite the pain it caused Lena and everyone who had to deal with it, everybody in her family seemed to think her hair should give her some pleasure. It didn't. It was a burden. Sometimes it was even an embarrassment. Strange women in the grocery store would stare at her and say to one

another in amazement, "Look at the head of hair on that child. Makes her look just like a grown woman."

Even her best friend in first grade, Gwen, the quiet chubby little girl who was smart like Lena, knew the burden that Lena's hair was for her.

"You better be careful not to run under Miss Pratt's sprinkler, Lena," Gwen would shout as they both ran down the sidewalk of Ward Street after school. "Unless you want a whipping when you get home for getting your hair wet."

During the first steamy fall and final hot spring days of the school year, Miss Pratt, who had a well and didn't use the city water, which she had to pay for, watered her vegetable garden and yard every afternoon at 3:00 sharp for a good two hours. So when the Georgia heat was most oppressive, the neighborhood children--private school and public--knew that if they could make it to the end of the school day, they could take a refreshing dash across Miss Pratt's pretty green lawn through the shower of icy cold water. Everybody, that is, except Lena.

Lena never had known the wild abandon of running in the spray of a garden hose without hearing her mother or grandmother calling from the house or garden, "Lena, if you don't get your little butt out of that water, you better." Or, "Lena, you get that hair wet and you and me gonna have it out." Or, "Lena, you know good and damn well you cannot cavort out there like that and get your hair wet. I refuse to let you go out this house once more with yourself looking like some wild savage because you played in some damn sprinkler and got your hair all nappy and tangled and then wouldn't let nobody come near you with a comb. No, little miss. Get your ass out that water."

The women had said it so often to Lena that they no longer had to be around to deter her when she considered running through some water.

In the weeks before their trip to the beach, there was as much discussion about what to do with Lena's hair for two weeks in all that moist humid air near the ocean as there was about the actual travel plans.

"Well, I don't care what you say, we gonna have to take a straightening comb with us to warm out that child's hair from time to time. Or do you want her to look like some wild thing the whole time we're down there?"

Nellie asked Jonah in all seriousness, as if it were a pressing matter like, how we gonna pay this house note this month?

"Don't waste my time talking 'bout thing that are already settled. You know what I said," her father replied over his plate at the breakfast table, as his wife jumped up and down getting more hot grits, more butter, more ice for his orange juice from the ice bucket on the breakfront. "The child's hair don't need straightening yet."

"Well, I don't know how you expect me to keep it looking nice when that ocean water and air get into it I tell you,

## The Interviewee

He arrives  
with booze  
on his breath,  
enough  
to be noticed,  
yet impossible  
to comment on.  
He doesn't seem  
aware we know  
his secret,  
a man dried up  
by too much sun  
and embalmed in whisky.  
Each word  
a calculation  
as if planned from birth,  
a script memorized  
for questions  
never asked.  
Nothing fits,  
his words jigsaw  
apart, leaving us  
a puzzle  
too difficult  
to put together.

Fr. Benedict Auer, O.S.B.

"Sure, Junior," I said eagerly. "All the guys do. They expect you to do great things. You got the connections and the smarts now. You must know a lot more than when you went in the House. You was only seventeen then. Now you're a man."

"Yeah, I'm a man," Junior said disgustedly, "and ain't a thing in this town I can do. Nobody's going to hire a jailbird."

"It's all right," I said. "I can take cared of us for a while, till you get yourself together."

I pulled out the five and showed it to him.

He was up on his feet, standing over me. "Where'd you get that?"

Something in his manner scared me, but I went on. "King gave it to me. And I'm going to make a lot more.

Selling this." I pulled the plastic bag out of my pocket. "It's--"

"I know what it is," Junior said and took off his belt. "Go flush it down the toilet."

"But, Junior--"

He gave me a whack with the back of his hand. It caught me by surprise and sent me sprawling on the floor.

"Flush it," he said. "And come right back here when you finished."

I trembled, cause I knew what was coming. He had the belt in his hand, folded over double. My face was stinging from the whack, and I was beginning to cry, more from surprise than anything else. But on my way to the bathroom and back I didn't let Mom see me.

Junior was waiting for me when I got back. "So you want to go to jail, huh? All right, I'll show you what jail is like."

He locked the door from the inside and gave me the worst whipping I ever had in my life. The only one, in fact. Pop left home before I was born, and Mom was always too kindhearted to beat us.

She had heard me yelling and was at the door, banging on it to be let in. "Junior, what's going on in there? What you doing to my baby?"

"Saving him, that's what," Junior yelled back through the door. "If he ain't already ruint."

He didn't open the door, either. He went right on whipping me. When he was through, he said, "You going to stay away from that slick hustler, huh? You going to stay off that corner and leave those pint-size hoods alone?"

I didn't answer, I was so mad.

"All right. You got a week to think about it." He shut the door behind him and locked me in.

---

**Junior said, "He wants to go to jail. So let him try it for a few days."**

---

"What you doing to my baby?" Mom cried again.

Junior said, "He wants to go to jail. So let him try it for a few days. Let him live on bread and water and stay in solitary and get knocked around every time he opens his mouth."

