



# ShootingStar

*African American Literary Magazine*

# Resolutions New & Beginnings

*Featured Artists  
in this issue*

*Toni Cade Bombara  
Chris Gilbert  
Harold Neal  
August Wilson*

**Winter, 1989   Spring, 1990**

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# ShootingStar

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Black Literary Magazine

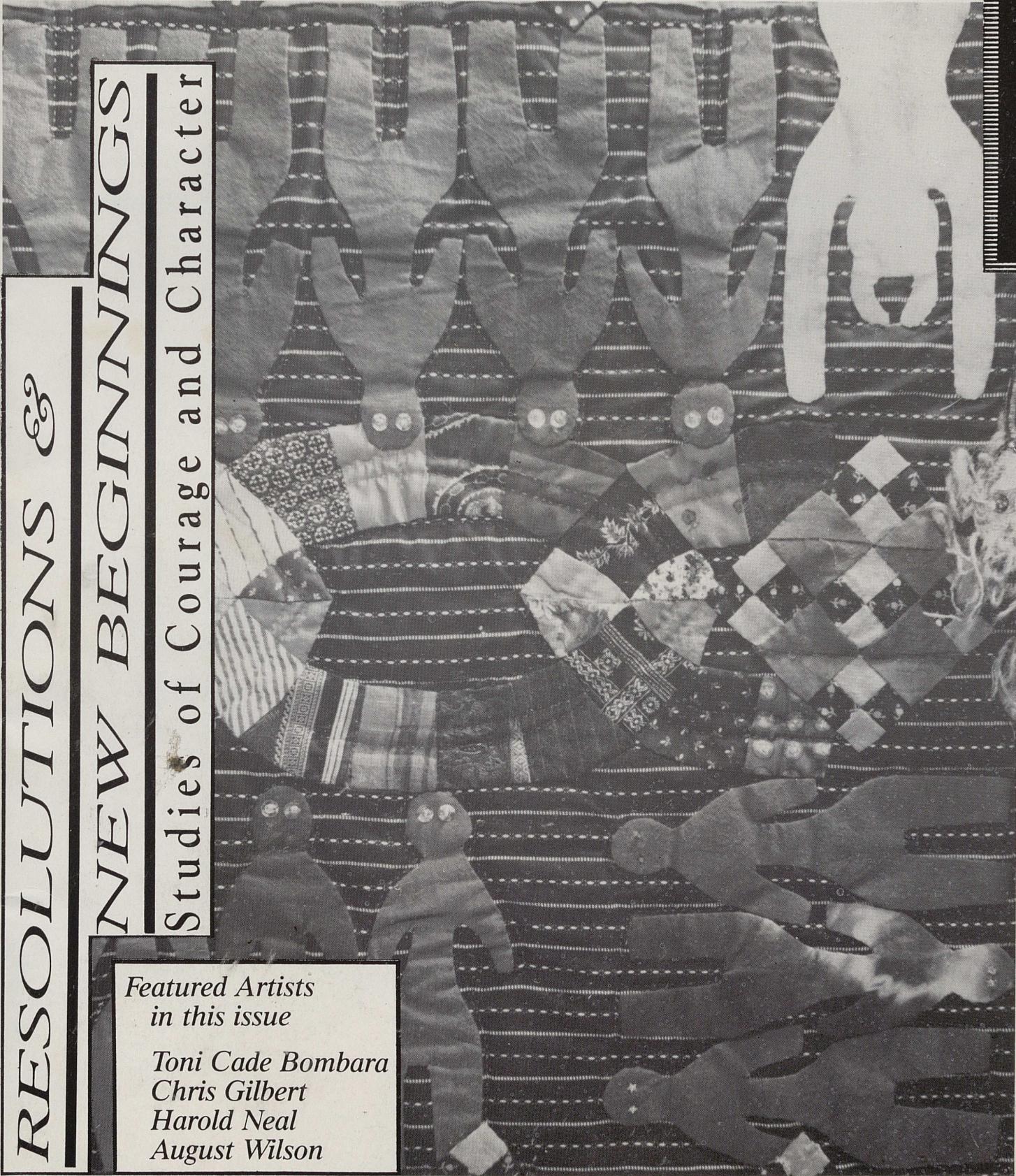
RESOLUTIONS &

NEW BEGINNINGS

Studies of Courage and Character

Featured Artists  
in this issue

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Harold Neal  
August Wilson



Winter, 1989 Spring, 1990

\$2.95

REVIEW

# YOU KNOW SHE IS A FINE BLACK WOMAN IF...

*She is disciplined and FAMILY oriented.*

*She is proud of her HERITAGE and promotes it rather than tries to camouflage it.*

