

ShootingStar

African American Literary Magazine

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REVIEW

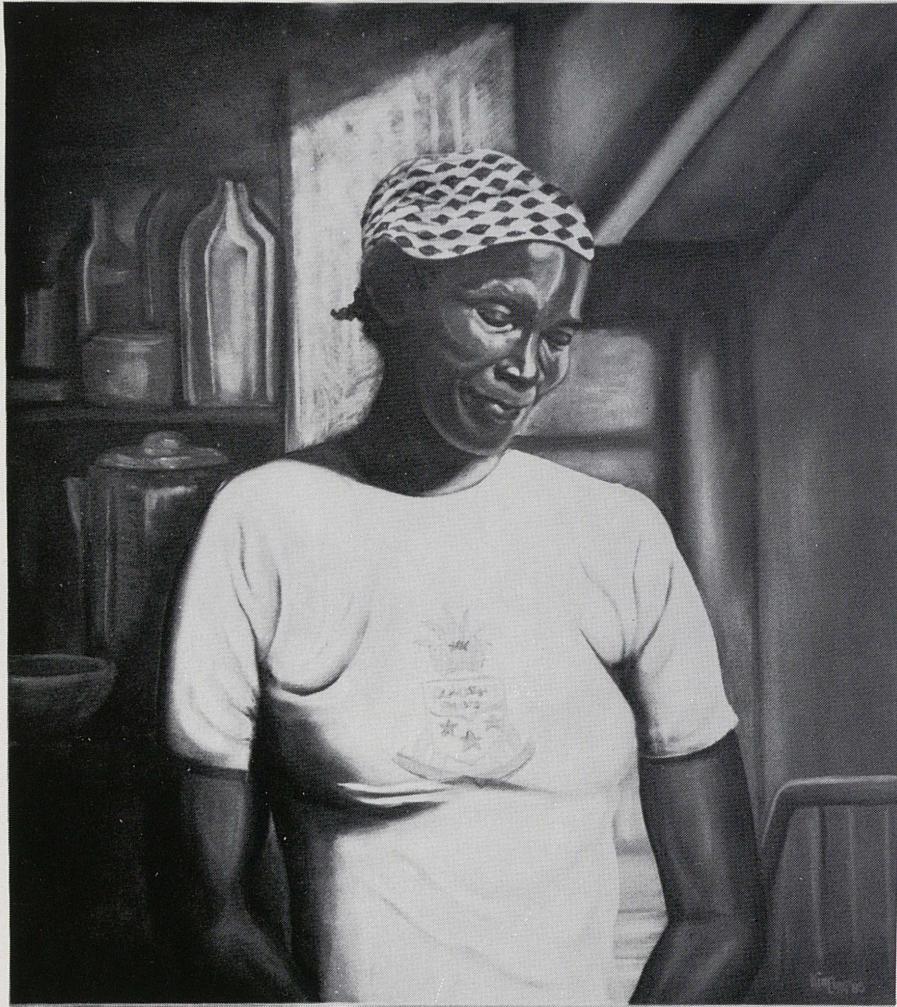
Autumn, 1989

Features in this issue
include creations by

Toi Derricote
Marita Golden
Shay Youngblood

DNEIGHT 84

A Salute
to African-
American
Women Writers



DAY'S WORK

*it was her that connected night
to the next day, daylight
to the night before, havin' walked
half-asleep from our place
to the kitchen*

*when the sun broke on that house like neon in the daytime
it stood there,
square and clean and straight as good white teeth,
no corners unsure of their spindly legs;
no foundation testing the next rain.
its broad, unyielding back wall
caught the sun
and threw the glass crumbs
back to us*

*her sweat commanded the noon-high house
as she swept the big veranda,
trying to catch bony black sight of her childrens' legs
pecking the dirt lane. cotton dresses in the chicken yard.*

*she picked his lemonade clean of imperfections,
scrubbed toilets and children,
kissed the iron many times with moist fingers
and watched it turn hard clothes to butter.
ending the day
in the kitchen,
with carrots and apples in the folds
of her apron,
the sun fell behind her shoulders.*

*Standing in the cedar closet,
she heard herself call out for God
and the syrup-heavy sound of her children.*

FOUNDER'S STATEMENT



Sandra Gould Ford

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- ★ The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
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*African-American People
are more than a minority.*

Welcome to *Shooting Star Review's* "Salute to African-American Women Writers." This theme was first suggested by Jane Todd Cooper of Philadelphia almost two years ago. Immediately and enthusiastically, Carla Du Pree from Washington, DC joined in the development. Knowing the talents and capabilities of these fine writers (who are also Founding Editors of *Shooting Star*), I've looked forward to this issue, and the results are inspiring. Please savor the introductory thoughts from each Guest Editor and enjoy the fine works that follow.

Sandra *

In gathering fiction for this special issue, I discovered writers' collectives throughout the country where women meet in homes, church basements and community centers to cheer each other on. To spark ideas when words falter. To say, with pride and tenderness, "Move over Alice, Toni, Gloria. You haven't told my story yet."

They inherit family secrets. They listen well and accept the responsibilities of our histories. They become so attuned to what ails us, that they know first hand what pain is and the tortured art of healing. When people ask what they do, they mention occupations like lawyer, broker and computer specialist. But "writer" wags on the tips of their tongues because there is no satisfaction from writing but to write.

The hardest part about compiling this issue was realizing that there wasn't enough room for an excerpt from Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* (Viking, 1989), or for Octavia Butler who expands our possibilities with *Imago* (Warner, 1989). In upcoming issues, we look forward to reading Linda Beatrice Brown, Carolivia Herron, J. California Cooper and other writers whose characters are right here, rummaging around in the thick of things, making life happen. We'll discover writers who will help shape future literature.

This Salute to African-American Women Writers applauds the dream makers and truth sayers. This issue allows us to wrap our arms around their words and massage their visions into our lives.

Carla R. DuPree
Fiction Editor

This issue celebrates the power and diversity of African-American women writers. Some poems pay tribute to our foremothers and spirit guides, writers whose brilliance is established like the remarkable Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde.

Many of the poems are by writers who are passionately concerned with family, with community, with the recent and ancient past and, in true griot style, with memory. From Aisha Eshe, we have a wail about child abuse. From Nzadi Keita, a lively celebration of sisterhood among little girls. From Toi Derricote, a poignant evocation of color caste in a Black family. From Valerie Lawrence a chant about the braids that bind the generations.

Page by page, this issue is a tribute to our fierce/tender singers. Keep your ears and hearts open to the many women whose voices are changing the character of American poetry. Yes, I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange, of Sonia Sanchez and of Pulitzer prize winner Rita Dove; of June Jordan, of American Book Award winner Ai and of Lucille Clifton. But I'm also thinking of Cleopatra Mathis, Colleen McElroy, Nubia Kai, Harryette Mullen, Rikki Light and of that gifted, deep river of a singer, Margaret Walker. All are poets whom I love, whom I wouldn't want to live without.

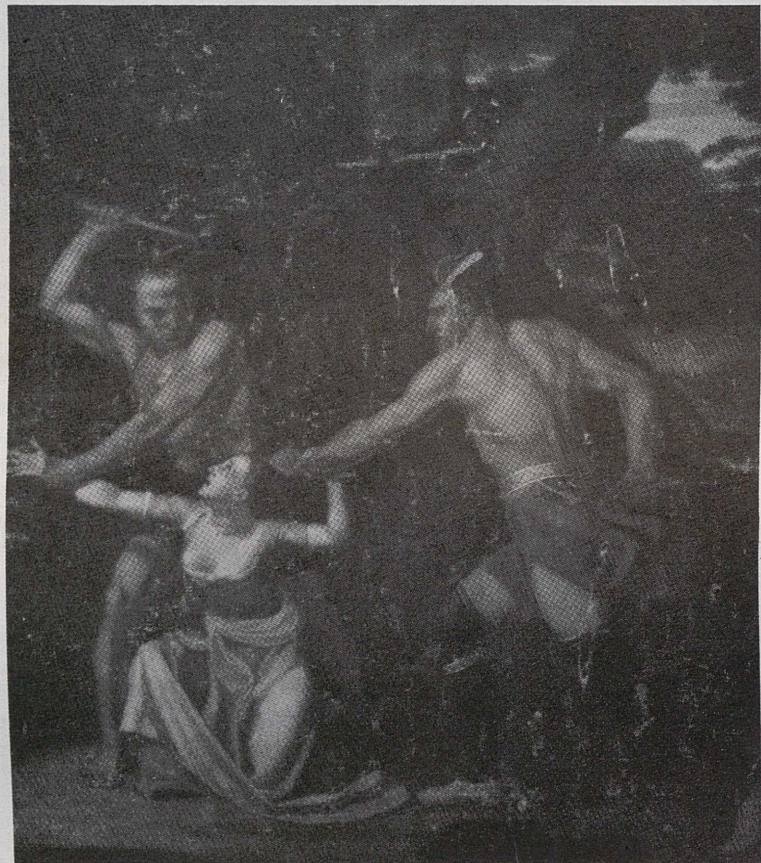
I imagine you have your essential sister singers, too. Let us know who they are so that each voice in the chorus is named.

Jane Todd Cooper
Poetry Editor

Shooting Star Productions, Inc. is a non-profit corporation that exists to promote artistic and educational outlets for expression of the African-American experience through production and distribution of publications, video and other media.

Notes on the history of African-American Women Writers

African-American women have long made distinguished contributions to this nation's literary treasury. The first-known creative writing from an American of African descent was penned by Lucy Terry (1730-1821) in 1746. Lucy was just 16 when she wrote "Bars Fight." She was owned by Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, Massachusetts. Ten years after she wrote this doggerel, and 30 years before the American Revolutionary War, Miss Terry was freed to marry Abijah Prince, a free African-American man. Her verse was not published until 1893, however, or 147 years after its creation.



Bars Fight

*August 'twas, the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six,
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valient men to slay,
The names of whom I'll not leave out:
Samuel Allen like a hero fount,
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shall we behold;
Eleazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately;
Oliver Amsden, he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain;
Simeon Amsden they found dead,
Not many rods off from his head;
Adonijah Gillet, we do hear,
Did lose his life, which was so dear;
John Saddler fled across the water,
And so escaped the dreadful slaughter:
Eunice Allen see the Indians comeing,
And hoped to save herself by running,
And had not her petticoats stopt her,
The awful creatures had not cotched her,
And tommyhawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead;
Young Samuel Allen, oh! lack-a-day,
Was taken and carried to Canada.*



Shooting Star

REVIEW

SHOOTING STAR REVIEW
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Sandra Gould Ford

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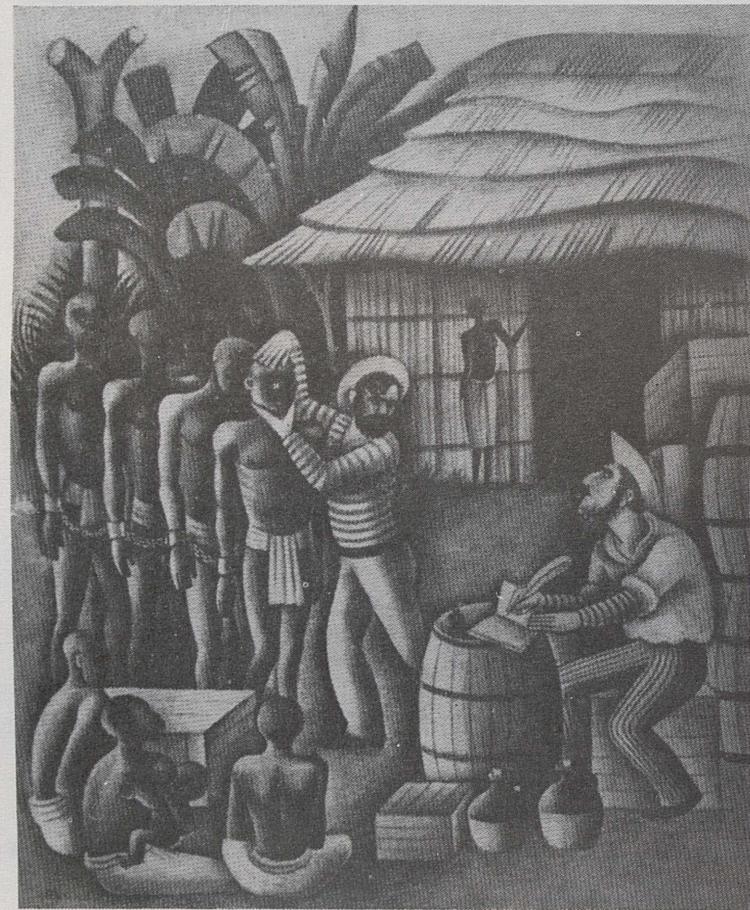
Notes On History

Continued from page 4

Phillis Wheatley was the third, known, Black literary talent to emerge in this country, although she was the first to see her work published. Learned men of Miss Phyllis Wheatley's era (1754-1784) were so surprised by her talent, that a group of 18 of Massachusetts' finest interviewed her privately before publishing her book. The results of the interview were revealed by this "Attestation":

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa...

The young Miss Wheatley was so affected by European-based theology that her poetry renounces her own racial and cultural heritage and supports 17th-century attempts to justify slavery as a salvation from heathenism:



On Being Brought from Africa to America

*Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye;
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refined, and join the angelic train.*

Congratulations to
Shooting Star Review
and its
Salute to African-American
Women Writers

BLACK WOMEN'S POLITICAL CRUSADE

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By the 19th century, the religious basis for slavery faded. The sciences were used to deny humane consideration for Black Africans. As treatment of Black people deteriorated, in part due to fears raised by several slave revolts, many Black writers of the early and middle 1800s (e.g., William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, Solomon Northrup, Samuel Ringgold Ward and William and Ellen Craft) worked to end slavery using moral arguments. Unfortunately, their rationale could not sway sufficient opinion to prevent the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision. This case, and the Fugitive Slave Law were two examples of a national mindset that, at worst, perceived Black people as genetically inferior to white people and, at best, declared that slaves were chattel.



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was one of the 19th century's major African-American literary voices. She was a poet, essayist and novelist whose protest works and lectures (in both the North and the South) dealt with abolition—as in the following poem—women's issues and temperance.

The Slave Auction

*The sale began—young girls were there,
Defenceless in their wretchedness,
Whose stifled sobs of deep despair
Revealed their anguish and distress.*

*And mothers stood with streaming eyes,
And saw their dearest children sold;
Unheeded rose their bitter cries,
While tyrants bartered them for gold.*

*And woman, with her love and truth—
For these in sable forms may dwell—
Gaz' on the husband of her youth,
With anguish none may paint or tell.*

*And men, whose sole crime was their hue,
The impress of their Maker's hand,
And frail and shrinking children, too,
Were gathered in that mournful band.*

*Ye who have laid your love to rest,
And wept above their lifeless clay,
Know not the anguish of that breast,
Whose lov'd are rudely torn away.*

*Ye may not know how desolate
Are bosoms rudely forced to part,
And how a dull and heavy weight
Will press the life-drops from the heart.*

Continued on page 8

Just as a woman was the first African-American to write as well as publish poetry, a woman, Ann Plato, was also the first Black American to publish an essay

collection and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) was the first known black-written novel published in this country.

OUR NIG

Mag Smith, My Mother

*Oh, Grief beyond all other griefs, when fate
First leaves the young heart lone and desolate
In the wide world, without that only tie
For which it loved to live or feared to die;
Lorn as the hung-up lute, that ne'er hath spoken
Since the sad day its master-chord was broken!*

Moore

Lonely Mag Smith! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart. It was not always thus. She had a loving, trusting heart. Early deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives, she was left to guide her tiny boat over life's surges alone and inexperienced. As she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for, there fell on her ear the music of love, awaking an intensity of emotion long dormant. It whispered of an elevation before unaspired to; of ease and plenty . . .

Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935), at one time the wife of Paul Laurence Dunbar, wrote during "The Black Woman's Era" (1890 to 1910). Although most of her fiction was non-racial, in Mrs. Dunbar-Nelson's later years, her essays had decidedly racial themes. From her 1899 volume *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories* comes this little work:

The Praline Woman

The praline woman sits by the side of the Archbishop's quaint little old chapel on Royal Street, and slowly waves her latanier fan over the pink and brown wares.