Mom let out a wail that sounded like a police siren, but it didn't change Junior's mind. He brought me bread and water for supper and took out the mattresses so he could sleep on them in the front room. I would sleep on the springs and get a taste of what a prison bed was like.

He explained it all to me patiently, like he wasn't angry anymore. "The small-time crooks, they get to talk to each other. But the real big-time criminals like you get solitary. And if they real bad actors, the guards take the springs out of the cell too. Then they sleep on the floor. I'm your guard. And if you a bad actor, I get to knock you around. Understand?"

But that was all he would say. Once or twice he knocked me around a little, just to show me it wasn't a game. The rest of the time, he didn't say or do nothing. Just brought the bread and water and took me to the bathroom.

I got so lonesome in there I wished he would come in, even to beat me. The old bedsprings stuck me no matter which way I turned, so I lay on the floor, thinking about stewed chicken and okra and having cramps in my belly. All I had to listen to was their arguments.

"You gonna kill him," Mom said.

"No," junior told her "He might get killed in jail. That happens to lots of guys. But this way he's gonna live."

"He's only a baby," she wailed.

"He's big enough to get in big trouble. I got home just in time."

The first night wasn't so bad. I expected Mom to come to my rescue any minute. But he wouldn't let her. In the morning I heard her going off to work. They would fire her if she took off two days in a row, so she had to go.

The second and third days, I lay there trying to remember boss things I'd done with the guys, like chasing girls in the park and stealing fruit and sneaking rides on the back of trucks. But pretty soon those things bored me too.

On the fourth day, I got some of my school books down from the closet and began reading. I even got interested in history.

Junior came in while I was lying on my stomach with the book open on the floor in front of me. For a scary moment I thought he was going to take it away. But he just looked at me. And then he smiled.

"Gonna be a big-time criminal like me?"

"No."

"Gonna drop out of school like I did?"

"No." I paused and thought very carefully, then surprised myself by what I said. "I think I might go to that tutoring place at Mom's church and make up math. I think I could pass it this time."

"What I think," Junior said, "is you ready to come out now. I'm gonna parole you. But you got to watch your step, you hear? No associating with known criminals. No messing up. A single slip, and back you go."

Then he fixed me a big breakfast. He explained that since we didn't have a father anymore, he had to be the man of the house. It made him feel good, he said, knowing at least part of what he had to do.

Then he let me go out on the street.

It looked different, like a place I hadn't seen in years and years. With all the slick people and crooks and hustlers, it looked like a place where I didn't want to stay very long.

"Hey man," Leroy hollered at me, "where you been?"

I was still weak and wobbly in spite of the breakfast. But I felt stronger and older than Leroy and the others. I knew things they still had to learn. One thing I knew was if I ever made it off that corner, I would have to make it alone.

"I been," I said, "in jail."

Then I left them and went on my way, knowing where I was going and walking like a man.



## DISAPPOINTMENT IN D

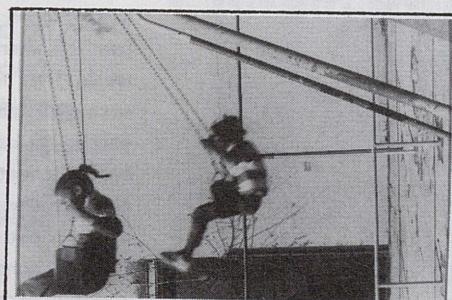


Photo (c) Heather Johnson

having  
finally realized  
at a ripe old  
age that  
adult life  
is  
a series  
of  
repetitive  
events I  
have stopped  
looking for the  
great  
adventure and  
am  
learning to love  
the park.

J.E.M. Jones  
Hollis, NY

# THE SLIM

By Curtiss Urness

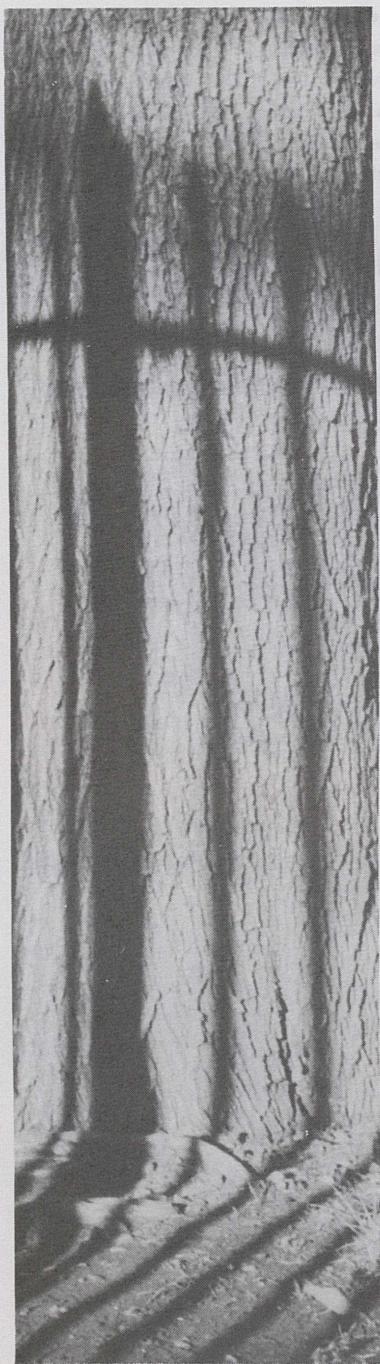


Photo (c) Rob Fredly

"My name is Abraham, the same as Abraham in the Old Testament," the man said, when he had first learned of his wife's pregnancy. "Abraham became the father of many and so have I."