*She knows the value of an EDUCATION and is always actively seeking to further her own as well as others.*

*She patronizes Black ART, MUSIC, and LITERATURE.*

*She is working towards a goal of SELF-IMPROVEMENT in order to advance HUMANITY rather than burden it.*

*She has a NURTURING spirit and can SOOTHE even the deepest wounds.*

*She can LEAD as aptly as she follows.*

*She takes the utmost PRIDE in her appearance, yet she is not vain.*

*She has the COURAGE to speak out against INJUSTICES and actively seeks their immediate end.*

*She has the utmost respect for other CULTURES.*

*Beyond her Faith, Wisdom, and Love, she is a pillar of TRUST.*

*She knows that she is FREE only because she has a DREAM.*

*She is not afraid of FAILURE, for she is living proof of "what does not kill you will make you stronger".*

*She keeps material things in the right PERSPECTIVE.*

*She has the utmost respect for PROUD Black men.*

*She is at PEACE with God, whatever she conceives the Creator to be.*

*FX Walker II*

*"Amenhotep"  
Lexington, KY*

# YOU KNOW HE IS A PROUD BLACK MAN IF...

*He is disciplined and FAMILY oriented.*

*He is proud of his HERITAGE and promotes it rather than tries to camouflage it.*

*He is an excellent role model for our YOUTH.*

*He GIVES freely of himself in order to further someone else's dreams.*

*He is ECONOMICALLY literate and POLITICALLY sophisticated.*

*He is working towards a goal of SELF-IMPROVEMENT in order to advance HUMANITY rather than burden it.*

*He patronizes Black ART, MUSIC, and LITERATURE.*

*He knows the value of an EDUCATION and actively seeks to further his own as well as others around him.*

*He has the utmost respect for other CULTURES.*

*He has the courage to speak out against INJUSTICES and actively seeks their immediate end.*

*Beyond his courage, wisdom, and strength, he is a pillar of PERSEVERANCE.*

*He knows he is FREE only because he has a DREAM.*

*He is strong enough to be SENSITIVE and sensitive enough to see the strength in UNDERSTANDING.*

*He actively seeks out and respects the counsel of his ELDERS.*

*He is not afraid of FAILURE for he is living proof of "what does not kill you will make you stronger".*

*He has the utmost respect for PROUD Black women.*

*He is at PEACE with God, Whatever he conceives the Creator to be.*

*FX Walker II*

*"Amenhotep"  
Lexington, KY*

## PUBLISHER'S STATEMENT

Greetings. Welcome to *Shooting Star's* twelfth and thirteenth issues. This special issue combines Winter, 1989's "Resolutions and New Beginnings" and Spring, 1990's "Studies of Courage and Character." While simultaneously ending the third and launching *Shooting Star's* fourth year, this issue touches on themes that acknowledge the past while offering thoughts for the future. Please also notice the design changes that we hope will make *Shooting Star* more pleasant to read.

At this time, I'd like to thank the many volunteers who have helped *Shooting Star* keep flying. We have managed, somehow, to produce 13 issues over the past three years, and this feat was accomplished with less than \$70,000. This year, *Shooting Star's* administrators and trustees will be working hard to build *Shooting Star's* quality and to assure that those who have volunteered so freely are working for more than free.

*Shooting Star* will need a lot of short and long-term help, and we can all start now, in one of the most important ways ... by updating our subscriptions and by encouraging others to do the same.

Some very talented artists will be exploring important topics throughout 1990. Our creative writers have a lot to offer, and it's great knowing that you and your friends will share the *Shooting Star* adventure.