"Pralines, pralines. Ah, ma'amzelle, you buy? S'il vous plait, ma'amzelle, ces pralines, dey be fine, ver' fresh."

"Mais non, maman, you are not sure?"

"Sho', chile, ma bebe, ma petite, she put dese up hissef. He's hans' so small, ma'amzelle, lak you's, mais brune. She put dese up dis morn'. You tak' none? No husban' fo' you den!"

"Ah, ma petite, you tak'? Cinq sous, bebe may le bon Dieu keep you good!"

"Mais oui, madame, I know you etranger. You don' look lak dese New Orleans peop'. You lak' dose Yankee dat come down 'fo' de war."

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, chimes the Cathedral bell across Jackson Square, and the praline woman crosses herself.

"Hail, Mary, full of grace—

"Pralines, madame? You buy lak' dat? Dix sous, madame, an' one lil' piece fo' lagniappe fo' madame's lil' bebe. Ah, c'est bon!"

"Pralines, pralines, so fresh, so fine! M'sieu would lak' some fo' he's lil' gal' at home? Mais non, what's dat you say? She's daid! Ah, m'sieu, 't is my lil' gal what died long year ago. Misere, misere!"

"Here come dat lazy Indien squaw. What she good fo', anyhow? She jes' sit lak dat in de French Market an' sell her file, an' sleep, sleep, sleep, lak' so in he's blanket. Hey, dere, you, Tonita, how goes you' bee兹ness?"

"Pralines, pralines! Holy Father, you give me dat blessin' sho'? Tak' one, I know you lak dat w'ite one. It tas' good, I know, bien."

"Pralines, madame? I lak' you' face. What fo' you wear black? You' lil' boy daid? You tak' one, jes' see how it tas'. I had one lil' boy once, he jes' grow 'twell he's big lak' dis, den one day he tak' sick an' die. Oh, madame, it mos' brek my po' heart. I burn candle in St. Rocque, I say my beads, I sprinkle holy water roun' he's bed; he jes' lay so, he's eyes turn up, he say 'Maman, maman,' den he die! Madame, you tak' one. Non, non, no l'argent, you tak' one fo' my lil' boy's sake."

"Pralines, pralines, m'sieu? Who mak' dese? My lil' gal, Didele, of co'se. Non, non, I don't mak' no mo'. Po' Tante Marie get too ol'. Didele? She's one lil' gal I 'dopt. I see her one day in de strit. He walk so; hit col' she shiver, an' I say, 'Where you gone, lil' gal?' and he can't tell. He jes' crip close to me, an' cry so! Den I tak' her home wid me, and she says he's name Didele. You see dey wa'nt nobody dere. My lil' gal, she's daid of de yellow fever; my lil' boy, he's daid, po' Tante Marie all alone. Didele, she grow fine, she keep house an' mek' pralines. Den, when night come, she sit wid he's guitar an' sing,"



"Tu l'aime ces trois jours,
Tu l'aime ces trois jours,
Ma coeur a toi,
Ma coeur a toi,
Tu l'aime ces trois jours!"

"Ah, he's fine gal, is Didele!"

"Pralines, pralines! Dat lil' cloud, h'it look lak' rain, I hope no."

"Here come dat lazy I'ishman down de strit. I don't lak' I'ishman, me, non, dey so funny. One day one I'ishman, he say to me, 'Auntie, what fo' you talk so?' and I jes' say back, 'What fo' you say "Faith an' be jabers"?' Non, I don't lak' I'ishman, me!"

"Here come de rain! Now I got fo' to go. Didele, she be wait fo' me. Down h'it come! H'it fall in de Meeseesip, an' fill up—up—so, clean to de levee, den we have big crivasse, an' po' Tante Marie float away. Bon jour, madame, you come again? Pralines! Pralines!"



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Notes On History
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The New Negro Renaissance was the next great era in African-American culture. The early 1920s produced one of the greatest surges of interest in Africa and any remnants of that heritage still residing in its American-born descendants. Although the efforts of the white-run American Colonization Society to remove freed slaves to Africa had soured many Black people on that subject.

It wasn't until Marcus Garvey's 'Return to Africa' movement stoked the hopes of African-American poor Blacks, that Africa became attractive. And when W.E.B. DuBois led four Pan African Conferences, the Black bourgeois' imagination produced literature seeking linkages to and celebrating an abandoned heritage. This 1927 poem by Helene Johnson reflects that period.



This nation has been blessed with an outstanding literary tradition created by American women of African descent. From Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley to Gwendolyn Brooks and Rita Dove... from Ann Plato, Emma Dunham Kelley and Amelia Johnson to Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and Gloria Naylor, African-American women—like those published in this issue—continue evolving, defining and refining themselves and their times. For more than two centuries, their vision and eloquence has preserved African-American culture. We admire and salute these talent-blessed women.

Bottled

*Upstairs on the third floor
Of the 135th Street library
In Harlem, I saw a little
Bottle of sand, brown sand
Just like the kids make pies
Out of down at the beach.
But the label said: "This
Sand was taken from the Sahara desert."
Imagine that! The Sahara desert!
Some bozo's been all the way to Africa to get some sand.*

*And yesterday on Seventh Avenue
I saw a darky dressed fit to kill
In yellow gloves and swallow-tail coat
And twirling a cane. And everyone
Was laughing at him. Me too,
At first, till I saw his face
When he stopped to hear a
Organ grinder grind out some jazz.
Boy! You should a seen that darky's face!
It just shone. Gee, he was happy!
And he began to dance. No
Charleston or Black Bottom for him.
No sir. He danced just as dignified
And slow. No, not slow either.
Dignified and proud! You couldn't
Call it slow, not with all the
Cuttin' up he did. You would a died to see him.*

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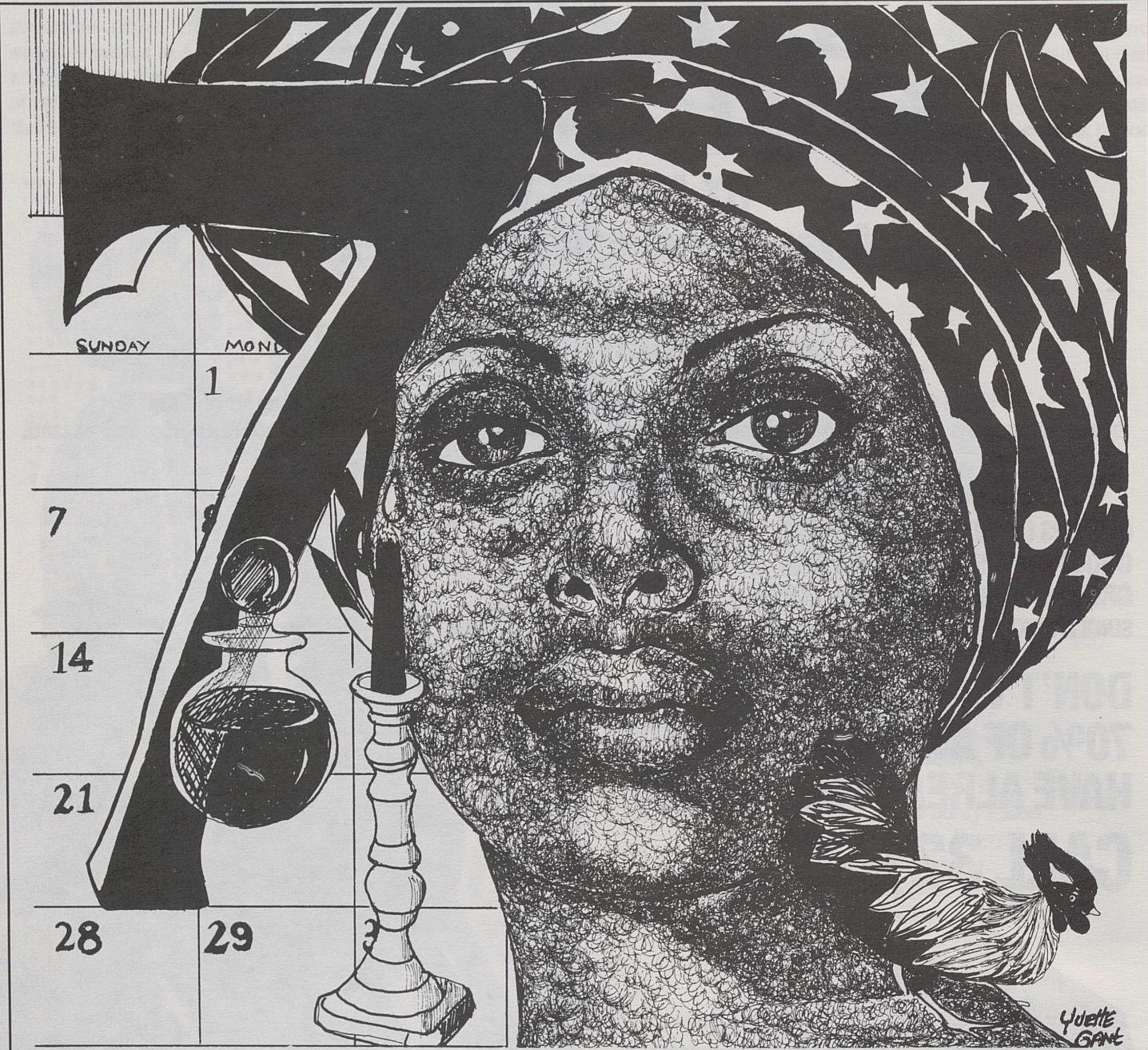


Illustration by Yvette Gant

The yard wasn't very
big, but on every
inch cept the brick
walkway, a plant,
herb or flower grew.



Watch the Spirit MOVE

Saturday mornings I watched Aunt Vi at the kitchen sink filling a mop bucket with hot soapy water. She reached up on one of the high kitchen shelves and poured a few drops of clear liquid from a little brown bottle into the water and sloshed it around with the mop head. The clear liquid was holy water Aunt Vi stole from the Catholic church. She was getting ready to clean her house like she did every new moon using the holy water to protect the house from evil.

Aunt Vi mystified me. Like Big Mama, she was a Christian woman. Yet she believed in roots and spirit work and depended on ancestor spirits to advise, herb and root medicines to heal and protect, and dazzling candlelit rituals to make the spirit move.

"Aunt Vi, why you need protection? Don't God hear you when you pray?" I asked her one time.

Watch the Spirit MOVE

"Yeah, baby, he can hear me, but even God need a backup," she said, and kept on mopping.

Aunt Vi lived down by the railroad tracks in a tumbledown house in the middle of the block. Her house was set apart by the wooden picket fence with faded designs in all colors painted on every picket. A pile of rocks, painted white, sat on the ground just left of the fence gate opening. Aunt Vi said they were another kind of protection. A cow's tongue sewn together with hot red cayenne pepper and tacks folded inside were buried under there to keep her name out of the mouths of gossips.

The yard wasn't very big, but on every inch 'cept the brick walkway, a plant, herb or flower grew. Tall stalks of yellow sunflowers, purple morning glories, and poppies, a corner of cooking herb mint, dill, basil, hot red and green pepper plants and a corner of raggedy weed-looking plants that Aunt Vi used in her root work.

The house had once been painted a dark gray with white trim, but then it looked black and sooty with gray trim. It leaned to one side, like the wind had whispered in its windows. Five wooden steps led up to the porch that stood off the ground on stacks of bricks

by Shay Youngblood

Watch the Spirit MOVE

at each corner and all around the house. Me and my Cousin DeeDee used to play under the cool shadows of the house peeking up through the floorboards and listening in on Aunt Vi's rituals. Sometimes she would catch us and pour cold water through the cracks over our heads.

A rusted horseshoe hung over the doorway. Two cane-bottom rocking chairs sat on the porch to keep off too many visitors at a time.

"Folks is what keep bad luck in your house. I try to keep 'em out of my house and my business."

Aunt Vi's house was comfortable and full of things to admire, look at and touch. It always smelled like the herbs and flowers she kept hanging on nails all over the kitchen.

"When I was a lil girl we didn't have money to be buying all them fancy and highly expensive doctor medicines. Root medicine work better anyhow. Root medicine older than dirt," Aunt Vi would say.

The bedroom was my favorite place in her house. There was a big iron bed with a mahogany chifferob and vanity to match. The vanity was a special place of honor. An altar was set up there in front of the three

Continued on page 14

Watch the Spirit Move

Continued from page 13

"Aunt Vi, why you need protection? Don't God hear you when you pray?"

"When I was a lil girl we didn't have money to be buying all them fancy and highly expensive doctor medicines."

angled mirrors, colored candles, trays of ashes and herbs, incense, river rocks and sea shells, bones from small animals, a small brass bell to call the spirits, and small dishes of fruit, food for the spirits when they came.

When Big Mama was working and Aunt Mae had company or a party going on, I would be sent to Aunt Vi's house. Sometimes Aunt Vi would take me with her to find ingredients for her root work. We'd go to East Winston cemetery for graveyard dirt and blackberries, or down by the river among the water snakes and prickly briar bushes for special plants like poke salad, which she used as a laxative.

This particular Saturday after Aunt Vi finished cleaning the house we went upstairs to her bedroom.

"I'll never forget it as long as I live, the day that led Franklin, my first husband, to go see Sister Cora Walker Saint for a reading," Aunt Vi said, kicking off her house shoes and curling up on her big iron bed with a cup of bay leaf tea. She shifted her weight on one elbow and leaned back into the soft feather pillows with her eyes closed. I lay facing her propped up on one elbow with a jelly glass of my own.

"It all started 'cause Franklin's favorite cousin Showboat was getting married. Frankie wanted to be sharp for the wedding. So months ahead of time he git a advance on his pay to buy a new suit. He was proud of that suit. Bought it at Shomburg's down on Broadway. It was a sharp thing, gray sharkskin with big padded shoulders and

long skinny lapels. The pants was pencil peg-legs, and he got a blood red shirt and tie to wear with it. He even went down to the pawn shop and got hisself some pretty imitation pearl cufflinks. He looked good in that suit. I must admit he was a handsome man...not bad to wake up to in the morning. That Franklin was a good, hard-working man. He didn't go to church though, too superstitious to step on a crack in the sidewalk. Always did put his clothes on left side first. Left sock, left shoe, left leg first.

After the wedding Franklin kept his suit in the plastic bag it come in. It was hung up in the chifferobe which we had to leave in the hallway outside our bedroom cause it was too big to keep in the room. Seem like he was always taking it out to look at. Way over in the winter, when he heard that his uncle was at death's door, Franklin went to the chifferobe to take a look at it. He'd done bought a black shirt to wear with it to the funeral.

"At that time we was living in that big, old two-story house on South Street. Franklin's cousin Loreen and her husband Brewster Mack was living with us cause they didn't have no place and Loreen was pregnant again. It was kinda nice having company during the day. Loreen the one learned me how to play cards and smoke with her fast self. She'd do my hair and sometimes I'd look after her lil baby boy. Brewster worked a day job in a barbershop downtown shining shoes and sweeping up the floor.

He was a quiet feller, kept to hisself mostly. Franklin worked in a garage fixing cars,

and Brewster was always teasing him bout being a grease monkey. Anyhow, Franklin went to the chifferobe and found that his suit, shirt, tie, imitation pearl cufflinks, and his Stacy Adams was gone. That man let out a cry to raise the dead. Loreen and Brewster had done took the baby to the country fair, but I knowed it woulda scared them bad as me.

"Woman, where my suit?" he hollered.

"I was out on the front porch and I run in to find him standing in front of the chifferobe. He asked me again, and I told him I ain't been near his suit. The man almost cry. He looked over every inch of the closet and all our rooms. He was still looking when Loreen, Brewster, and the baby come in. Course they say they ain't seen it neither. This thing worried Franklin so. Bout three days later he come home with a paper put out on the street by them spiritual advisers.