He stood proudly in the blistering sun, although he was dirty and sore from plowing the fields. The hair crowning his ebony head was as tufted and white as the cotton he had

grown for most of his life. The smile that cracked through the wrinkles of his face was mostly toothless, the majority of his teeth having been knocked out during a beating when he had been jailed for smuggling. His stature, though, was straight and erect, despite his years. He was still robust and barrel-chested; still a very strong man. He stood shirtless in the light of day, not afraid to expose the bullet wounds disfiguring his abdomen from when Obote's soldiers had shot and left him for dead.

Naomi, his wife, sat huddled in the doorway of the mud hut Abraham had built as a temporary shelter. She seemed lost in the long, flowing gown and the kerchief she wore; a figure too thin and frail to conceive of as being able to bear a child, although she had already bore four. She wiped her nose with a filthy rag and asked, "Where are your many now, Abraham?"

Abraham grimaced and shook his head. He did not want to think of the family he had lost, especially not with the good news of this day.

"It doesn't matter now," he said. "Like the first Abraham, I am

"It is not a cold. I have seen those cursed with the slim and I

blessed with a child in my old age. It is a sign from God. It is not good to think about what happened in the past.

"I am thinking of what is happening now. The Abraham you are speaking of lived long ago. These are the times that the Lord told of as the end. These are times of war and pestilence and disease. These are the days when Death rides a pale horse.

"That is enough. I'll not have you curse me with this kind of talk. This child is a blessing to us in our old age. This child is a reward for the suffering we have endured. You will have this child and, if it is a boy, we will name him Isaac."

"There is no good in hoping, Abraham," Naomi said quietly, her eyes cast downward. She brought the rag to her face again and coughed.

"You know I have the slim," she said.

"I know no such thing!" Abraham shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. "Everybody in this village thinks they have the slim. You have a cold, woman; a cold and nothing more. Do you understand?"

tell you that I am suffering the same things. Tell me you haven't

noticed how I shake and how I sweat at night. Look at this..." She opened her mouth and stretched the corners of her lips with her fingers. The insides of her cheeks were spotted with sores. She removed her fingers and said, "I have seen the same in the mouths of many who've had the slim."

"And I have seen it in the mouths of babies and it was nothing," Abraham answered. "It is an infection from yeast. You have no slim, Naomi. Quit thinking such bad thing and consider the joy growing in your womb. Are you a witch that you would change a blessing into a curse?"

Naomi hid her face behind gnarled, bony fingers and began to cry. She sobbed softly at first, almost imperceptibly. Then the floodgates of her terror opened and tears streamed through her fingers. The sweeping folds of her garment silently rippled with the trembling of her slight body.

Abraham turned away in pity and disgust. He, too, had been through much but he could not sit and cry like his wife. He would not just abandon the hope and promise that this new child was bringing. He could not lose himself in sorrow. A man had to continue his life and always work for something better. He walked back to the field where he had tethered his mule. Naomi wailed after him, each piercing cry a barb of grief and pain.

Abraham harnessed his mule and shielded himself from Naomi's anguish with his work. He could handle the toil of the fields. He was born to know the sweat and relentless heat, the smell of the animal and the smell of the earth. Weakness and sorrow, familiar as they were to his life, were foreign to his nature.

Before the years of war, he had the best farm in the valley. He grew cotton and vegetables in his fields and coffee on the hillsides. He had three sons and one daughter, all well liked in the village. They were literate and educated, unlike so many others in Uganda.

---

**"I know no such thing!" Abraham shouted, throwing his hands up in the air. "Everybody in this village thinks they have the slim. You have a cold, woman; a cold and nothing more. Do you understand?"**

---

His oldest son, Geoffry had been a soldier, a lieutenant. Abraham had been proud but Naomi was fearful of her boy entering battle. Geoffry, when he left for the last time, had prophetically warned her that everyone should be prepared for war. The war, he said, would not confine itself to the north. He died in Nile Province.

Abraham's second son, Robert had been the smart one. He was a truck driver and a smuggler, also. He would frequent the boom towns along Lake Victoria's shores and come back with outrageous tales and expensive gifts. His fingers always bore rings and his clothes were too stylish for a man who worked hauling freight. That had been his downfall. His body was found riddled with bullets near

the Kenyan border. His ring fingers had been cut off. The government said it had been the work of bandits but Abraham was suspicious. There was little distinction between soldiers and bandits in those days.

His other two children, John and Anna were killed when the soldiers massacred the village. Abraham had been out picking cotton with Anna's husband and some hired hands at the time of their murder, so he had been spared seeing what happened. When he and Naomi returned to the farm this spring, his offspring's remains told him the story. John's bones were scattered near the barn, the axe that was used to kill him lying nearby. The boy had been 14 at the time. Anna's skeleton had been found whole, the bones of her wrists still wired to two bushes and the hem of her dress rotting over her skull.