*Sandra Gould Ford*  
Founder and President  
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FREE Submission Guidelines with helpful information, including upcoming themes and maximum word counts available with SASE. All submissions must include a self-addressed envelope with sufficient return postage (SASE). *Shooting Star Review* is completely free-lance written and open for graphics, photography, illustrations, short fiction, folktales, essays, reviews and poetry. Written work must be neatly typed, double-spaced and legible. Send poetry and fiction in separate envelopes. Artists submitting material for publication can come from any cultural background, but all work must relate to the Black experience.

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### COVER ART

*The cover is a section from Tina Brewer's sculptured quilt about the Middle Passage titled "The Harvest." Tina is a fiber artist living in Pittsburgh, PA. Her husband, John, describes the quilt as follows: The African Slave Trade harvested over 40 million men, women and children who were frequently stacked on slave ships. The harvesting of these multi-colored people required more than pacts with the dominant tribes. Devilish spirits were summoned. The top of the quilt has glittering Harvest Birds who will deliver those selected. Special batons woven into the fabric symbolize complex allegorical allusions. One figure, however, is not an allusion. He is stripped of color, feeling and love. He is the essence of evil.*



# Black Literary Awards: From The Back of The Bus

African Americans must consider complete emancipation from literary sharecropping by establishing our own book awards. We are now in a glorious point of our third Renaissance, (the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement were first and second respectively). For African Americans to continue looking for niggardly reparations from the European table of "qualified" or prize worthy writing, is to maintain one foot in the field and on foot in the big house.

In 1988, my chest, initially, burst with pride at the unity Robert Allen and Maya Angelou et al. showed when they gathered to protest Toni Morrison's exclusion from the Pulitzer Prize lists. After all, Morrison had produced five major works of fiction. But, in light of recent losses in the courts and business communities, I realize the space "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison" absorbed in The New York Times should have been an article inaugurating The African American Book Award, with Toni Morrison its first celebrant. By failing to establish an African institution of letters, we — in lieu of breaking the chain — added another link.

In little more than 100 years of freedom from actual bondage, we have built many admirable institutions. We must continue this intra-strengthening tradition. When our community organizations went wanting, the Black United Fund was established. When our doctors were professionally persecuted, the National Medical Association was founded. When our worshipers were

ripped from their kneeled positions and cast into the streets, the African Methodist Episcopal church began. It would behoove us, and it would certainly continue to save us, to abort prioritized racial assimilation like the AIDS plague it is, and build while rebuilding our own institutions for our liberators, our writers.

The Pulitzer is fine; it has become coveted. The Bancroft Prize from Columbia University and the Before Columbus Foundation also have their place. Through the latter two, in 1986, Jacqueline Jones received \$4,000 from *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, and editors Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua gathered coveted "literary achievement" plumes for *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. But, the African American Book Award, established and maintained by African writers in America and abroad, would become — through proper planting and nurturing — as coveted as all of the aforementioned.

I believe that Morrison would have captured the Pulitzer for *Beloved* with or without that infamous article questioning the Pulitzer committee's history of "oversight and harmful whimsy". But, we ALL would have shared victory if we had, and if we will, display the pride in self that heros such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Richard Allen took years of pain to teach us. Clearly, we are listening neither to the ancestors

nor contemporary history, and we are paying the price in self-esteem.

Our writers are much maligned by others. The Notable Book of 1986 — a list that has been in existence for 40 years — included no books by African Americans. The American Book Award, in 1986, went to a non-African while that year's best-seller lists boasted commercial hits like *Fatherhood* by Bill Cosby and *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme* my Mary Wilson.

Even with Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize for Literature, we, a nation within a nation, were not prepared to present either Soyinka or Morrison with anything from the African-American family. Instead, we form fighting committees to push our writers toward established European awards. Year after year after year, we confine ourselves and our writers to more exclusion, hurt and "after-thoughtness".

Literary sharecroppers are doomed to malnutrition. We must break the chains that bind us to non-productive and self-destructive racial and literary assimilation. Let's build a literary institution that moves us from the back of the bus into the driver's seat.