"The paper say something like: How many times you seen ads in newspapers, on flyers and in folks front yards promising to tell your future, heal all wounds, and destroy your enemies? Rev. Sister Cora Walker Saint



Woodcut images by Toni Truesdale

brings to you the answers to the mysteries of life. She seeks to help people who have been crossed, can't hold money, want luck, want their loved ones back, want to stop nature problems, get rid of strange sickness, or find something they have lost. If you are seeking a sure fire way to gain financial aid, peace, love, and prosperity in the home, you need to see this woman of God today! Be amazed at the results gotten by Rev. Sister Cora. Satisfaction guaranteed. Then it give her route number in Zebulon, Georgia.

"At the time I wasn't a believer, so I bust out laughing when Franklin told me he was going down to see this woman to find out about his suit. He find out something alright. After she took his five dollars she tell him he find all the things he missing under his own house in seven days time if he do everything to the letter that she tell him. He was to wring the neck of a rooster and sprinkle the blood on the front steps, light certain kinda candles, and rub confusion oil on his forehead to help him think clear and untangle the mystery. Didn't take long. Day four of all this oil and candle business Loreen and Brewster move down to Vidalia., Brewster say he got a job picking onions. I was sorry to see 'em go. I knowed it be lonesome and quiet with just the two of us.

"On the seventh day, Franklin was downtown looking for a new suit to wear to his uncle's funeral when he saw his Stacy Adams and pearl cufflinks in the window of a pawn shop. The suit, shirt and tie had been sold the day before. Come to find out it was Brewster who'd done pawned them things. Just like Sister Cora said, it was found under the house, under a snake living in the house to be exact. Well, Franklin wasn't one to let sleeping dogs lie. He was hooked then. I begged him not to, but he went back to Sister Cora to try to get revenge on Brewster. She give him some more things to do—boil turtle eggs till they was black, burn something belong to Brewster, light more candles and more incense. Ten dollars was her fee that time. It work, too.

First thing to happen, Loreen run off wid a soldier and left Brewster with the three babies, then he got beat up by the Klan, almost killed, then he lost his job and come back to Princeton with them three children

looking like a family of rag pickers. What could we do but take 'em in? They was blood, family. Brewster begged Franklin's forgiveness for taking his suit, said he owed money to gangsters and they had threatened to kill him. Brewster had lost everything. We was taking care of him and the children cause he couldn't keep a job and was on the verge of losing his mind, when Franklin realize he'd gone too far. It was all coming back on him: evil don't get nothing but evil.

"The third time Franklin went to Sister Cora, she charged him fifteen dollars to reverse the spell on Brewster, and for free she give him a lesson on the principles of root work. The main one being that by putting bad luck on a person, a negative, it was bound to come back full circle. In other words, you get out what you put in. After that Franklin never asked for nothing more than good luck and good health. Brewster finally got another job and another woman and went on with his life. Lord, that Sister Cora shore could make the spirit move."



Shay Youngblood was born in Columbus, Georgia, and was raised by a family of loving, old, Black women. Her short stories and poetry have appeared in *Essence*, *Catalyst*, *Conditions* magazines and the Greenfield Review Press Anthology, *The Stories We Hold Secret*. A collection of her short fiction, *The Big Mama Stories*, was published by Firebrand Books (Ithaca, NY) Spring 1989. Her original play, *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, adapted from her short stories, was professionally produced by the Horizon Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia. Ms. Youngblood lives in Atlanta.



Photo © by Lonnie Graham

AFTER I READ THESE LINES FROM AUDRE LORDE'S "PROLOGUE"

*"Yet when I was a child
whatever my mother thought
would mean survival
made her try to beat me whiter
every day."*

*Maybe that's why Momma and
Aunt Marge
lashed that brown leather belt
across my back my legs my
shoulders
Maybe they just wanted to lift
some of that color off my skin
Maybe they just wanted to pull
some of those kinks outta my hair
Maybe they thought if they beat me
long enough
my nose would rise up to meet the
lash
of that brown leather belt*

Aisha Eshe
Philadelphia, PA

H A REARRANGING D S

by HELEN E. LEE



"Haint" by Kimberly Camp

Autumn has a different feel to it. The knotting of cord around a package of months gathered together in a shifting balance. The pause between is and was.

And so it seemed, that fall five years ago, that I heard her dying in the turning of the leaves, in their touching ground almost silently, in the sound of shoes grinding red and yellow dust. As the trees staged a colorful revolt and then resigned themselves to loss, November came in folding, and announced the closing of my daughterhood.

We still gather persistently on holidays, a shrinking group, keeping safe the concept of family, pulling each other close with custom and a simple grace. And having come around again to Thanksgiving, today we will make a center out of our ring of joined hands.

The doorbell rings and I send Lisa to welcome my sister, Gina, and her kids. When she returns I pull my child between my knees, push her soft springy hair back from her face, and return her anklets to a neat fold. Then I nudge her gently towards them and despite her twisting foot and flushing face, announce gold stars and other tender triumphs.

After kindling a conversation, I jump up to baste the turkey and bring Dad tobacco and pipe. Spent from the effort of shaving and dressing on an off day, he sits where he passes all unrelegated time since her death, looking from his armchair at seasons turning. Over the years they have taken on each others' forms... seat sunken, worn arms covered with doilies for when company comes.

He always did go straight for that chair as he came in from work. Exchanging his lunch box for the evening news, he waited for her, whose arrival had preceded his by half an hour, to ask from the kitchen about his day and to finish the



family meal. Occasionally he called out to her across the arid landscape of their relationship with noteworthy happenings from the printed page. As long as he had the correct address, she would be there. A fixture of his world. He would have been as confused to enter after work and find her missing as to come home and find the furniture rearranged.

I used to wonder if their marriage had always been so parched. Had their love been cast from the very start into its shape of unwavering routine, their prescription for disorder? After dinner, they watched their favorite shows and exchanged notes on layoffs, marriages and children born. She then retired with *Reader's Digest* and left him to the paper and TV. Before dozing off, she always placed her needlepointed bookmark, the one product of a distant crafts class, in the page where she left off and returned her book to the night table at her side. On their ways from dusk into evening, they drifted just by each other. Never quite colliding.

With a voice that echoes a little too energetic, I deliver a progress report on dinner, making sure to mention that it can't hold a candle to Mama's cooking. I slide a drink into Gina's hand and return to the kitchen. She sits and listens as Dad asks the kids about school, answering for them when their attention strays or their glories are not sufficiently set forth. The husbands have gradually come to feel comfortable in declining these festive afternoons. They resist in the name of large-screen color football, and it has come to be a mostly female chorus that drifts in from the other room. I lift the tops of pans to sniff and season, striving to do things as they should be done. As I drip gravy across the floor, I glance over my shoulder as if she could detect my spill, and smile at the nervous rage to which the disarray would drive her.

It seems I was always pushing her to some edge, from which she inevitably returned even more composed. From my

I have prepared the holiday meal that she used to cook. Although nobody touches it...

About the Artist



Kimberly Camp is a painter as well as the creator of KimKins dolls. She currently works for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. "Haint" ©1989 is acrylic on canvas 48" x 48" and was inspired by Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Other images by Kimberly appear on pages 2, 21 and 29.

adolescence on, frail and persistent hairline cracks grew across the world of our understanding, like the blue tangle of veins that spread across her hands. The full mouth that bloomed soft in smile tightened and shrank as she meticulously enumerated my flaws. Her head shook as she rearranged me, pulling a cuff, straightening a pleat. Nervous fingers plucked at the zinnias that grew in skirt folds as I left on evening sojourns, smoothing, always smoothing my way safe.

I have prepared the holiday meal that she used to cook. Although nobody touches it, I continue to serve cranberry sauce in the glass bowl carved with arching birds that was her favorite. I have cooked for all of us, for those who are not here, too, and we will have leftovers all week. On the table are the sterling candlesticks that came as wedding gifts. Two of the children will light them as we did. In the center my father has placed his contribution: a wreath of plastic mums and marigolds.

Weekdays and Saturdays Mama cooked balanced meals made possible by careful coupon-clipping. Sundays we had something special, like pot roast, and her special pound cake or lemon pie. We felt imprisoned in her code of manners and ate hurriedly, our minds on evening plans. Without offering words of criticism or praise, Dad cleared his plate. I never remember him requesting a particular meal and when she asked what he preferred, which she always did, he said, "It doesn't matter to me, Leora. I like them all." As my brother slipped upstairs, we began to clear the table. Elbow deep in suds, she offered ritual warnings of forbidden love. She overlapped my words with urgent exhortations, tapping the counter with clear polished nails for emphasis, until I fell silent and turned away. Often after dinner she sat at the table draped in plastic lace, and filled book after book with S&H Green Stamps.

It was here that she served my brother,

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Their palms are sticky from the ribbon candy that I put out four weeks before Christmas, as Mama always did.

now absent overseas, and his friends. They knew where they could gather for a hearty Sunday meal. It was here that she asked once too often if they were sure they didn't want something more to eat, and a shrug sent straying hands to clasp the neck of a draped cardigan whose sleeves, uninhabited, flapped comically, like wings. Heads hunched deep into broadening shoulders, they repeated politely that they were full, and exchanged mocking smiles. As she beamed with purpose, and asked about their after-dinner plans, they coughed and swept eyes at her fumbling of the latest slang.

The living room is too quiet, and I peek in to find the children re-routing pipe smoke, laughing at their semaphores. Their palms are sticky from the ribbon candy that I put out four weeks before Christmas, as Mama always did. I kneel at Lisa's side and, kissing each one of her short brown fingers, I whisper our favorite joke, reaching for the thread that joins us. She laughs and grabs for my nose, but I'm too quick and end up scooping her in my arms. As I hold a little too long, too hard, too close, having never mastered a balance in loving, she squirms and disengages our limbs. I straighten up and motion towards the table, proclaiming that it is time to eat, bending to collect sweaters and toys from the couch. I dig deep in the cushions to rescue a cloth doll whose arm reaches out for help.

In five years, I have not been able to erase the image of her lying on this couch with knees bent. The plastic cover buckling underneath. Her feet tucked under the cushion at the end. Skin fading and uneven, hair thinned to patches, she clutched a pack of Kools while smoke curled slowly overhead.

My father makes his way into the dining room and Gina comments enthusiastically on how nice everything looks. I have set the table with the pink bordered china that we take out of the glassed-in cabinet only for special occasions. I caress the edge of a plate and remember the hot slap and the look of loss when, hustling with my brother in the kitchen, I broke one of the serving bowls. Gina jokes, as always, that if we only used paper plates, we wouldn't have to bother with cleaning up. Dad bends slightly over the table, taking up the long silver knife and fork with hands that are not so steady anymore, and mumbles, as he always does, that he doesn't carve so well, that he has never really learned the proper way. It has always been his job.

I don't think he ever really imagined that she would die. Even after the treatments had begun and she withered daily, she had continued to prepare complete meals and to get up and pack his lunch. He had found her when the artery burst and had stood there immobile, astonished that she could bleed so.

Now on intermittent weekend visits, I find him up nights, shuffling in the dimly lit hall, looking for something in the half-light.

We are seated, and ready to begin. My sister reaches out to stop anxious little fingers from grabbing prematurely, but she is too late and gherkins bounce to the floor. Gina and I shoot warning looks across the table at the others, and decide to move on. I have tried to synchronize my preparations, but the rice ended up sitting and is probably sticky or dry. Despite the other foods that grace the

table, I can focus only on this. Though Mama pulled this off daily, I have never achieved her kind of finesse. While she produced her meals in silence so that their sudden appearance was magical, I must coax and scream food into submission. How different we are.

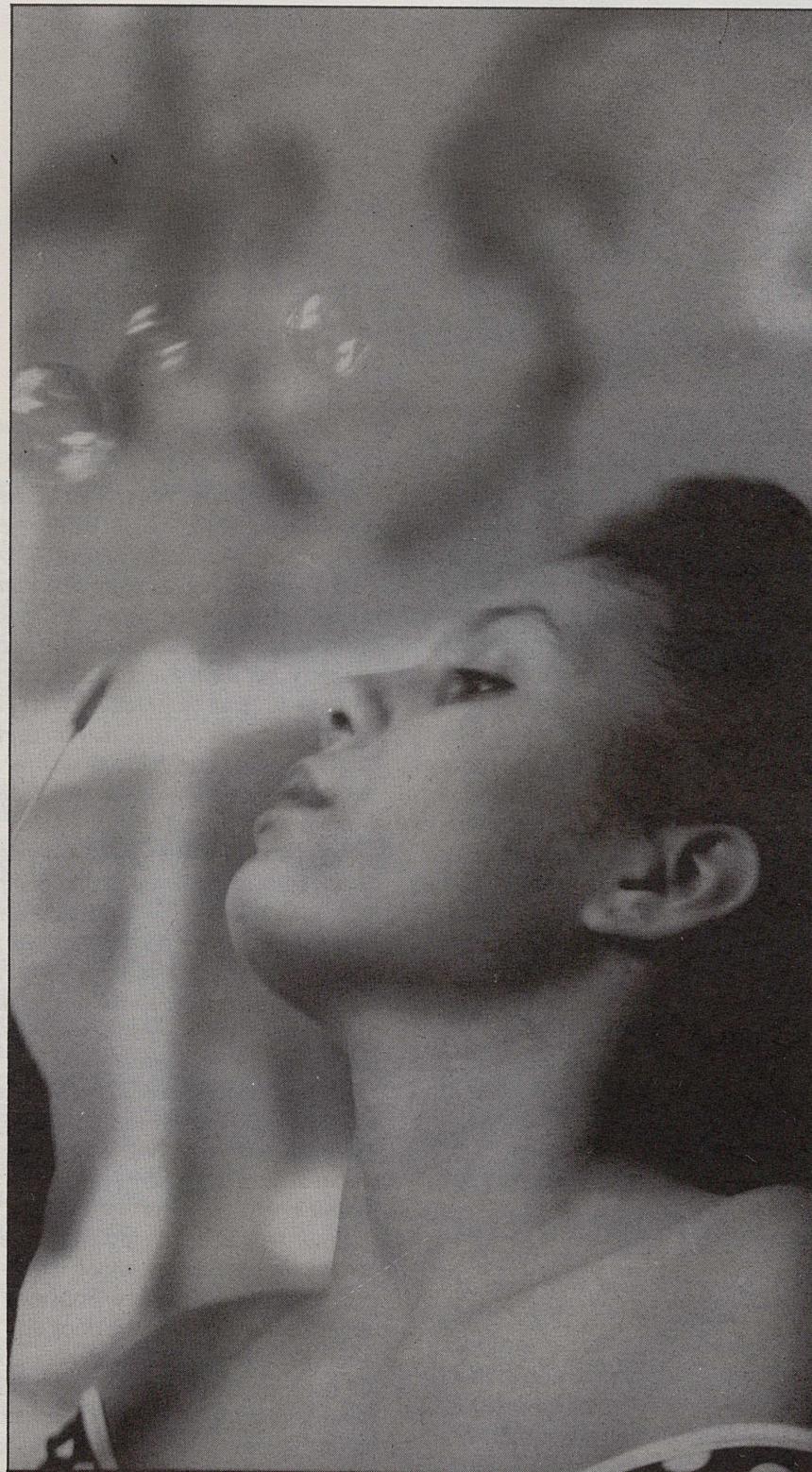
As turkey slices begin to fall, Dad mumbles something about it looking dry. Passing the butter, my hands begin the trembling that is so noticeable in a woman of my age. I launch into ritual apologies and before I stop I have taken responsibility for the weather. I don't even know who likes turkey anyway, and I suspect we are all looking ahead to the sandwiches that the week holds. After ascertaining once again our age-old preferences for light or dark, he fills our plates.

China circulates and once it has all landed, it is time for a formal thanks. In keeping with family tradition, one of the children will recite the grace. Today it is Lisa's turn. We clasp each others' hands and look down. "God is great...God is good..." Eyes closed, I lift my head slightly. My shoulder twitches and then quiets as I feel the brush of fingers freeing a trapped collar.



Helen Lee comes to writing fiction by way of the social sciences and law. She went to college and law school at Harvard, and currently works as a lawyer part time at a federal agency, and part time for the Center for the Study of Social Policy. Ms. Lee works with and writes non-fiction about pregnant teenagers, dropouts and unemployed youth. She has published several short fiction pieces and is at work on a novel. "Rearranging Hands" first appeared in *Sage*.





What's yr hair like
after u wash it...