Abraham and his workers were caught by a squad of infantry in the cotton field that charged at them in a skirmishers formation, firing at will. Abraham's son-in-law, Richard was one of the first to die. A bullet hit him square at the base of his throat. Blood gushed from the wound and from his mouth as he fell. Abraham was shot twice in the mid-section and he dropped to the ground, where he wisely pretended to be dead. Others were found alive and he heard their screams of torture for hours afterward.

It was later that night, that Alfred, a friend of Robert, found Abraham near death. Alfred and some others stole him away to the mountains, where a woman friend of Alfred nurtured the wounded man back to health. Abraham was told that his family and almost everyone in his village had perished in the raid. As soon as Abraham was strong again, he joined Alfred's smuggling ring in the fishing villages along the Lake.

### The Slim Continued

Sometime after Obote temporarily fell from power, Abraham learned that Naomi had survived and was living in a refugee camp in the Sudan. He packed his belongings and began the arduous journey to find her. With him, he brought a small fortune, for he had profited well from smuggling.

When they finally met, it was to each of them as if they had seen someone risen from the dead. Abraham's heart was lightened and his mind overran with prospects of starting a new life. Together they would go back to the place where they once had a family and, despite the grimness associated with it, rebuild. Indeed, on the day Abraham learned of his wife's pregnancy and turned his back on her tears, most of his acreage was plowed and near his ruined house were boxes of nails and stacks of lumber.

**When he and  
Naomi returned  
to the farm this  
spring, his  
offspring's  
remains told him  
the story.  
John's bones  
were scattered  
near the barn,  
the axe that was  
used to kill him  
lying nearby.**

he watched his cotton rising green and vibrant from the blackness of the earth. Still, there was the thorn of his wife's despair stabbing at the underside of all that hope; for her illness had not passed.

The fall came and he reflected on all that had passed as he now loaded his bundles onto the mule. The planning and labor was mostly done; its fruition realized. The house, although it wasn't as large as the building that stood before the raid, was finished. It rose from the ground gleaming with a new coat of white paint; solid, compact and tidy like a country church. Abraham's crop had been picked and sold, bringing in a decent profit. With all his successes, though, there were still things left undone.

The mule protested as Abraham put the two bundles, wrapped in white cloth and not actually that heavy,

Abraham then toiled through the summer months in a state of productive optimism. With his farm and his wife back, not to mention the expectation of a new child, he was sure that he would regain his former happiness and prosperity. How could that not be so, he thought, as

### FOR A SISTER CONTEMPLATING SUICIDE

Your battered soul entombs itself in a stone wall  
ignoring my love, out here waiting.

It screams to you, but you will not hear,  
will not understand that a Black woman is born to suffer,  
that I suffer with you.

And what you envision as the end of your pain,  
blinds you to what is really the beginning of mine.

You ask me not to forget,  
but all I'll choose to remember,  
is that you left.

You will not go alone.  
They will seal my soul in the coffin with you,  
shovel mounds of dirt on my heart,  
and the 'whys?' will eat at my flesh, forever.

Please sister, save me from being buried alive.  
Press the ear of your battered soul to the wall and listen carefully.  
You will hear the faint, steady sound of my love,  
beating its angry, bloody fists against the stones.

Carol Dixon  
Brooklyn, NY



Photo (c) Curtis Reaves



### The Slim Continued

onto its back. All the labor and planning one undertakes can not prevent the dark things from happening, even when they should have been foreseen. Abraham held a bandanna to his mouth and coughed up some phlegm before he led the mule down into the valley.

Just beyond Abraham's farm lay the bones of a man and a mule, commingled into some kind of a mythical man-beast, in a ditch beside the road. Through the valley stretched the road, yellow and dusty, bordered by fields grown fallow and returning to jungle. On the horizon, a blob, a figure that could be two men running or on some small vehicle appeared. A trail of beige dust smoke marked their passage. Abraham could hear no monkeys chattering or birds singing

in the stygian silence of the road. Perhaps they were there and the singlemindedness of Abraham's purpose prevented him from hearing. Overhead, two kites circled with unperturbed patience.

---

**She seemed lost  
in the long,  
flowing gown and  
the kerchief she  
wore; a figure  
too thin and  
frail to  
conceive of as  
being able to  
bear a child**

---

The mule did not want to

cooperate. Abraham taxed his strength dragging it, cursing it and every other animal of its nature. Sometimes the mule would stop completely and place all the strength of unwillingness against the man's sad determination. Then Abraham would have to kick and beat it until it moved. Sometimes, after an especially sharp kick, the mule would break into a run and Abraham would have to catch and slow the beast for fear of upsetting its precious cargo. Finally, after a couple of miles of this, Abraham tied the animal to a tree and rested himself on the road's shoulder.

From his resting place, Abraham could see the town and the approaching figure was almost upon him. It was a man riding a bicycle.