Their mamas
grandmas
aunties &
all the men & the family
far back as they cld trace &
far back as the grandmas
remembered...

The Ancestors
The Land
The Traditions
 The Land
 The Ancestors
 The Traditions
The Traditions
The Land
The Ancestors
 were African
 were African
 were African

The blood dripping into
the Middle Passage
The blood crusted in the crevices
of cold, damp, dark holes
The blood that stained the magnolias
on sweet honeysuckle afternoons
 were African
 were African
 were African

The nappy curls that adorned
queens & kings
The nappy curls that crowned
children of freedom
children of song
children of the first sunrise
 was African
 was African
 was African
is yr daddy's
is yr grandmas &
is yr mamas—

So tell me, how yr hair gon
be anthang but nappy curls
after you wash it, like
 yr mama
 yr daddy
 &

u
is African
is African
is African..
now, straighten that out, if you can.

photo © Sean Anderson

Valerie Lawrence
Pittsburgh, PA

Heirs & Orphans

by Doris Jean Austin

On the night before her parents were killed, long after she should have been asleep, Rosalie Tompkins crouched behind her bedroom door and peeked and listened to the last conversation she would hear between her father and his only brother, her Uncle Cleophus. Listening behind doors and around corners was her only other vice besides her capacity for remembering slights forever and "getting even." This night she listened to a conversation, punctuated by the dull thump of her daddy's earthenware moonshine jug being set down on the table, picked up, set down again.

"Amos," her uncle said to his brother, "just give me one good reason to hold on so hard when we could both be rich. We could just take the wives and children and head on up north. Buy us a house where the pavement grow." Cleophus's "children" came out sounding like chirren, Alabama written all over it.

"Ain't selling this land to nobody and nothing." Thump.

Cleophus picked up the jug and took another swig. "Gonna be trouble. For that kinda money, somebody sure 'nough mean business. You thought about that?" Thump.

"Thought about it. Don't care 'bout no trouble. Ain't selling and that's all to it. Land belong to Rosalie and Moses after we gone." Thump.

"We may be gone a whole lot quicker

than you thinking bout. Old Sumpter already sold off his place. We ain't even got no more neighbors to speak of. And what about that big old place they putting up so fast up on the ridge. It's looking smack down on us. Ain't nothing in back-a the place but them rocks leading over to the swamp. What they building can't grow no place but right down here. Run us right over. Who you s'pose building up over us? You sure you know what we doing?" Thump.

"You the college man, Cleo, you oughta be figgering better'n you doing. Sumpter never was nothing but some poor white trash. Anything he got for that old run down dust bowl put him ahead. You right though. We may have to sell 'em a piece. Sell whoever it is a piece a land so they don't feel cramped 'tween here and the swamp. Not a big piece. Just a little good will piece. No more'n that. Why'nt you gwan out front and look at what we got and then come back here and tell me you wanna give it away."

Amos picked up the jug and turned it up over his shoulder, he shook it over the table to show it was empty. Both men got up and tiptoed over to the door and out front. Rosalie guessed they were going for her Uncle to look at the land they weren't going to sell, or to get another bottle of her daddy's liquor. He kept some cooling off in the well sometime. She went back and climbed into her narrow bed on her side of the room, careful not to wake her cousin Moses sleeping on the other. Whatever it was all about,





Rosalie would always remember how proud she was that her daddy wasn't selling their land. She didn't care *that* much about living on some pavement up north. She scooted down under the cover facing the window, watching the moon, and fell fast asleep.

Ever since Rosalie could remember she had loved the feeling that came to her just before daybreak—the feeling of being the only one awake in the whole state of Alabama, maybe in all these United States of America, and at the height of her grandiose dreaming, Rosalie pretended she was the only one awake in the whole world. That's how it was in the pre-dawn of the day that would reshape all her possible futures in to question marks, that Rosalie lay in bed under her open window, her whole room full of country silence until she heard the first sounds of birds waking, one joining the other until their tentative notes cradled the house and echoed softly in the nearby woods. Soon, she knew, would come the iron sounds of the men laying new tracks, salvaging the old Union-ravaged rails of southern railroads that would reconnect the "New South" her Uncle Cleophus was always telling her daddy about. Tracks were being reshaped and laid in Georgia and Louisiana to come on down and meet in Alabama so everybody could go any and every which way. They'd all ride to Selma on a train one day soon, he said. But on these mornings when the iron rang out over the land, the neighboring south, including all the grown folks in her own family, would rise and Rosalie wanted to get away to the

woods before they woke up.

Lightning flashed over by the smokehouse, behind her mama's clothesline, and the wind brought the shadow of a flapping quilt across her window. It gave her a nice, lonesome feeling watching that quilt weave and bob toward her, just like maybe it wanted to come in and lay across her on the bed, she thought. The wind loosened some pecans from

the tree that leaned over the room Rosalie shared with Moses. The nuts clattered singularly down the roof and fell silently to the ground. "Shhhh," she whispered automatically, hoping they wouldn't wake anyone else in the house. She raised up on her elbows and breathed deep. Rain coming. She had smelled it when she first woke up. Unable to resist,

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Featured Artist





GOUACHES ON PAPER

Night Songs and Initiation

Barbara Bullock's art acknowledges primeval sources, reflecting her appreciation of both body and spirit. Remarkable in range and complexity, it is sensitive to culture, myth and tradition. A Philadelphian, Barbara was strongly influenced by her work at the Ile Ife Cultural Center and Museum, a Philadelphia center of learning for African Culture. Her imagery expresses the movement, spirituality, color and ritual of African peoples. Her paintings are in museum and private collections and have been exhibited across the United States of America and abroad.



Heirs and Orphans
Continued from page 21

Rosalie got up, shook Moses awake and handed him his overalls and shirt off the nail over his bed. With stealth and shushings they dressed by fading moon and starlight, and Rosalie sneaked herself and Moses outside real quiet-like, helped Moses climb over the fence that made so much noise when you forced open the gate, and headed for her own private place. It was several miles through the woods, across an open pasture bounded on the right by a patch of watermelons, on the left by a field of corn, almost up to the cave near the stream where her daddy kept his still. That's where she and Moses would go if God sent more rain than Rosalie was comfortably prepared to meet. They arrived at her lookout point before the sun or the rain.

She waited. The coolness from the earth rose soothingly under her pinafore where she hunkered down between vines connecting watermelons as big as her body. The green mint smell of earth and morning was damp around her. Rosalie watched the last few stars

fade and the sky go ash gray with sunrise. An unexpected breeze caught the hem of her skirt to expose what were surely the whitest

"I just meant you know how to cook by yourself. Without Aunt Tennie watching." His voice was appeasing, admitting he always suspected she could cook out in the woods by herself.

cotton drawers in Monroe County, Alabama. Her skin was full black, tinged with blue and smooth all over. She shone. Her eyes were fixed on the bank of clouds on the horizon. Suddenly, she broke into a dazzling grin. Her

thoughts were hushed. *Oh, here it come!*

"Moses, you wake up now! Here it come!" She spoke over her shoulder in a loud hoarse whisper.

The vines rustled behind her as Moses sat up knuckling his eyes open, blinking at the wash of sunlight glancing off the melons around him. His red shirt startled the green morning. Rosalie reached back impatiently for his hand and pulled him up. It came, driving the snuff-colored dust before it. Laughing, they ran, spindly legs pumping faster and faster, to meet the rain.

Moses was the first to turn as the cloud swept overhead leaving them thoroughly soaked and breathless. He looked back the way they had come so early, earlier than even the grown folks got up. In the distance he saw what appeared to be another sunrise and his mind turned homeward. They had come too far from breakfast for his comfort. Moses



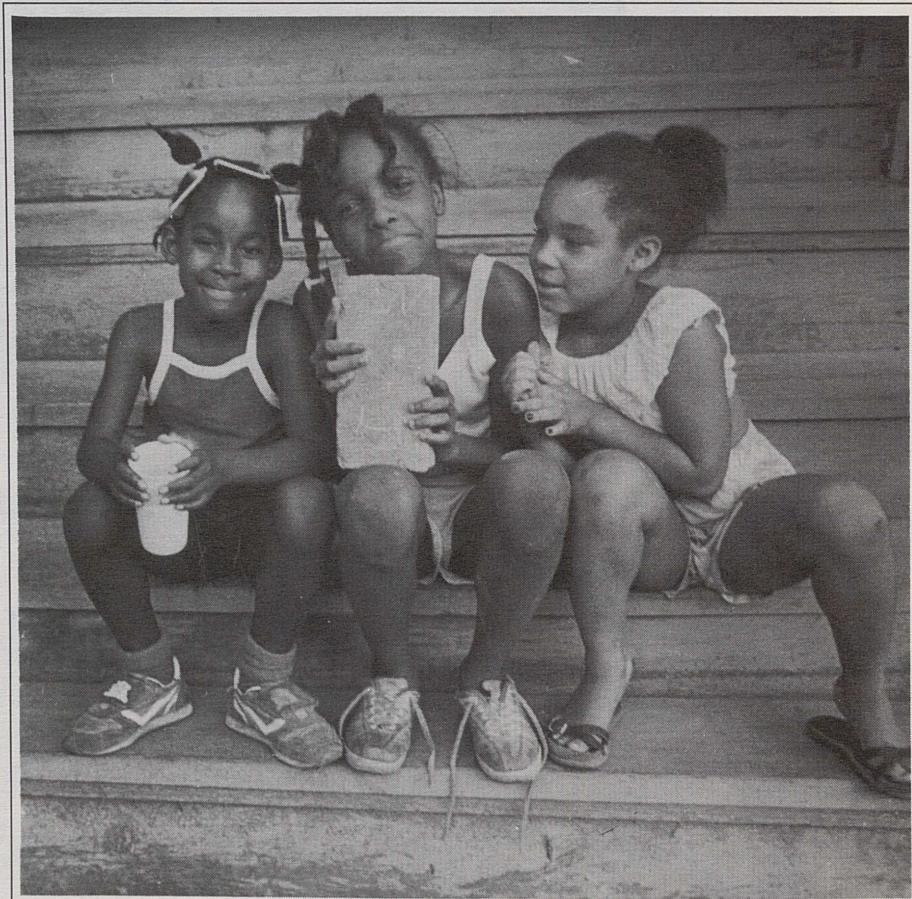
such good friends

*we was always together
when the work got done;
me & E.B. & Sammie Kate.*

*3 bite in the candy from Mr. Frye's store
3 wildflowers joinin' the fork-road
at our meetin' place
3 satin ribbons
trailin' the red-raw
hoops of dust*

*Runnin' with our mouths
open so the sun fell in
and made us laugh
Loud an' Hard as we went*

Nzadi Zimele Keita
Philadelphia, PA



wanted to go back to the house and "smell some sausage cooking," he'd confided as he mumble-trotted behind his cousin. He couldn't see no "damned advantage" (he quoted his daddy) to tipping round before day, sneaking out the house while everybody else still sleep to come all this way." His soft drawl was tentative in deference to Rosalie's eight years. Moses was only five. "We done missed breakfast, you reckon?" he asked the hand that held his.

Rosalie cast a look upon her young cousin that said clear as day, *Oh ye of little faith*. She

words. "Whatchu mean?" she repeated, like he better not mean what she thought he meant.

"Course I kin cook by myself! All I got to do is make me a fire and cook it up. I got a pot and everything."

"Breakfast in that sack?" His genuine concern made the risk an honorable one.

"Sure nough. I got some ham and yams, and some biscuits from last night and...." Rosalie went silent with her inventory. The air rang loudly with hammers and iron. Back at the house, their folks were up.

Her Uncle Cleophus was home from over at Tuskegee to spend the summer with his wife and son, and to help his brother with the sowing and harvesting of their land. It was August and, aside from picking peas and milking and churning, going to revival meetings and getting saved, wasn't much work left to do. They had added two rooms to the house last year and this summer they'd extended the front porch around one whole side of the house so the grown folks' bedrooms looked out on a side porch now. They intended to cut some doors from the bedrooms to the porch pretty soon. When Cleophus graduated next year....

switched her hips as best she could, lifting her knees high like she had to back through the vines and over to the closest plump melon. She bent to raise high a wrinkled crocker sack toward Moses. It gave off a wet straw smell. "Moses, I'm gonna cook us up some breakfast right outchere in these woods. You just watch and see if I don't." She patted the pocket of her pinafore where a fistful of forbidden matches rested. She knew she would get the switch if her mama counted and missed the five matches she took from the box in the kitchen. She'd taken them one at a time all last week.

"You know how to cook?" Moses said it real quiet, like he knew he was treading on dangerous ground. And sure enough, she turned on him something fierce.

"Whatchu mean, kin I cook?" The hand that held the sack went to her hip and the sack bobbed up and down, punctuating her

This seemed to be Moses' talking year, he never stopped. He followed Rosalie from sun up to bedtime with questions about chickens and eggs and sunrise and sunset and, "How Daddy and Uncle Amos know when it be time for dinner?" he wondered as Rosalie hurried them along with the midday meal down to the field where Amos and Cleophus worked shoulder to shoulder. "Roe, how this pecan get all the way inside this shell?" Rosalie's patience, born of her pride, answered each question firmly and approximately. Now, Moses stood gazing back toward the house perplexed.

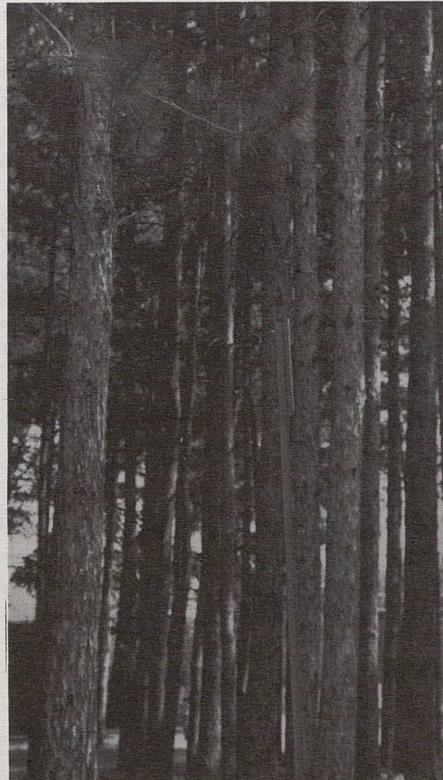
"Roe, look over yonder. Ain't that the sun coming up behind them clouds back there?" He pointed to the left, over the woods they'd come through, then whirled around to face the sun he and Rosalie had been running toward. He stopped in confusion, his arm still in the air. But before he could continue

his questions, Rosalie spun around, delicately lifting the wet hem of her skirt away from her body. She stared in surprise. The sky was dark with hundreds of birds, their screeching rode the morning air. Beneath them, it did look like the sun was blazing orange through the blackest clouds she'd ever seen. In the west.

Rosalie didn't say a word to Moses—just sped away in the direction they'd come. She instinctively increased her speed to investigate Moses' western sunrise. Her heart hammered a faltering beat in her throat as she sniffed suspicious thoughts from air that confirmed her fear. Moses followed, disgruntled by a speed his shorter legs could never match. When he fell trying to keep up, Rosalie left him there on the damp ground crying and alarmed. She stumbled and fell. She rose emptyhanded and was off again, eyes still on the smoke that spiraled steadily upward in the distance. Mud dried on her hands and arms as she ran. The front of her dress clung wet and muddy against her body. Her bare feet slowed as they slapped the ground with faltering hope when she could no longer see the flames peeping at her through the trees, but still, she ran. When

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photo © by Gabriel Tait



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Heirs and Orphans
Continued from page 25

she arrived at the edge of the woods near her house, she collapsed, having only that much strength left. Shortly, Moses arrived and plopped himself beside her. They stared into the clearing, speechless.