### SHE WHO BEARS THE THORN

her vulva was clean  
roe turgid and pink  
from the focus of her  
she thought of her mothers  
who bore the thorn  
had the bud of their pleasure  
cut out  
  
their labia sealed like an oath  
with mud and blood  
ash and gut  
the girls before who lay moaning  
men who clicked by in approval  
while wives rocked and fingered  
their own coarse scars  
nothing like those wormed onto flesh  
naming proud lineage and sense of ground  
nothing like those shouting right to birth  
to strut kick take on the sun  
the knife maimed her  
in the name of Allah  
cleansed all desire  
to make her precious  
in the arms of a god  
who knew not her name  
or delight in girlish touch

Terri L. Jewell  
Lansing, MI



Photo (c) Salongo Lee



### The Slim Continued

Tied sideways to the back of the bike, balanced on top of a board, elongated and crosslike, was a bundle wrapped in white cloth. The man was gaunt and emaciated, as though from the slim. Abraham doubted, however, that a man could pedal a bike so vigorously if he was afflicted with the slim. The cyclist looked like a stick figure, with knobby knees and elbows, as he pumped furiously, almost comically, up the road. The highway dust adhering to his sweaty flesh turned his black skin a pasty color. His bicycle and that which he carried on it were also pale with dust. The two men eyed the similarity of their burdens.

"Go with God," the man on the bicycle said to Abraham as he passed. He spoke from behind dust-crusted spectacles.

"You also, brother," Abraham returned. "You also."

As if commanded, Abraham rose to his feet and prodded his obstinate mule on toward town.

Just before the entrance to the village, like a marker, was heaped a huge pile of human bones. Dozens of skulls, thrown upon the crest of the mound, leered eyelessly at the living who dared to pass. These were the martyrs of Abraham's village. They had been slaughtered by soldiers in the same week that Abraham's daughter and youngest son were killed. The tools of their torture were mixed in with the bone. There were wires, pipes, chains and bayonets, rusted to the red-brown color of dried blood, jutting up out of the gruesome shrine. Weeds sprang up through some places near the edge of the pile; green, leafy blades looking queer with life. A generous peppering of ants also haunted the mound, finding what meager bites Abraham could only guess.

The village itself had a look of death about it. Several of the buildings had been burnt to the ground and those still standing were pocked with bullet holes and graffiti obscenities. Only a few people milled about the streets, watching Abraham with haunted faces, acknowledging and not acknowledging him. Some who were dying from the slim laid in doorways and stoops.

Their bodies were wasting away from the lack of medical attention. Many of them were as fleshless as the cyclist Abraham had encountered. They gazed at the bundles Abraham's mule carried with the horror of condemned men watching a peer taken to the executioner.

The doctor who had visited the village said the slim was called AIDS and that it was spread by sex. Abraham had never known Naomi to be one to have sex with strangers but they had been separated for a long time without either knowing that the other was alive; Abraham himself had lived very badly during his sojourn with the smugglers. Maybe this slim

with the smugglers. Maybe this slim was a curse on them for their faithlessness. Then again, maybe it was only another thing one had to accept in this blighted nation.

Abraham felt bile rising in his throat and fought to keep from vomiting. He did not want to look weak in front of these people he did not know. Most of them were newcomers to the village, having arrived after the raid. All of his old friends were dead or dispersed. There was no one in this land of living and dead skeletons to grieve with him as he went to bury his wife and newborn child.



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# Duquesne Light

# Together We Have The Power To Brighten The Future.

Recommended reading for this "Behind Bars" theme.

David L. Rice

Lock This Man Up



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Terse, evocative  
poetry by a Black Panther  
member convicted in a  
policeman's bomb death  
Rice has regularly  
contributed to Shooting  
Star Review and, in this  
fifth poetry collection,  
he develops the range of  
his artistry on many  
levels.

They would get the big black iron skillets red-hot and the grease would pop all over the place. There would be loaves and loaves of Wonder bread and the number three tubs would be filled with cold Pabst Blue Ribbon and Jax beer. Ma Ponk's long front porch was turned into a stage where the local musicians would come to play and sing the blues, and her small front yard was soon filled with colored people.

Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored

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C. Vann Woodward  
Oxford University Press,  
\$24.95 ISBN 0-19-505744-  
9

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Prison Literature in America

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Beacon Press, \$15.95,  
ISBN 0-8070-0206-2

This Steve Biko Prize Winner (Stockholm, 1986) is an autobiographical essay of life in Sophiatown, the heart of South Africa, during the 1950s. This powerful account of a racially mixed community, undermined and forever changed by apartheid, also traces this Black writer and poet's rise to political awareness.



HAIR Continued

"it's gonna rise like yeast bread," her mother replied, her voice high, as though she were being persecuted.

The discussion went on and on, from the breakfast table to the dinner table, with Lena sitting there pretending they weren't talking about her, and Raymond and Edward making monkeyshines when their parents weren't looking, one of them pretending to be a crying Lena getting her hair combed and the other one pretending to be their exasperated mother combing her bales of hair.

The problem was solved serendipitously for Lena and her family when Gail Goode, a shoplifter and loose woman (Lena's family called such women Broadway Jessie's, alluding to the street they walked) strutted into The Place a few days before their departure with her own daughter proudly in tow for Lena's mother to see.

Lena, downtown at work with her mother that day, was playing behind the counter of the liquor store, exploring the everchanging trove of treasures kept on the shelves beneath the cash register--pocketknives, sunglasses, tissues, silver dollars, packs of SenSen, cigarette lighters, torn dollar bills, rusty nails, rolls of pennies, and decks of cards--when she heard the bell on the door ring. She didn't bother to stand up and see who had entered, but she did see her mother, who was sitting near the end of the counter and running the store that day, nearly leap over the counter in her excitement.

"Who did that child's hair like that?" her mother wanted to know immediately.

"Well, good afternoon to you too, Miss Nellie. And how are you today?" Lena heard Gail Goode's slow liquid voice and knew who it belonged to because Gail Goode was the proud owner of one of the biggest asses on Broadway.

"Oh, hey, Gail," her mother greeted the woman perfunctorily. Then, "This your little girl? She shore is cute. Now tell me, who did her hair like that?"

"I did," Gail answered proudly.

All Lena's mother seemed interested in was the child's hairdo. Lena knew it would eventually have something to do with her, so she scrambled from the dirty floor and peeped over the counter.

The little girl standing next to the Broadway Jessie with the enormous behind was a bit smaller than Lena, but her shiny black hair was every bit as long and thick.

Whereas Lena had her hair braided into four thick plaits, this little girl must have had her hair combed into a hundred thin braids cascading down on her shoulders like Shirley Temple curls. Someone had taken the time--Lena imagined that it must have been days--to part off a small section of her hair and braid it, then another small section and braid it, then another and another and another, until the little girl's entire head of thick, strong-looking hair was herded into long, tight manageable plaits that fell from her scalp to the ends of her hair where they curled into wiry little spools.

From behind the counter Lena could tell that the little girl did not like being the center of so much attention. She skipped around and fidgeted behind her mama's big butt to get out of so many lines of vision. But Nellie was having none of that.

"Well, you cute little thing," Lena's mother crooned from her stool at the end of the counter by the plate-glass window. When she wanted to, Nellie could get almost anything she wanted by being sweet. "Come on over here and let me get a good look at you."

"Go on, child," Gail said impatiently. "Don't be acting like a fool when people talk to you."

The child saw she had no choice and peeped around her mother's hips, her head full of thin heavy braids swinging around her ears. Then she moved out to where Lena got her first good look at her and walked slowly over to Nellie with her chin tucked down to her chest and her eyes on the dusty cement floor.

The little girl had on a fancy pink polished cotton dress with a huge sash tied in back that was frilly enough for a party. On her feet she wore pink stretch socks trimmed with a narrow band of white lace and shiny black patent-leather baby dolls that were so free of scuffs that Lena knew they had to be new. And on the very top of her head someone had tied a wide pink satin bow on one of her braids.

Nellie lightly touched the girl's pink hair ribbon with the tips of her fingers and smiled. Lena saw her mother's eye devour the little girl's hairstyle as if she were memorizing it.

"Well, I sure do like your hairdo, young lady," Nellie said to the child, who still hadn't looked up. "I have me a little girl just about your age, too. Come out her, Len, and meet this pretty little girl."

Lena was going through a shy period herself, but after seeing how the other girl caught it for ducking her head behind her mama's big behind, she didn't dare pull the same stunt. So she stepped right out and leaned her back against the Schenley's gin sign pasted on the front of the counter.

"Say hello to the little girl," Nellie prompted.

"Hey," Lena said softly.

The other child looked up at Lena and smiled shyly, then dropped her chin back on her chest.

"Why don't you take Shirley Lee over to the other side and get you and her a nice cold drink," Nellie suggested.

By the time the girls had returned to the liquor store side of The Place with their snacks, negotiations must have been settled, because the next morning Gail Goode drove up to their house in her loud raggedy Chevrolet. She had come to comb Lena's hair into the same 'do that she had given her own daughter.

It hadn't taken days to do it as Lena had imagined, only the entire morning. The tugging and pulling that it entailed hurt Lena's tender scalp as much as ever, but when Gail Goode was finished, Lena couldn't have been happier with the

results. She stood on a chair in front of the small mirror in the downstairs hall, the same mirror where she stood and lipsynched songs from long-playing albums by Dinah Washington and Billie Holliday and Dakota Staton and looked at herself until her mother made her come to dinner.

She danced around all that evening and the next day slinging her tiny braids around her head. Sometimes she whipped them around so sharply that the ends stung her face where they landed. Her brothers swore they were sick of her and couldn't wait until she slung her hair around one time too many and her head went flying off into a corner.

Even her grandmother told her that if she didn't stop swinging her handful of braid around her ears like that she was going to get a headache for seven years like you got when you threw your hair outdoors and the birds used it for their nests. But she smiled when she said it because she thought Lena looked cute as a button with her braids. The old lady tried to count them, but when she got up to two hundred, Lena wouldn't sit still any longer and Grandmama lost count.

Lena didn't care what anyone said or thought. She was so pleased with her new hairdo that when she awoke the following morning and felt all the braids on her cheeks, she giggled. She felt she looked like a whole new exotic person.

When she overheard her mother tell her father, "And the best part is, no matter how wet she gets her hair, we won't even have to comb it again till we get back from vacation and she'll still look nice," Lena knew this new hairstyle was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Maybe I am really lucky, like everyone say, 'cause I was born with a veil over my face, she thought. And my luck just took a while to start.