Rosalie lay on her stomach breathing hard. She hadn't the wind or the courage to scream. A numb protective silence descended over her like a dome. To the left of her vision, a man was leading Turnip to her mama's chinaberry tree just outside the front yard. The gravid mare danced skittishly as the man tied her and tried to pat her quiet. Vaguely, Rosalie remembered that Turnip's foal was to be hers. She already had a name for her pony: Dumpling. She watched the man as he moved across her vision to the right toward a skinny string of a man who strutted about—nervously in charge. The gate lay inside the yard. The porch leaned in on its two sides toward the smoldering rubble and even from here she could smell kerosene. The sun was all white dry heat to her eyes from the shelter of the woods where she and Moses lay hidden. Each scene melted silently into the next like a picture book her mama gave her once—when you flipped through the book real fast, the characters moved faster. Rosalie watched the rapidly shifting scenes before her and she could feel the red dust in her face as the men stamped around. There were four of them, four white men casually performing on her daddy's land. As she watched, sound returned in an indecipherable wave—like a single note hurled from an entire orchestra. "Possum," she heard one of them say, *wasn't some children....*" His voice faded. Shimmering waves of August heat blurred the scenes before her forever in her memory. She tried and could not imagine that the charred sticks and smoldering tar collapsed in the middle of their new porch was once her house, and that it now contained not only her own mama and daddy, but Moses' as well. She fought back the fiery images and replaced them with nothing. Just sat, emptyminded, watching. Moses lay on his stomach beside Rosalie, sniffling, snot-nosed, wild-eyed black baby boy. He squinched his eyes as tight as he could against the house burned to the ground—and the end of the world. He whimpered for his mama, having made only a vague connection between the fire and her absence. Forever gone was not within his power to envision. When he cried out again, Rosalie clamped her hand over his mouth.

Sweat ran from her forehead into her eyes and became tears. Her head was cocked to one side listening. Suddenly, she jerked around, looking for... but no one was there. The men were in the barn now. She heard the chickens squawking their protest. She heard... She jerked her head around again, sure this time, she'd heard her daddy's voice. *Was he hiding out in these woods, too? Was he trying to whisper something to her?* Rosalie wiped tears or sweat from her face and concentrated. It seemed like her daddy was saying for her to *"Just be still."* Just like that. Just like that time when she cut her foot on the axe when she went out to get some kindling for her mama's fire. "Just be still, sugar," he told her when she wanted to dance and run with pain and fear of her own blood. "Just be still, baby. Daddy gonna take care everything." Then he'd lifted her up light as you please and took her in to her mama. Tennie was the one always stopped all the pain. Moving around her kitchen with authority, smelling of cinnamon and vanilla extract, stopping pain when it came to Amos and Rosalie and visiting relatives, and even an old mangy dog once—just always stopping the pain because it was her job. This hadn't been the first morning Tennie Tompkins found an empty bed when she went to Rosalie's room. Hadn't been the first time she complained to Amos that Rosalie "done sneaked her lil fast self out to them woods fore day again." It hadn't been the first time Amos laughed her out of her fretting. *"Done took Moses again with her this time,"* Tennis laughed to Cleophus and EverJean. It hadn't been the first time....

Rosalie lay real quiet listening. *"Just be still,"* her daddy whispered—so she did. She put her arm around Moses and lay just as still as anything.

When the men finally left, leading Turnip and the other two horses from the land, closing two dusty wagon canvases on four pigs, sows and hogs: two of each, four cows, six calves, all the chickens and roosters and two wild turkeys her daddy'd been fattening up—when finally they had all left, Moses turned to Rosalie. She sat, eyes unblinking, staring at the yard. "Roe?" His voice was scared and tear-stained. He shook her shoulder, "ROE!"

When Rosalie still could not or would not answer, Moses fell upon his cousin with all the fervor of his alarm.

"ROE!" His blows fell on her face and

shoulders in fierce repetition. "ROE!"

Only when his arms grew tired did Moses fall exhausted into Rosalie's lap, the only solace he had left in the world.

"Roe?"

"Shhh."

"Roe?"

"Shhhh."

She stood up slowly. She didn't cry. With a mind of their own it seemed, her eyes blurred with tears. But she didn't cry. Again, she cocked her head. Listening. *"Run, baby. You run way from here."* And even though Rosalie wasn't sure if it was her father's voice or the ringing of the iron, she ran, dragging Moses behind her. Running and stumbling back through the woods. Wet leaves slapped her face and neck and she didn't notice the many scratches on her bare arms and legs. She felt but could not hear herself landing heavily, breaking through the dense undergrowth. Her ragged breathing danced awkwardly between each footfall that seemed to pursue them, and the busy remembering and trying not to in this terrible silence. Moses fell and she dropped beside him, scuttling them both off the path, burrowing deep into the underside of the moss-covered rock—a boulder really. The hole in the earth where they hid was just large enough for all of Moses and most of Rosalie. Her arms could not be pulled in all the way. From this shelter, Rosalie watched the path through eyes stretched to popping. She allowed no thought of her parents, no memory of her aunt and uncle, to mar her fearsome vigil. An hour later—or maybe it was five—Moses tugged unnecessarily at Rosalie's shoulder to signal her attention to the heavy footsteps approaching. She held his hand tightly, beyond knowing that he might have cried out. Without words, Rosalie's brain recognized and stored the image of the man who had tied Turnip to the chinaberry tree. He rounded the bend, obviously searching—although just as obviously, without diligence....

For us, Rosalie thought. Oh Lord, he looking for us. The deserted woods were unnaturally quiet, no birds called, the only sounds were the approaching footsteps. *Oh Jesus, oh Jesus,* Rosalie whispered to her own scared self, sounding just like her mama for the world. *"You gonna wear the Old Boy out directly, ain'tchu, Tennie?"* Amos would laugh his full-bellied girth past his wife, managing to brush up against her as he moved from one chore to the next. Rosalie



turned sharply away from the picture of her mama and daddy and replaced her silent litany to Jesus with a whimpering, "Oh Daddy . . ." then was silent. Dragging loose dirt as fast as she could up around her and Moses, unaware that the small trenches left by her finger shovels would be amateur sleuthing for a man like Possum Crowder, her eyes never wavered from the path. She could see him plain as day now. Possum's big red moon face glistened its usual heat in the cool quiet woods. Rosalie pushed her fist as hard against her chattering teeth as she could. Possum came, brandishing a long stick before him to the left and right. The stick cut through leaves a foot or so above and in front of the children's heads as he moved past. Rosalie eased her free hand from her mouth to press against her heart, sure when he stopped that he heard it drumming like thunder. But he only paused to pull a jug from inside his shirt and take a long swig before returning the bottle to his shirt and moving on. It seemed hours before he returned, moving

faster this time, his search obviously over as far as he was concerned. Again, as it forever would it seemed, alcohol made its arbitrary contribution to history and helped the woods to hide the children.

Rosalie and Moses crouched, clenched still and silent, long after he left. They did not speak or look at each other. They squatted, stared straight ahead. Once Rosalie stood and tried to pull Moses up, but his trembling legs did not allow him to understand. She fell beside him. And although she forgot to breathe—convulsively, at long intervals—her body wrenches her forward in its demand for air, small seizures that threw her sideways against the moss-covered rock. Slowly, their postures thawed and they sprawled in relief. Moses lay on his back staring up at a ceiling of sun-peaking branches. Presently, he peed on himself. Rosalie watched his small crotch darken, watched the stain grow. Her eyes were bland with what might have been acceptance. Fitful sobs convulsed her slight frame but there were no more

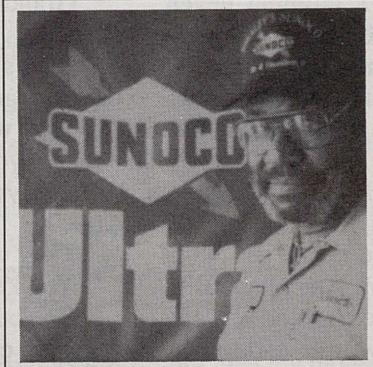
tears. Finally, she turned over and, using the rock for a pillow, released her body to almost-sleep, unseeing eyes wide open. In the back of her mind her daddy's cave began to grow and move slowly in front as the air became chill with the promise of more rain. Cried out and exhausted, Moses and Rosalie slept in the shelter of Alabama woods that indiscriminately sheltered heirs and orphans.



Doris Jean Austin, novelist, journalist, former newswriter for NBC radio, now teaches journalism at the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, and also holds the John O. Killens Chair in Humanities at Medgar Evers College, a division of Cuny. Austin is on the Council of the Authors Guild and a member of PEN American. Her novel *After the Garden*, published by New American Library, is now out in paperback. This is an excerpt from *Heirs & Orphans* to be published in 1990 by New American Library.



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LOUISIANA SHADE

by Kathy Elaine Anderson

Sterling

Rains have come. The air told me it was time. The down-turning of leaves. The hissing rain makes. I place my fingers, palms up on leaves receiving the wetness.

The rain air whips my pants, then pulls them like breath in a balloon. My feet seek roots that stream across the path. A trickle of a path. I touch the tree trunks that line the way. I have discovered faces in these trunks. One, narrow and lean, the bark rough and patchy. Another with knots I can hold onto, hollows I explore with cautious fingers. Wet and pungent, the few remaining pine trees are sticky to the touch. The oak holds the lace of a spider web, wet with dew and the soft warmth of decomposing wood.

There are trees that have elbows. Indians tied them down when the trees were saplings—they learned to grow horizontal. When released, the center stayed parallel to the ground, the rest of the trunk continued seeking sun. They make a trail. I follow my hand as it finds them. They lead me to the spring.

The ground instead of yielding to my feet, ever so slightly, has become rocky. And here I sit and have sat, dangling the dark legs I pretend shadow the underworld.

LeRoy

It's hot. That little bit of rain didn't do nothin'. I'm in the middle in bed and even with the covers off it's hot. Wish I could draw on the ceiling. Give me something to look at some nights. I can't stand it no more. It's about time I go to the window, I love wigglin' down to the bed bottom. I guess I better wash the windowsill

tomorrow before Momma sees this dark place where I've been putting my chin.

Woods and stars. Everybody sleep or pretending to be. The woods be dark but there's this clear space right at the edge of town. It's almost time. There, there he go, standing like Moses in that picture in the Bible. And he just stand there.

He lives in the woods. Grandma say it was thirty years the house he live in was empty. His daddy come back every year when his granddaddy died to make sure everythin' was alright—nothin' broken into. He paid Mr. Culver to watch it and keep it up when he was gone. Mat Sterling's momma never came back. I wish I could of seen them. We wait every Saturday for him, the son who came back thirty years later. We wait for him to go to the general store.

He real tall, only Mr. Culver come close. And he got this big stick carved with all this stuff we never get close enough to see what of. And black! Billy Lee say if he walked around at night you wouldn't know the difference unless he spoke to you. I know better.

He don't stay long, just look like he be looking right at me. Then he turn around and go back. He must be wanting to talk sometime. Me, too. I wants to go away like in one of those dreams I have sometime. He be in my dreams and we sit and talk. Remind me of Daddy but I can never remember what we talk about. Shoot, it's my secret—watchin' him standin' there three or four of the seven nights in the week. Just watchin' his face let me know he ain't gonna hurt me. His comin' say to me he want to talk. I look at my bandana in the moonlight. Squint real good. Yeah.

I wish it didn't happen. I wish I wasn't there last Saturday. I wish I didn't have to do what I got to do before this Saturday.

Grandma

Child, why are you fidgeting so? LeRoy, if those ain't ants in your pants, they must surely be fleas. Have you been out in the woods with that dog? Stop swinging on that porch rail before you end up fixing it! Come down here and keep Grandma some company in the garden. Here, start turning that soil up, that's right, right there."

"Grandma, are you really the oldest deaconess in the church?"

"That's right. My momma and your daddy's granddaddy started working this land when it was just trees rising back till you can't see no more."

"Do you remember when they came?"

"They who?"

"You know, the Sterlings."

"You been asking about that man all summer, ever since you children knew you did wrong. I don't care if *you* didn't say anything. You all should be shamed, calling that man Mr. Sterling names. All of you should have been whipped in the middle of town, as it is, there was many a daddy with a sore arm from switching brown behinds. That Sterling family . . . my momma always said they brought more than forty acres and a mule. They had seven wagons piled high. He built the house totally by himself, almost. The rest of them helped a little. She said they were real friendly. They all were, cause we all were trying to make a space for ourselves after the war. We just didn't want to bother white folk—moved as far



back as possible so as not to disturb them. Actually, to say the truth, so they wouldn't disturb us. We heard about some white fok trying to keep their slaves, telling them the war wasn't over and they weren't emancipated. Humph. It worked moving back here, 'cause we each had our little gifts for doing things so we didn't have to go to them for nothing.

"The first Mat Sterling must of got his name cause his work was so good. At sunset there would be a battle between his furnace and the sun right through the trees. Nearly anything iron around here still standing he forged into something beautiful. I knew the second Mat Sterling and you know the third. The third Mat Sterling's daddy went up North to go to college (people didn't see why, we got good Negro colleges right here) and then came back and didn't keep the furnace burning. Maybe it was because he wasn't named Mat Sterling. It was little Mat who got that love of fire and iron from his granddaddy. I sat down with his granddaddy, the second Mat Sterling, and he said his father and his father's father was a blacksmith. It's such a shame that house stayed empty thirty years after the accident.

"Child, that row could use some straightening. Those are very good. Now, why do you keep asking me about the Sterlings?"

"Grandma, I got to go. I'm supposed to meet everybody. I'll be back. I did my chores already."

"Well, I guess it's alright. Come give me some sugar and go ahead and play while you still got some play left and I'll tell your momma."

Sterling

The night is escaping slow. Wisps cling to the edges of trees. The wooden floor is still slightly warm from the first heat since the rains. I stand in the sun mornings before my work inside is begun. Do you know I have returned to your forge? Stand silent, touching each tool—the instruments you played six days of every



Illustration by Kimberly Camp
"Uncle Thomas" Acrylic on Paper, 1989 38" x 52"

week. The woods would sing with the sound.

For ten years, the ten years remaining to you, I did not see you, I was only able to speak to you over telephone wire. Over and over you said it wasn't right that you couldn't see the third Mat Sterling, that my mother was wrong stealing me away.

It was an accident. I was going to learn your trade—what my father wouldn't. I return Mat Sterling. You are here still in the quiet of the mornings. I think of when I would slip out of bed and you would be waiting for our walk. I return with my own instruments. I can't use yours but mine continue to play the songs you began long ago.

LeRoy

It was Mr. Culver who knewed he was coming. We were waiting for him but our folks said we weren't supposed to stare. Trying to be

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**Do you know I have returned to your forge?
Stand silent, touching each tool—the instruments you played six days of every week.
The woods would sing with the sound.**

Louisiana Shade

Continued from page 29

respectful—we just made sure we had work to do outside that day.

When he came walking down the street, I peeped at Grandma, Momma and Daddy. They were wondering, too. They were just better at hiding it. Grandma started patting her foot and humming a little and that always means somethin' special was about to happen. She was thinking somethin' but that day she wasn't sayin'.

He walked into town with this carved stick taller than him. The elders said it was somethin' from their mommas' and daddies' time. It was all carved up and pretty. He walked like he knew where he was going. That was when Grandma said he was blinded at his granddaddy's forge when he was five years old.

Grandma

Boy, you awfully quiet. What's on your mind?" "Oh, I was just thinkin' about the day when Mat Sterling came to town. Hey, Grandma,

has anyone ever visited Mr. Sterling?"

"Young man, hay is for horses and by now you should know the good Lord didn't put me here in the shape of a horse. I don't know of anyone visiting him. I guess nobody's been invited. His daddy wasn't like that or his momma. His daddy would come asking all kinds of questions and then disappear into that house for days. The tap-tap-tap of that machine would come out of the woods at night.

"They say he got his degree in something called folklore. He was studying us, real friendly, but studying all the while. He said our great, grandchildren are going to want to know about us. That we got to record our ways cause the white folk who were weren't doing us no justice. Well, we tried to help him best we could, him being from here and all and his family helping to start this town. And boy, why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. Nobody really talks to him except 'how do you do' and I keep thinkin' what's it like to have nobody to talk to and nobody to

see either. I wonder if he gets lonely. Nobody knows if he can speak, huh? He's been away two times more than I been alive. Did his momma make them go back North?"

"I see you have been paying attention to your math. No child, nobody has heard him speak and his momma sure did snatch him up quick and take him up North. She was a schoolteacher and never seemed to get used to our ways. And when little Mat was blinded, well, she just went crazy. LeRoy, I don't know how to answer your other questions. But it hurts me to my heart to see him so. You know, we make our own choices in this life, and the least we can choose is what we do with what we got. Now, your daddy's coming home and you better get ready for supper."

Sterling

I thought I could return and work in peace. I thought within this wood, the fold of my family home, I could just disappear, become stone. The children, first with taunts, then with a fragment of the stone I have

Gwendolyn Reading in Black Voice

*"Ugly" is bad enough
but she stretched it out in black,
deep in her gut, and
brought it to the surface,
making it rise up throaty:
U U U G ' L I*

*The little boy in the poem
came alive through
her grave black voice
belching the ugliness he felt
when Black is supposed to be
B U ' T I F O O L*

by Robert Lima



become, demand recognition.

They did not accept my offerings, what I have been able to give of myself—left on the trees where they have found them, each their own nature, a gift.

The children know, they won't accept my silence. They mock me, I do not hear their voices, I hear the chorus of ancestors through them, a chorus that becomes louder each time we meet, the chorus dark without face, just voice—my work must be shared—they are coming for me. I must face them this Saturday.

LeRoy

We shouldn't of called him names. Our butts wouldn't of been tore up and I wouldn't be standing on this road with all the boys mad, all quiet, makin' the air thick and mean. I tried to open my mouth but everybody stared me down. I feel sick every Saturday morning. I try to get out of coming but they call me "chicken" and "blind man junior." Why doesn't he say somethin'? Why don't he do somethin'?

Week after week, after we got our butts beat we stood on the road before town. It was Billy Lee who got beat worst of all. He started it. As soon as Sterling got close Billy Lee started mumbling softly making no sense. They all caught on and made this sound that got louder, raspy and ugly until he went past. And oh how they'd laugh! We wouldn't get in trouble cause hey, we didn't say nothin'—did we?

He didn't do nothin'! Didn't say a word. He be crazy or stupid. Why did he want and go do that for? So, every Saturday we'd be waitin'.

I tried to meet him on the road by myself. I'd watch him. He'd touch the trees and sometimes he'd just stand with his face lifted no matter if it was rain or sun touchin' it. I never got the nerve to speak and he was so hard in his thinkin' I don't even know if he knew I was there.

I'm not sure when we noticed the

bandanas. Week after week he said nothin'. I noticed that each time he came to town he got a different bandana hangin' out his back pocket. They'd be all different colors. They ain't nothin' store-bought. They never be the same cause one day we done compared the ones we got. And when he came back from town they wasn't there no more. I found the first one, like some strange bird off a tree.

And whoever finds one has to be treated like a king all that week. Everybody got to do what the king say then... and if you don't get it, well, the old king keeps on bein' king until somebody gets it. I was hopin' everybody would stop botherin' him but they didn't. They thought it was fun and scary and somethin' to do cause it was so hot.

But now, cause of last Saturday, nobody goes up that road on Saturday mornings anymore and I got to see Mat Sterling at his house.

Last Saturday it was so dry and hot. There was a silence that made you forget that the forest had animals and birds and bugs. If you looked down the road the air looked wavy. Everybody was cross. For the last time I said, let's leave him alone. Boy, then everythin' bust wide open. They started shoutin', "Blind man junior! Blind man junior! Go ahead and be with him—you look like him too—black and stinky. We're not going to be your friend anymore. You stand there and look stupid, see if we care. Shh! he's coming!"

They started that hum, this time standin' at different points on the road. They started kickin' pebbles. And he didn't do nothin'. I couldn't stand it. I started shoutin', "Why don't you do somethin'? Why do you let us take your bandanas? Why do you stand at the edge of town at night? I see you, I see you, I see you. You think you better? You think we stupid? Tell us to stop—we'd stop, honest. You, you..." and I took a rock and threw it. You ask me why and I can't tell you. It hit him. I swear, it hit him. He stopped. Shook his head

and turned around to face us. None of us said anything or breathed. There he stood in the middle of the road lookin' like Moses like he do at the edge of town at night. He stood there with his head a little to one side as if trying to see. And for the first time, he had somethin' to say.

"Names may never hurt me but that rock you threw did. I think it is about

*He'd touch the trees
and sometimes he'd
just stand with his
face lifted no matter if
it was rain or sun
touchin' it. I never got
the nerve to speak and
he was so hard in his
thinkin' I don't even
know if he knew I was
there.*

time we all had a talk. I suppose if I had spoken with you earlier, it may not have come to this. I suppose you wonder what I do all day and night and why you and your parents have not been invited to my house. My grandfather saw your families often. Fixed your families' gates, shod your horses, reforgered broken axles. I can't do that but I do have some things to show you. Next Saturday I invite the young man who threw the rock to my house and anyone else who would like to accompany him. Your parents need not be concerned—I will not harm you. They are invited too; I will tell them so on this trip to town. It will be an open house—light up my home as you have never seen—a beacon. Oh, was that LeRoy Washington who spoke? If so tell your grandmother I have something to give her."

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Louisiana Shade
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That's all he said. Everyone looked at each other and then they all had somethin' to say to me.

"Boy, you went and done it now and you're gonna get it. Oh brother, I'm glad I ain't you. Nobody's gonna want to go with you. He might strangle you and hang you over the river to rot. He might burn your eyes out and eat them for dinner."

All I could say was, "Oh, shut up!"

Grandma and LeRoy

Boy, I'm not answering another question about Mat Sterling, not a single one. I do know I'm going to visit. I don't care if the rest of the town act a fool.

"Just imagine, he came to town, opened his mouth and spoke so clear—his voice is deeper than the preacher Michael's. Folks are having a hard time deciding. Not me. You say he got something for me? Goodness, I didn't think he'd remember me, he was so small."

"Remember what, Grandma?"

"Don't start me lying. Baby, now you know Grandma don't lie if she can help it. This will be our secret. Don't you tell a soul. Come here close. That's right. Now."

"Sometimes real early in the morning me, Mat Sterling and his grandfather would go for a walk in the woods. That's after his wife died and I was married to your granddaddy. Oh, I was bold

in those days. If anyone would of found out, I would have been marked a scandal—me a married woman walking in the woods with a widower and his grandchild at that time in the morning. But it was good times and the little Mat would chatter like a squirrel. Real good times...."

"Grandma. Grandma, I have a secret to tell you too. I'll tell Momma and Daddy and I'm going to get punished, but please, I got to go see Mr. Sterling first. I, I threw a rock at him and it hit him and I want to say I'm sorry. I got to go to his house before tonight. Grandma, can I go? Please?"

"Child, why did you throw a rock at Mr. Sterling?"

"Grandma, I don't know but I got to go see him."

"What is this world coming to that my baby is throwing rocks at a blind man? At any man. You're right. You are going to get punished but I'm proud that you know to go pay your respects, say you're sorry, and face the consequences of your acts. Yes, LeRoy, you go and I won't breathe a word of what you got to tell your momma and daddy. Now go on, you hear?"

LeRoy and Sterling

I only know where his house is cause Daddy showed me where we are going' to start huntin' next year when I get my first gun. Those trees look funny, all bent over. Maybe that's what I'm goin' to look like when I get home. But he didn't sound mad at me. He even said that I should

tell Grandma he had something for her.

There it is and there he is standing with his face in the sun.

"Yes? Who is there?"

"It's me, LeRoy Washington. I come to say I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you with that rock. I just wanted you to make them stop and every Saturday you didn't say nothin'. You just let us do it. I didn't mean to tell about you at the edge of town. I kind of thought that was our secret, except you didn't know I saw you, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Well, seeing that is the case, I think you should be the first to enter my house. Don't stand back; I won't bite you and my porch steps don't creak so you don't have to step so gingerly."

"What does my steppin' have to do with ginger?"

"That simply means carefully."

"Excuse me, Mr. Sterling, how come your door look like that?"

"Well, when I was a little older than you, when my family moved up North I met two African carvers and they taught me how to carve. I carved a yam knife first, then a bowl and other things. Doors were a challenge. Where they came from people of high rank had special doors made that told the story of their strength and wisdom. This door has its story too."

"Hey, Grandma was right! She said your great-granddaddy came with seven wagons piled high and here up at the top is a man with seven wagons! How come the bottom half don't have nothin'?"

"I haven't lived it yet. Come inside."

"Mr. Sterling, what are those pictures up there where your wood walls stop? They don't look like nothin' I ever seen before. And how come your walls are like that—half thick, thick wood and then walls like ours? And why you got these wood things where most of us put our livin' room furniture? Did you do all this?"

"Yes."

"But you're blind! You can't see to paint no picture. How can you paint when you can't see?"

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"I always liked the coolness of rain. Often I try to put it on canvas. The coolness, the rain, the wet sound. Sometimes, I try to paint what is behind my eyelids. See, my canvases are large. I need to be able to swing my hands over their surfaces. I paint when I can't say anything with my hands directly. I paint when I want to see. This first one is called *Louisiana Shade*. Isn't it the shape and texture of the soft warmth under a tree in a Louisiana summer? I was trying somehow to capture that space under a large tree but I am certain that's not the definite shape of a tree. And these are *Midnight's Last Call*, *The Close Wind Speaks*, *Tree Talk*, *Black Man Carving*, *Black Folk*, *The Ways of Some Gifted Ancestors* and *Phantasmagoria*.

"My walls touch you back. There are three paths carved into these walls. Close your eyes and you will feel the story. Your hand will find a lone figure standing in front of three portals, three entrances. They lead to the same place but each path is different. You must feel the story, not see it.

"And so my carvings in clay and wood are where you put furniture. They are large because each has its own spirit, its own opening into space.

"Come, follow me upstairs, I will show you where this all comes from."

"Can I touch...?"

"Yes."

"Up here, facing East, the sun finds this room first. This is where I paint."

"It sure is bare. What's that?"

"It's my easel and that row of cans in the rack in front are my paints. I believe the colors are a little like a rainbow."

"Why you got a brush at both ends? Do you paint with both brushes at the same time?"

"Yes, sometimes I do. Both hands have something to say."

"Hey, those are our bandanas!"

"That's right. All the children don't have one yet, so I am making the remaining ones."

"In the first light I paint here. Then the light changes and moves. In this next room I carve. I made the door here and the panels of the walls downstairs."

"What is that big hunk of wood goin' to

be?"

"I don't know yet. Sometimes it takes awhile for a piece to take shape."

"This final room is my clay room. I am here in the evening when it is cool and in shadow. I face the forge here. My grandfather was a great blacksmith and I think of him sometimes, particularly in this room. Come, the time has passed quickly and you must go home.

"Here, give this to your grandmother."

"Oh, she's goin' to like this! She told me a secret and here it is. You made it out of wood. Here you are all walkin' in the

woods—you a little boy, Grandma and your granddaddy, and nobody'll know 'cepin' us!"

"That's right. You go on home. Thank you for coming by and please, come back."

Grandma

He's been carrying a weight too long and he done spun it into something precious.

"It sounds like a dream to me. Precious."

"That weight—he done spun to gold."

Kathy Elaine Anderson is a writer living in Washington, D.C. *Louisiana Shade* first appeared in *Southern Review* summer issue 1985. Her poetry has appeared in several publications including *Callaloo*, *Essence Magazine* and *Obsidian*. She served as co-founder and editor of *Nethula Journal of Contemporary Art and Literature* from 1979 to 1985. She was selected by Gloria Naylor to participate in the PEN New Writers Series in 1987.

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LONG DISTANCE LIFE

By Marita Golden

Three months after the riots, Esther walked back into her mother's house as carefully as she had fled five years earlier. King's words had drawn her, like a clarion call, to the South. His murder, which killed the man and the idealism of a generation, propelled her back home. During the twenty-two hour bus ride from Selma, Alabama to Washington, DC. Esther relived every moment of her time in the South, the land that had nurtured her kin, and then spat them out like a mutinous taste into the arms of the North. And yet the South, its cadence, its promise and betrayal, flourished inside all of them, as strong as a heartbeat. Esther had ventured into that seething terrifying land to change it and in the end, submitted to its more willful touch, felt the South mold and shape her, momentarily break her. A small cardboard suitcase in the overhead compartment held all that she owned in the world—blue jeans, work shirts, underwear she had bought at the Goodwill in Montgomery, a Bible and a dairy she had kept. The diary overflowed with words she had denied her mother.

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From the book *Long Distance Life* by Marita Golden.
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Illustration by Charles Epps



and son—names of men and women she had walked to courthouses to register to vote, a woman beaten to death with a whip in the basement of a jail as a warning to other Black women not to leave the kitchens of whites to protest segregation, of the two lovers she had had—one driven mad by the sight of a friend dredged from the Mississippi River, the other who drove her to the bus station in silence the day she left the South, and told her as they sat together in his car, “The stakes are higher now than ever. If I didn’t leave before, I sure as hell ain’t leaving now.” The book held dreams of her own death—a white man’s hands around her neck or a bullet wound setting her on fire with pain. Into the diary Esther had poured the words that were too heavy, too monumental to enfold in a dutiful letter home.

Beneath a translucent full moon, occupying the Mississippi night sky with an opulent beauty, the tents stretched—crowding the field, dotting the landscape, their tops jutting like steeples filled with uncertain yet persistent hope.

It was almost 11 p.m. and the kerosene lamps in most of the tents had been extinguished. Earlier in the evening the dim lights had lit more tents. All over “Tent City” reflections had danced on the sturdy canvas cloth, as women poked the insufficient wood stoves, men layered cardboard on the tent floors to keep out mud and the November frost and children sucked thumbs in their sleep, tossing on slender army cots.

For three hundred families “Tent City” was now home. Over a thousand people had been evicted from plantations in McComb, Mississippi, for registering to vote and a third of those people had taken refuge here.

Esther kicked dirt over the remaining embers of a small fire that several women had used to cook evening meals. They were women who had started picking cotton at four, had their first child at fourteen, women whose hands were calloused, bruised, as hard as the lives they lived. Women who had seen a doctor maybe once in their lives, a dentist, never, who, if they could read at all, hid that fact from the bosses who owned the land they toiled. The bosses were men and women whose families had owned the dark rich soil for generations and who had held these women in hock, at bay, who demanded their respect, subservience, who could deny them food, shoes, dignity and life. Esther escorted these women to the courthouse, women who had marched through the main streets protesting segregation, women who had reclaimed what their bosses told them they had never had.

Pouring a tin cup of water over the soil to completely douse the fire, Esther heard the men’s voices—flexing and oddly triumphant in the darkness, scattered among the trees surrounding the field. The men sat on the edges of the camp in small groups, their eyes wide and searching for danger, ears cocked and their rifles loaded. The men had ignored the bosses who told them that Esther and all the civil rights workers like her were agitators, Communists. They had dressed in their best overalls or suit, the day they went to the courthouse seeking vindication and freedom. They had turned aside pleas of

cautious, relatives and wives, begging them to “leave well enough alone” and not to risk the little they had. They were men who could have hopped a train North, freeloaded, hoboed their way off the land that enslaved them. But they stayed, wedded to the soil, the plantations, the bosses, by women and children they loved, families they could not live without. They were men who knew they were men because of what they owed to others and what was owed to them.

Esther stood up and wrapped her poncho, made from an army surplus blanket, closer around her arms. A car, its headlights off, cruised past the field, tracking the sounds of life on the campground.

People and families had been arriving at the camp all day, as word had spread of its existence. People had arrived in ramshackle trucks, loaded with bed, cookware, furniture. Some had walked, carrying what they valued most wrapped in knapsacks on their backs, teenagers pulling crumbling wagons burdened with tattered, secondhand possessions. The people had streamed into the camp, arriving thunderous and unexpected like a swollen too-full river.

For over six months, the civil rights workers had walked and driven along the back roads, broken bread with these people over skimpy meals and worked to persuade them to brave their bosses and their deepest fears and register to vote. And when the sharecroppers had taken what was, for some, the longest walk of their lives, they returned to plantations from which they had, by their actions, set themselves free. They returned to face the wrath of people who thought they owned them and who thought these people could be destroyed by forced separation from the land that they did not own and that had always—somehow—betrayed them.

The plantation owners, in league with the White Citizens’ Councils, had pledged to stamp out “the movement” and so the people were driven off the land.