That very afternoon she put her new hairdo to the supreme test. While everyone else was off in different parts of the house preparing for the trip or ignoring it, she went into the kitchen pantry and closed the door. She stripped off her playsuit and panties and stepped into the striped tank-style swimsuit and white flip-flops her mother had just bought for her. Then she'd slipped out of the pantry, through the kitchen door, and down the back steps, peeping around corners and looking over her shoulder all the way to the water spigot under the back steps to make sure she wasn't seen.

She went straight for the water spigot and turned it on full force. Not giving herself time to lose her nerve, Lena ran full steam into the spinning jet spray of the lawn sprinkler.

The cold water hit her right in the chest and sent a shiver through her system. She screamed in shock and delight. As she turned and came back, the sprinkler spun around to hit her from behind, and she screamed again. When the stream of water came around a third time, it hit her on her butt and legs. Now she was completely wet from shoulders to feet, and she just laughed.

The fourth time, she ran into the spray headon, and she yelped again when the water hit her in the right ear and soaked her face and hair. There was no turning back now, so she decided to enjoy this new experience.

She danced in the water's spray each time it came around, holding her hands out to make it cascade over her head. She pretended that the white stone birdbath in the

middle of the yard was her partner and she danced around it, giggling at the sound of the drops of water hitting the surface of the water in the bowl. Usually when she danced, everyone laughed at her lack of coordination. But dancing in the water made Lena feel like a ballerina. The two redbirds--a bright crimson male and his mottled brown mate--that came each evening and bathed in the spray of the sprinkler appeared at the edge of the birdbath from the pine trees above and jumped around the rim of the bowl as if they were joining Lena in her dance.

She didn't notice she had an audience until she heard her mother's voice.

"Lena, you must be mad!" Nellie screamed from the porch where she stood with her grandmother and brothers beside her. "Get out of that water, get out of that water this instant!"

Lena had one wild idea of playing on as if she hadn't heard or seen her mother, but thought better of it when she remembered how angry her mother got when one of the boys ran from her while she was trying to whip him. She scampered out of the sprinkler's spray and up on the porch dripping wet. Before her mother could get her hands on her, however, Lena began explaining.

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**"When you been kept from something so long, sometimes you don't know how to act when you get to it."**

---

"But, Mama, you said it yourself, I heard you say it to Daddy, you said, 'Lena can get her hair as wet as she wants and we won't even have to comb it.' You said it, I heard you. You said it."

Her mother stopped in midgrasp, her hand about to encircle Lena's skinny arm. Nellie turned to Grandmama with her eyebrows raised slightly, and the older woman laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

Lena's eyes danced from her mother's face to her grandmother's face in expectation.

By the time Nellie said, "Go on, girl enjoy yourself," the boys had peeled down to their undershorts and beat Lena back to the sprinkler, where they ran and played all afternoon until their fingertips and toes were wrinkled.



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# TO LIFE

Harvey Adams  
Pittsburgh NAACP

## To My Father/For Myself

Sad eyes, like thick, black sand  
pull me deeper into your private pain,  
rising and clawing at my waist.  
I panic, struggle to free myself  
but fighting only pulls me deeper.

I feel myself consumed,  
imagine myself slipping beneath the surface  
choking, suffocating on the black sand  
seeping into my mouth, my ears, my nostrils.

I search the sad eyes for understanding  
and understand the sadness is fear,  
hard, rock-like, impenetrable.

My feet somehow find this firmness  
and trembling, unsure legs steady themselves  
as finally I begin to realize  
that I can stand on your fear,  
climb out of your darkness,  
and save myself.