Luta Mae Allen and her husband Sam and their five children were amongst the throng that had arrived that day. Esther was the first person Sam saw when they entered the camp. She was giving out blankets and sleeping bags to a line of people. “I don’t mean to be interrupting nothing here, Miss,” Sam began, removing his cap and gazing at the ground in that automatic gesture of deference Esther had seen people adopt in the presence of whites or those they felt were their “better.” This was the etiquette of oppression, ground in over generations. Esther and all the others had come South to bring these peoples’ gazes up from the ground.

“You’ll have to go to the back of the line,” Esther told him.

“It ain’t a blanket I’m asking for right now. It’s a favor,” Sam said, daring a full glance at Esther. “You come out to the McKessin plantation a few weeks back. It was you and a man come out, talking to the folks about registering. You probably don’t remember us, but we was in the crowd gathered at old Uncle Bob’s place that night. Well, I went on down with one

Continued on page 37

THE

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That time my grandmother dragged me through the perfume aisles at Saks, she held me up by my arm, hissing, "Stand up," through clenched teeth, her eyes bright as a dog's cornered in the light.
She said it over and over, as if she were Jesus, and I were dead. She had been solid as a tree, a fur around her neck, a light-skinned matron whose car was parked, who walked on swirling marble and passed through brass openings—in 1945.
There was not even a black elevator operator at Saks.
The saleswoman had brought velvet leggings to lace me in, had cooed, as if in the service of all grandmothers.
My grandmother had smiled, but not hungrily, not like my mother who hated saleswomen, but wanted to please, and they had smiled back, as if they were wearing wooden collars.
When my legs gave out, my grandmother dragged me up and held me like God holds saints by the roots of the hair. I begged her to believe I couldn't help it. Stumbling, her face white with sweat, she pushed me through the crowd, rushing away from those eyes that saw through her clothes, under her skin, all the way down to the transparent genes confessing.

Toi Derricote's new collection, *Captivity*, is due out this fall from University of Pittsburgh Press. Her second collection, *Natural Birth*, was published in 1983 as part of the Crossing Press Feminist Series and her first collection, *The Empress of the Death House*, was published in 1978 by Lotus Press. Toi teaches at Old Dominion University in Virginia.



Long Distance Life

Continued from page 35

of the workers and registered and now I ain't got no place to stay. But I got a few dollars and I'm going to Hattiesburg to see if my folks'll take us in. I'm asking you to keep an eye out for my family here while I'm gone."

Luta Mae Allen stood beside her husband, her belly protruding in what, Esther guessed, was the eighth month of pregnancy. She stood beside her husband as fragile as a flower, as sturdy as a tree, old woman's age lines marring her still-young face. The children, in ill-fitting clothes covered with dust and grime gathered on the trip to the camp, stared openly at Esther and at the activity around them—people arriving, stations set up to give out clothing donated by people in the North, firewood, canned and surplus dried goods and tents.

"I'll be back in a day or so, Sam said. "Will you just watch over them? And see that they get everything they need?"

Esther promised she would and Sam told the oldest boy to do what he was told and to "take care of your mama."

The Allen family became Esther's charge. She got someone else to give out the blankets while she found a tent where Luta Mae could get off her feet. Luta Mae took slow, painful steps and sat down and accepted a glass of water gratefully. The oldest boy, Ben, who possessed his father's spry combination of hustle and self-effacement, managed to keep an eye on the other children while getting the supplies and help they required to set up while Esther continued working with other families. Later, she ate a dinner of cornbread and pork and beans with Luta Mae and her children. As they ate, Luta Mae said, "I'd be right grateful if you'd share our tent with us tonight. This baby feels like it might come any minute and having you nearby would be a blessing. We got two beds. You take one. The children'll make pallets on the floor. Sam'll be back soon, then we won't ask nothing more of you."

When Esther entered Luta Mae's tent that night, she stepped over several feet. The children slept on blankets on the cardboard floor, their aggressive, contented snores warming the tent like a smoldering fire. Esther removed her shoes and lay on the cot, pulling her poncho tighter around her shoulders. Her body smelled old and unwashed. The demands of the past two days had sunk into her muscles and congealed into a fatigue that after all this time, still could defeat her. And yet she knew it would be an hour or more before she slept. Fear, anxiety, apprehension, formed like a cloud over her each night, making her wakeful and strangely excited. Even as she lay in repose, her heart beat as if she were pursued, her eyes fearfully scan the darkness. "Maybe us getting throwed off McKessin's place was a good thing." Luta Mae said lazily, as though continuing a conversation.

"Well, registering to vote was a good thing, no matter what the price," Esther replied, grateful for the woman's voice.

"Sam's folks and my folks been on that land long as we could remember. And no matter how much cotton we planted or growed, we never got outta McKessin's debt. Sam says now we can start over. We ain't got much. Just what we brung with us."

"Luta Mae, that's all you need."

\$ LOTTERY DREAM \$

*little old black lady living on SSI
eating leftover's leftovers praying
that the rent won't go up praying that
neckbones are still on sale so she can
save a dollar to buy a \$lottery
ticket\$ black America's gateway to the
American dream one chance in 50
million but a little hope is better
than none and if she wins just think
she can buy all the neckbones she
wants and even pay a white woman to
cook them for her she can dream...
can't she?*

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Washington, D.C.

"You got a man? A husband up North?" she inquired, her voice melting with a warm familiarity.

"Yes, there's somebody I love."

"How'd you leave him to come down here?" Luta Mae wondered, surprise raising her voice.

"You know, Luta Mae, sometimes I don't know. But I had to come here. When I left, there was nothing else I could do," Esther said, thinking of Randolph, really thinking of him for the first time in months. He lived in her memory, bold, inescapable. She never had to think of him. He was simply always there.

"You got kids?" Luta Mae asked.

"One. A boy. He's a little older than Ben." Esther confided softly.

"You miss him?"

"Sure. But I'm doing this for him too, Luta Mae. It's hard to see it, but I'm here for both of us."

This is what Esther told herself every day. And there were even days when it worked. Days when her inability to "mother" her own son and her willingness to lay her life, sanity, and tranquility on the line for people who were strangers, seemed less of the obscene contradiction she felt it to be in her heart. He would never forgive her, that is what Esther feared most when she thought of Logan. And Randolph would never again love her. Yet Naomi's embrace soothed Esther into sleep each night, no matter where she slept. She had tutored youngsters the age of her son in Freedom Schools across the South, yet had not seen Logan's report card in four years. She had lain in bed beside men with whom she had shared terror and bravery and clung to them as lovers. Yet she had not once written to Randolph, the man whose measure she had yet to find. But soon, very soon, she knew, there would be dues to pay. She wanted to pay her debts, collect what

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Photo ©1988 by Gabriel Tait

New Woman

*She needs room of her own,
more room than her body width and length
measured in a straight-jacket of complacent sleep.*

*Awake, she needs room to thrash,
room that stretches like a Sahara,
its dunes rounded over sacrificial gifts,*

*her children's demands swaddled in its dust,
the men of her life neutered,
their totems strewn like cactus in the sand.*

Bettye T. Spinner is an English instructor at Moorestown High School in New Jersey and an educational consultant. She is completing her Ph.D. dissertation on teaching poetry in high school.

★ Long Distance Life

Continued from page 37

was owed her. And she had begun to feel the stirrings of a need for home and a home—the face of her son, the sound of Randolph's voice her mother's love. She was a prodigal, selfish and shameless, yet she was a woman larger now than even she knew. It would be a while, but soon she would go home, to see if she still had one, to build one if she did not.

"Y'all some brave folks to come down here," Luta Mae said sleepily.

"You're the brave ones," Esther said.

Luta Mae yawned and turned on her side, the springs of the army cot squeaking, as she concluded, "I think maybe we's all brave."

The battlegrounds of the movement were plantations, classrooms, bus stations, swimming pools, lunch counters, libraries, courthouses, department stores, churches, and jail cells. In southwest Georgia, Esther and twenty-five others were jailed in a cell made for four people, for leading a prayer vigil. Outside the jail hundreds were being arrested in waves. Inside the cell, humanity, packed as tightly as in a slave coffin, persevered, overcame. Freedom songs rang through the jail—pure, righteous, undefeated. Breakfast and dinner were cold grits and fatback on a tin plate. The toilet backed up after one day. At night the cell trembled with the sounds of fear and bad dreams rising like a fever from troubled, uneasy sleep. Esther wrote messages on scraps of toilet paper to movement workers in other cells and watched the orderlies smuggle the words across the hall. She spent fourteen days in the cell, watched as others were bailed out one by one. Esther and the other workers remained, in solidarity with those who could not make bail.

For years after that jailing, those fourteen days when her life was confined and determined by the borders of a cell haunted Esther in nightmares and loomed behind her when she had left the jail cell. The word *freedom*, sung or chanted or shouted, swelled in her mouth and in her imagination with a fervor so intense, uttering the word could choke her with tears. At unexpected moments, once when she lay in the arms of a lover in a small house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, once as she sat teaching a man to read—the bars of the cell flashed before her eyes, as gruesome as the unexpected sight of blood, and yanked her back behind their steely, desolate embrace. Both times Esther ran as far as she could go from the cell's grasp, ran to feel the wind against her skin, the sun on her arms and the feel of freedom all around her.

How would she ever be normal again, when the abnormal and the extraordinary had scarred her so deep? Esther had witnessed cowardice that made her mute and courage of the kind that made her want to live forever, just to witness it again. And yet it was over. It was done. And there was no more for her to do. Others stayed because they were shaped to run the long distance life in a manner that did not belong to her. Esther left the South because she knew it was simply time to come home.



Though she was only sixty-two, Naomi's hair was now prematurely, solidly white. Awaiting Esther's return, praying for her safety had driven the rich black color from her hair. The sight of her mother's hair and the crevice like worry lines across Naomi's forehead informed Esther, as did nothing else, of the price her family had paid for what she had chosen to do. Naomi said nothing the evening she saw Esther get out of a taxi in front of the house, for she had seen her daughter's return in a dream a week earlier. Naomi was not surprised, she was limp with gratitude. As she watched Esther get out of the taxi and turn to look at Naomi and the house, Naomi stood up from the metal folding chair she sat in and shouted to Esther, "Come on up here, gal. I knew you was coming home tonight and I got a sweet potato pie in the house with your name on it." Esther ascended the stairs, walking with an assurance, a resoluteness, flaunted like a prize she had won. She was heavier and there was a bright tremor of sadness in her eyes—a clue to what she had seen—that Naomi knew would always be there. The sight of Esther had started Naomi's heart beating so fast she thought she might faint and so she held on tighter to the bannister, clutching it to calm her over excited spirit. And when Esther reached the top step and gazed into her mother's face, she could only say what she had wanted, through her love of Randolph, the birth of her child, her flight from them all, to say, "Mama I'm home."

That night Esther sat up with her mother and son until 3 a.m. Logan, now nearly as tall as Randolph, muscular, his face both boyish and restlessly masculine, held Esther in his arms in silent, total possession when he bounded into the living room, summoned from next door by a phone call from Naomi. Esther felt in her son's embrace everything he expected of her, all he had ever asked and would now demand. And she felt his tears against her neck and for the first time she held him as he held her, unconditionally, fiercely. Esther lay Logan's head on her suddenly strong shoulder and stroked him, stroked the child he would never be again, stroked the man he was becoming. But finally she had to break Logan's grip, for he held her for the five years she had missed. And Esther knew what her son refused to believe—they would never get those years back.

They all sat up until early morning, Naomi plying Esther with food, Logan alternating between moments when he looked at his mother as if he did not believe what he saw and nonstop questions about what she had done.

The next morning Naomi brought Esther her breakfast in bed. She entered the bedroom and found Esther awake, staring out the window gazing at the street. "I brought you two strips of bacon, two eggs, grits and toast, just like you like them," Naomi said, placing the tray on Esther's lap.

"Oh, mama, after all that food last night," Esther groaned.

"That's why I didn't fix much. Just go on and eat. It'll be good for you," Naomi shushed her.

Watching Esther eat slowly, Naomi said, "I'm not gonna ask you no whole lot about what you seen and did down there, I can look at your face and get my answer. I just want you to know I

was always praying and I was always proud of you. I don't know if I could've done what you did."

"Mama, you had no road map when you left down there and came up here and you found your way pretty good. I learned to read signs by watching you." Esther looked at Naomi as the sun filtered through the curtains.

"Mama, your hair. I know that's from me. You were praying. And maybe you were proud, but I know you were worried. I made you old."

"You turned me gray," Naomi said primly. "That's not the same thing as getting old. I ain't decided yet to get old. Don't know when I'll get around to doing that."

"Mama!"

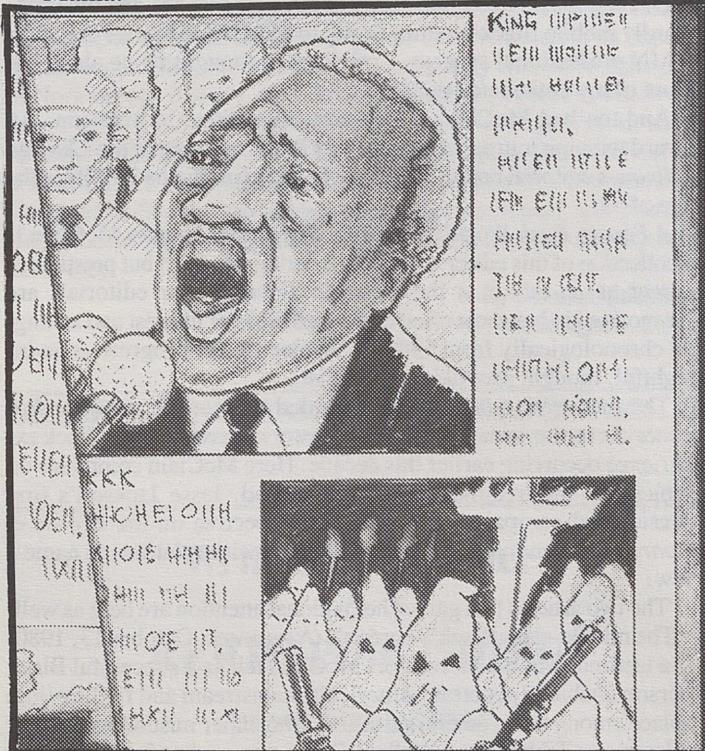


Illustration by Charles Epps

"Don't start apologizing. I might just put you on a bus and send you back on down there. You made your bed. You chose your life. It's not mine, its yours. Don't apologize to nobody."

"What do I tell Logan?" Esther asked, letting her fork fall from her hand with a sigh.

"Tell him the same thing you told me, 'I'm home!' That's what a man would say and everybody'd feel like they'd been blessed. And wouldn't nobody dare mention the time he'd been away. He was your son while you was gone. Just like I was your mama."

"How do I explain?"

"You can't." Naomi assured her daughter, as if these words explained everything. "Baby, you can't."

When she finished eating Esther bundled herself beneath the spread. She lay looking out on the sidewalk, too full of the pain

Continued on page 42

A Foot In Each World

Essay and articles, edited by Clarence Page.

Northwestern University Press, 1986

Cloth \$25.95 Paper \$10.95

Too bad I was unfamiliar with Leanita McClain while attending college in the early 80's. To me, a young Black media major with no recollection of Jim Crow, viewing daily newscasts a la Bryant Gumble and learning editing from an instructor who was also an international news editor at the *Washington Post*, an accomplished journalist like McClain seemed more norm than phenomenon. Had I been enlightened about the constant struggle that she and other upwardly mobile Blacks endure trying to MAINTAIN after they ATTAIN professional success, I might have thought twice about the clout of my anticipated degree.

And too bad McClain lacked the wherewithal to maintain. An award winning journalist and the first Black member of the *Chicago Tribune*'s editorial board, her struggle ended in suicide in 1984 at the age of 32.

A Foot in Each World: Essays an Articles by Leanita McClain is a collection of this editor's best work during her short but prestigious career as an editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. Her editorials are categorized in her most often expressed areas of interest and arranged chronologically from 1980-84 displaying her progress as an insightful, thought provoking journalist.