Carol Dixon  
Brooklyn, NY

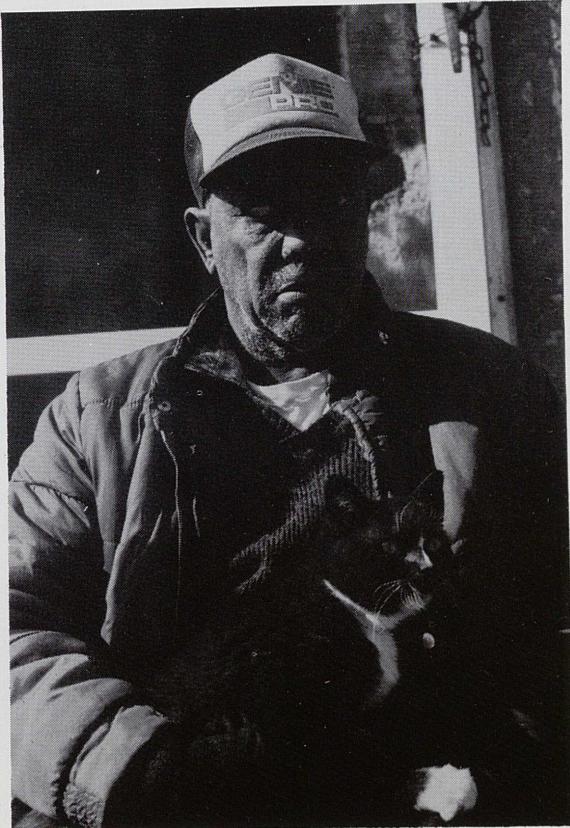
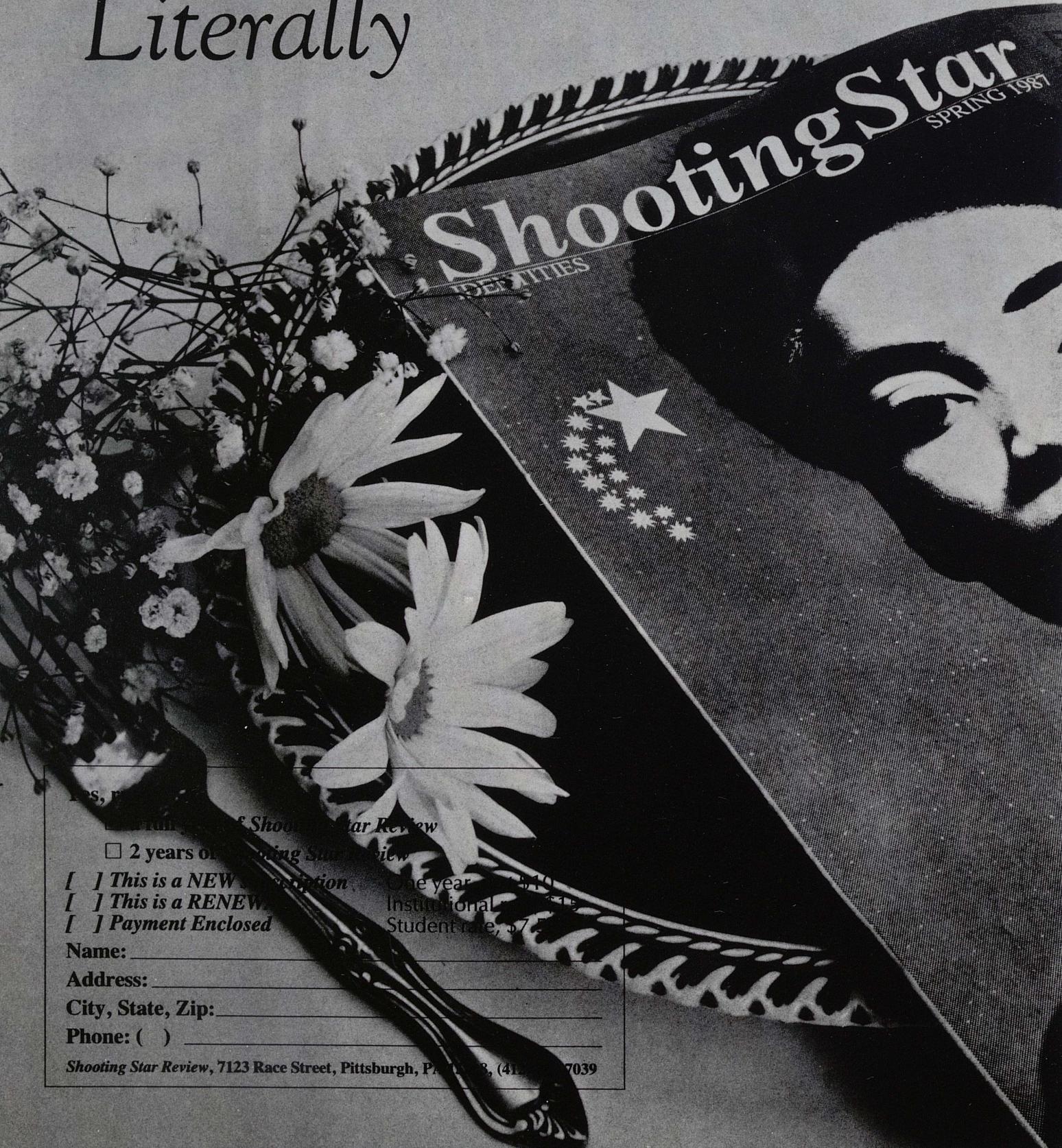


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*Shooting Star Review* (Vol. 1, No. 1; Spring 1987). ISSN: 0892-1407. Editor: Sandra Gould Ford. *Shooting Star Review*, 7123 Race Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15208. Quarterly.

The *Shooting Star Review* is the latest quarterly devoted to the black literary arts. It publishes original fiction and poetry, along with essays on black culture. Rich with illustrations that evoke pride in black accomplishments, it also includes honest graphics that portray realistic views of street life. The mixture of drawings and photographs is worth noting, as they establish the feel of this publication, promoting a spirit of openness and warmth, and the sudden discoveries implied in its title. The general essays have explored gospel music, medical problems of blacks, the African origin of Egyptian civilization, and prostitution. The poems have touched on green-bean snapping and the life of black women. The reprinting of a story, "The Fall of Adam," by Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932), rescues this amusing tale from the oblivion of old anthologies. Along with book reviews, the journal includes reviews of the performing arts, such as Rob Penny's review of the New York production of August Wilson's important play, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." This is a swinging communicator, infused with serious intent, a jazz note in words that should be on the current periodical shelves of all libraries that seek an investment in black creativity.

Reprinted from April, 1989 Small Press Magazine



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