The first section of this book, entitled "Race," is comprised of editorials on the social, political and historical events of the Black experience occurring earlier this decade. Here McClain comments on topics like the treatment of Blacks abroad, Jesse Jackson's first presidential campaign, a 30 year retrospective on the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision and Black/Jewish relations to name a few.

The two articles that gained her national attention are here as well. "The middle-class Black's burden" (*Newsweek*, October 13, 1980) is a testimony to the discomfort McClain felt as a successful Black person unable to penetrate America's mainstream and finding little solace among the brothers and sisters who either misunderstood her dilemma or dubbed her a "sellout." She sums up her frustration best in the opening paragraph: "I am a member of the Black middle class who has had it with being patted on the head by white hands and slapped in the face by Black hands for my success."

"How Chicago Taught Me to Hate White People" (*Washington Post*, July 24, 1983) was especially controversial if for the title alone. In it McClain expressed her extreme disappointment at the extent to which racist attitudes prevailed in Chicago during Harold Washington's race for mayor. Several Chicago whites were incensed not only with the nature of the article, but also with the fact that it appeared in a major out-of-state newspaper. It even prompted a city alderman to introduce a resolution to city council demanding that McClain apologize to the citizens of Chicago and that the *Tribune* reprimand her.

"Politics" is the lengthiest section in this book, but the most limited in scope. Aside from two editorials that could be considered universally themed, "Militancy and black women" and "Crimes against free expression," this section is devoted more to Chicago

politics right before and during Washington's first term as mayor. Though this may have been an exciting time in Chicago politics, for those unfamiliar with or uninterested in it, these editorials seem especially dated and boring.

The final sections of this book, "Crime and Punishment," "Home and Family" and "Schools," contain McClain's most humanistic editorials. Drawing from personal references and experiences make her opinions on issues like the Atlanta child murders, the drug epidemic in many urban areas, reproductive rights and the declining quality of public school systems especially hard hitting. The genuine concern that McClain had for the welfare of Chicago as a community becomes apparent from these editorials particularly. Unfortunately these sections are the briefest in the book.

The introduction, written by Clarence Page, and the afterword by Charles Chi Haveli, attempt to acquaint readers with the woman behind the strong columns as well as speculates on possible reasons for her suicide. Page, McClain's ex-husband and *Tribune* editor, shares his personal remembrances of McClain and those of some of her colleagues and friends (all of whom are males) to describe her as "warm, witty, influential," yet "alienated, frustrated" and lacking confidence in her own success. The four poems written by McClain at various times during her life that he cites suggest that she had a melancholy personality aside from any professional dismay.

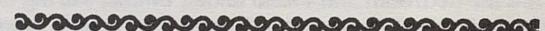
Haveli, whose association with McClain is unclear, says she was "a victim of the no-man's-land" in which Black journalists sometimes find themselves, criticized by both whites and blacks. "...although she intellectually understood her paradoxical position, she was emotionally devastated by it."

But it is still a wonder how someone so intelligent and talented managed to slip through the cracks so easily. What was her rapport with her family whom she refers to fondly in some of her editorials? Did she have any close Black female friends or colleagues? Had she even cultivated support systems that could have helped her to deal with the often referred to "duality" that proved fatal for her?

In one of her editorials, McClain describes the eternal optimist/eternal pessimist tendency historically used by Black Americans as a survival technique. "The psychology draws from the old proverb 'Look for the best, expect the worst,'" she wrote. Optimism aids in confronting adversity, and pessimism is the safety net to fall back on when hopes are smashed. In many ways McClain was the embodiment of that collective optimism that Black Americans can overcome centuries of adversity. But, by not believing in her own existence as a viable Black journalist, she cancelled out all hope.

Too bad about Leanita McClain. There is no doubt that she would have been a strong journalistic voice had she lived. Fortunately her writing has been preserved.

by Julia Chance



HAIKU

*When the blind girl speaks
of beauty, sound coils
(a) mimicry of sight*

Ramona L. Hyman
Philadelphia, PA



Narratives:

Poems In The Tradition of Black Women

by Cheryl Clarke. New York, Kitchen Table Press, \$4.95

In the introduction to this powerful collection of 15 poems, Cheryl Clarke refers to the cultural-political climate which consistently undervalues and dismisses the power of poetry. The vignettes contained within the pages of "Narratives" constantly do battle with that damnable condition, and, through the use of Clarke's strength as both a gifted chronicler, and as a poet unafraid to let the language and events speak for themselves, the reader is frequently rewarded with poetry filled with determination, brutal as anything seen on a newspaper's front page.

As the book's title implies, *Narratives* tours the lives of Black women like Vashti, who "was dull in school/but broke no rule. Teachers laughed openly at her stutter. Frequently calling upon her to read aloud. Cowed, her face swelling like an udder, she would rise to the effort/and the humiliation."

One of the purposes of art is to bring us back in contact with the everyday, and Clarke's work excels in its ability to do so. In pieces like the aforementioned "if you black, get back," the subject's horrifying encounter is as real as yesterday. Within the space of those few concluding lines, we are confronted with emotional dynamite.

Clarke's poetic portraiture also extends itself to romantic areas. The voice in "The moon in cancer" speaks with great tenderness of Rachel, who is "cancer, tropical, lovable, self-contained, gregarious, predatory and mean." This description stands in contrast to the speaker who "only ever wanted/Rachel between me/like the moon/Orange and sandwiched between/charcoal clouds."

But, there are flaws. The longer poems don't always hold together, leaving the reader awash in a disappointing mix of suddenly dulled poetic knives. Poems like "April 4, 1968" have the dubious honor of being preceded by titles like "The Older American," a tough act for almost any poem to follow. Most poets would be more than content to come up with something as riveting as "April," and granted, its flaws are fairly minor. But in a collection as strong as this one, even the slightest shortfalls call attention to themselves. This by no means clouds Clarke's achievement. *Narratives* is a success.

by Reuben Jackson

Say That The River Turns:

The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks.

Edited by Haki R. Madhubuti. 84p. Third World Press,
Chicago, 1987. \$8.95

This volume of poetry, anecdotes and critical essays has a difficult task before it. How to capture the enormous impact Gwendolyn Brooks has had on American letters without succumbing to rhetoric

or maudlin overstatement. How to touch base with the poet's various phases: The lyrical isolation present in "Maud Martha," and the concrete hard imagery of poems like "We Real Cool."

Happily, *River* meets these challenges and then some. Madhubuti's assemblage of relatively well known writers like South African exile Dennis Brutus, Sonia Sanchez, and himself, combined with authors whose work is not as appreciated as it should be (like Raymond Patterson), does much to further the reputations of these authors, and in its own way, illustrate something Brooks wrote in 1973 concerning poems that successfully call all Black people: Black people in taverns, Black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate... For in addition to the tribute poems one might well expect in such a volume, the reader encounters writing of a consistently high quality.

There are occasional lapses into sentimentality; poems and essays too wrapped up in the business of praise to leave much of an impact on the reader. Still, one of the highlights, poetry comes from the pen of Nora Brooks Blakely, Mrs. Brooks' daughter, a piece in which we learn, among other things, about Brooks' fervent interest in soap operas. While this tidbit may strike some Brooks' fans as trivial or unbefitting, it does much to illustrate the genuine lack of pretension Gwendolyn Brooks has always shown her audiences and poetry. Other facets of her remarkable literary vision are well represented here, too.

by Reuben Jackson
Washington, D.C.

SEE SHOOTING STAR BOOKSTORES ON PAGE 33

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Long Distance Life

Continued from page 39

and triumph of what she had seen on her mother's face and in her son's eyes, to imagine a way to fashion an answer to Logan's questions. And yet he was on the threshold of entering the world that Esther had helped to shape and so he would insist on answers as neither Naomi or Randolph would.



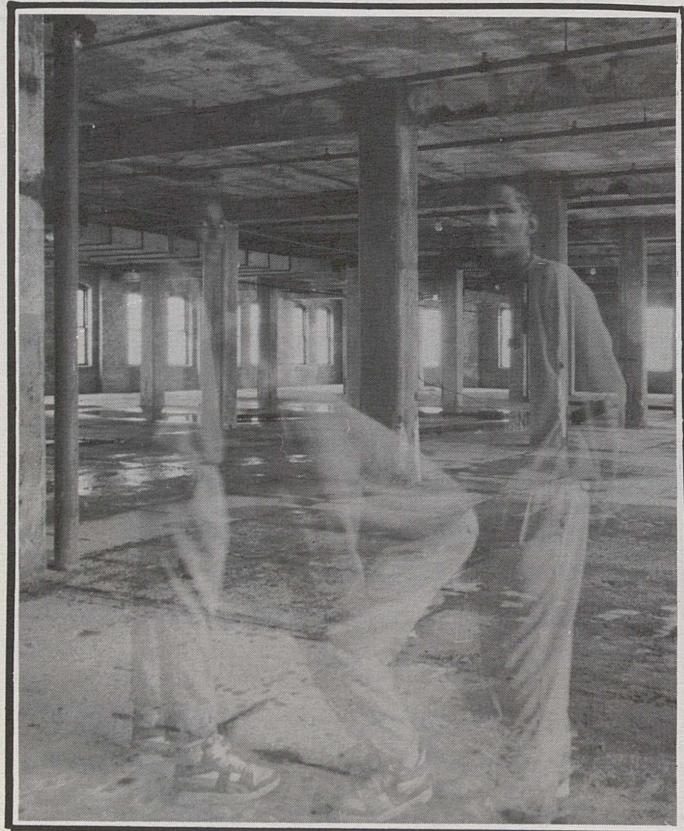
Marita Golden is the author of the autobiographical memoir, *MIGRATIONS OF THE HEART*, and the novel *A WOMAN'S PLACE*, both originally published by Doubleday and recently re-issued in paperback by Ballantine. Her next book, a novel, *LONG DISTANCE LIFE*, will be published in the fall of 1989 by Doubleday.



*Swatting songs
Black brooms stroke
Wooden splintered floors*

*The blues:
A moaning
Yeah!*

Ramona Lahleet Hyman
Philadelphia, PA



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To register, contact *Shooting Star Productions, Inc.*, 7123 Race Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15208 (412) 731-7039.

CAN'T NOBODY SAY JOSHUA

Dedicated to Grandmom Sarah

On Tuesdays
 She would seize
 A stained plastic bowl and a
 Crumpled brown bag of stringbeans
 Sit down in
 HER chair
 Randomly examine the
 Fresh green torpedoes between
 soap operas and commercials
 Always outwardly dry, the
 Beans would SNAP with a
 Moist POP underneath the
 Pressure of 60-year-old fingers

Unintentionally
 She would
 pop-pop-pop-drop
 pop-pop-pop-drop
 First one end, then
 The other, then
 An even break down the middle
 Pop-pop-pop-drop
 Bean bowl on the left
 Bean bag on the right
 Each dismemberment
 Knowing its place
 The kitchen smelled of
 Neckbones so thick it
 Cut through the maze of cigarette smoke that
 Haloed
 HER head
 "Can't nobody say Joshua like
 Reeva can say Joshua," her
 Sixty-year-old voice bouncing from the TV

First the plastic bowl of beans
 Rinsed in one smooth motion of triumph
 Each fiber reexamined, then
 Added to the steaming pot
 Salt, pepper, a touch of onion powder
 With the beans now quietly tossing
 A satisfying smile etched across
 HER coffee colored face
 She would sit down in
 HER chair
 "Ummp ummp ummp," shaking
 HER grayed head of hair at
 The TV screen
 "Can't nobody say Joshua like
 Reeva can say Joshua."

Sharon Leonard Goodman offers poetry workshops in schools through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Many of her poems use blues rhythms and structure. This is her first appearance in *Shooting Star Review*.

GRANDMOTHER

I ussta watch Grandmomma
 in the mornings
 as she sat in her rockin' chair
 dippin' snuff
 spittin' tobacco
 to the rhythm of gospel music

Her face was framed
 with strands of gray hair
 smooth as corn silk

I ussta watch Grandmomma
 at night
 as she sat on the side of her bed
 combin' her hair
 and talkin' 'bout how it was down south

In the fields
 pickin' cotton
 an' corn
 an' sugar cane

Her fingers led the pieces of hair
 into shiny braids of flowin' gray
 soft as the cotton from the fields

Aisha Eshe, a novelist and poet, has published widely. Her novella, *Blood at the Root*, will be issued this fall by Esoterica Press in Barstow, California. Currently she is working on a play about her mother.

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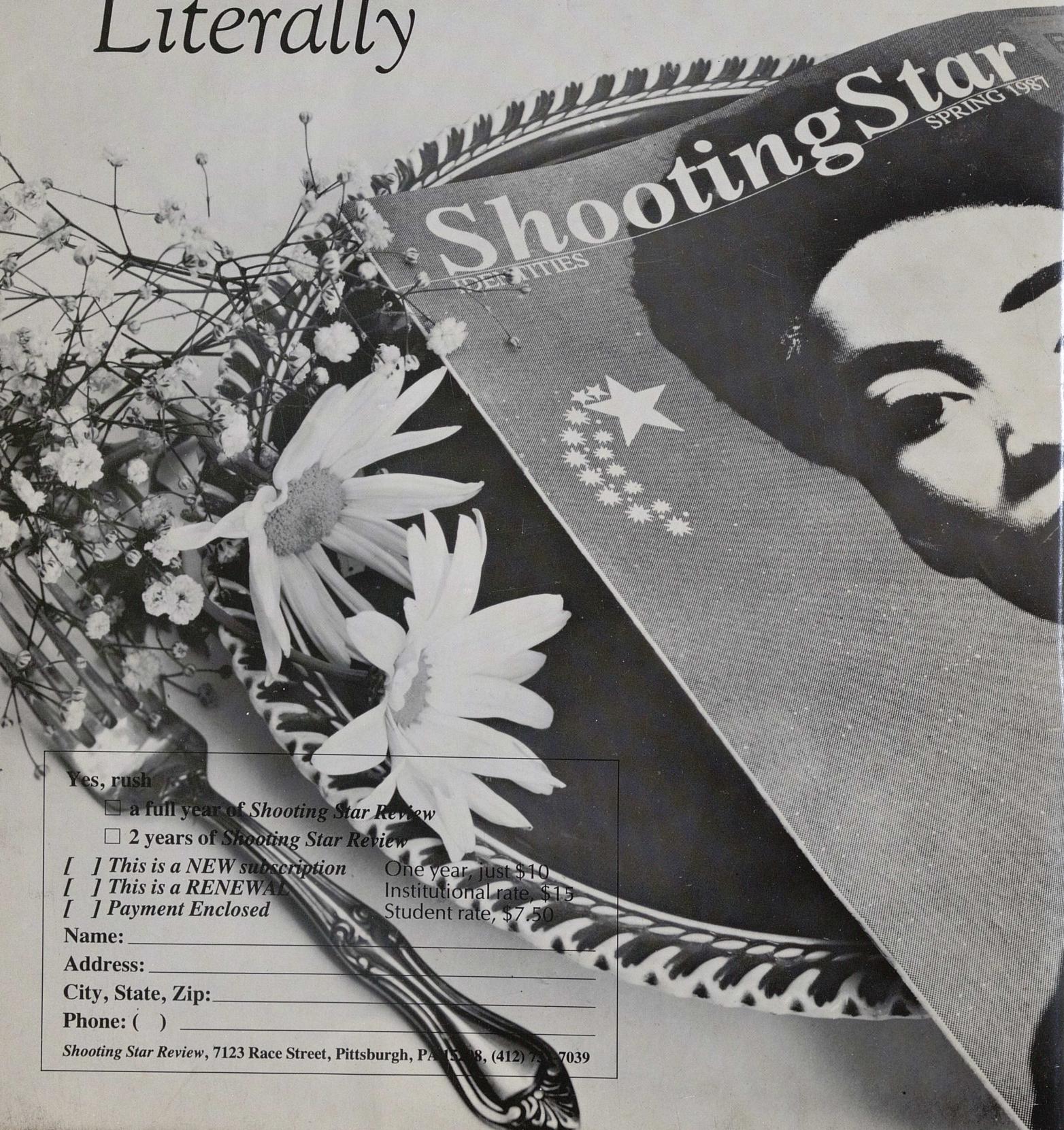
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