★  
Sandra West  
Newark, NJ

# K I N

(For Yvonne)

*At a glance  
I saw in your eyes  
My same homesickness and longing  
For plateaus of being and shores  
From which we have drifted.  
My arms would shield you, I vowed,  
On the whale's road.  
In your wake  
I would take comfort on my way home.*

*Washing ashore,  
On the traffic island you christened a "park"  
(Or any place we paused to fall and laugh),  
We hold class:  
In that school  
I flourish under your watchful eye  
Whose beam splits clouds  
When my prospects dim  
Beneath the dense canopies of culture.*

*In my reveries,  
I plow sun-licked fields in your honor,  
For, as I unfold to my fullest  
And you swell to yours,  
We shall create the world anew  
And feel ourselves most at home.*

Rodney G. Holman  
New York, NY



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# The Accident

Jewell Parker Rhodes

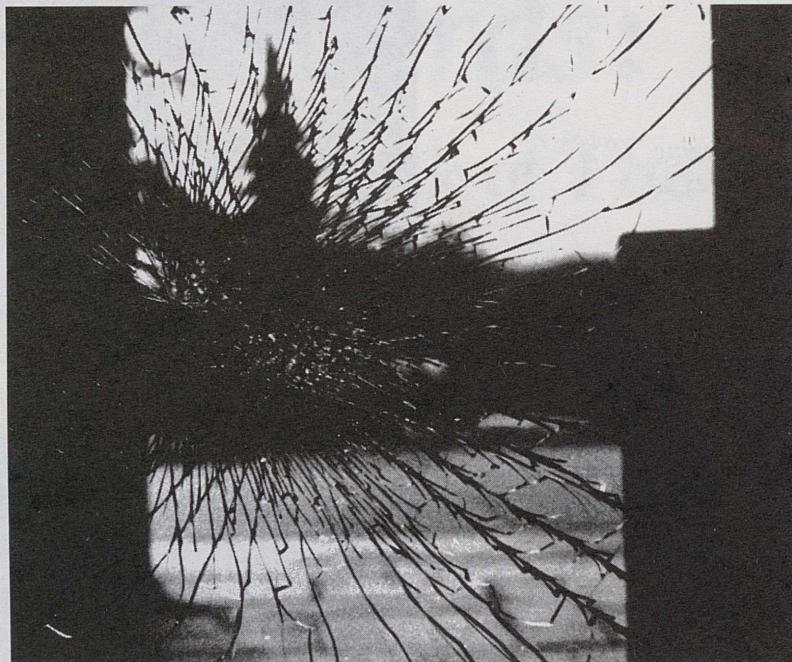


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***Jackie heard the song so many times, she wanted to scream and cry. She used to cry but since the accident, she couldn't. Crying wet the straw tucked inside the bandage of her damaged eye.***

---

**J**hey were playing indoors—Jackie, her sister Tonie, and Ave Satique Jones, the neighbor girl. Playing indoors because of Jackie. Jackie with her half-bandaged, one eye free to see, and her stomach covered with red-brown scabs.

Jackie sat, her flesh and robe sticking to a vinyl-covered chair. She watched the ceiling fan slicing stagnant air, moving with lazy ease. She wanted to stare it into stopping. To make it stop and recognize her. But the fan kept whirling, whizzing-by just like the automobile did.

Whirling like the tiny red ball Tonie threw into the air as she raced to scoop spiked diamonds before the ball bounced, splattering the pattern of colored Jacks on the floor.

The automobile made Jackie splatter, too, or so Grandma said. "You flew so high your shoes and socks came off." Jackie tried to imagine her body whirling into the air, cotton and patent leather shoes sparking outward until finally, she had to be scooped up. Scooped up like her sister scooped Jacks. Jackie stared at her sister's fingers straining to pick up three Jacks...then four...then five.

Jackie had to go beyond the "fives" to beat her sister. Before the accident, she easily beat her sister everytime. Now she eased out of the chair, carefully lowering herself onto the wooden floor. Tonie whispered something to Ave. Ave gurgled, rolling her hazel eyes.

Jackie picked up the ball. The rubber felt good. She wanted to keep it still, to hold it close until Tonie and Ave were forced to yell at her.

"You've got to get beyond six to win." said Tonie.

"I thought it was five."

"Six," snapped Tonie. "We had to play inside because of you."

"Yeah. Keep the baby company," giggled Ave.

"Mummy face." Tonie peered over her shoulder to see if Grandma could hear.

Jackie didn't say anything but just kept bouncing the ball higher. Pass the fives. Sixes. Sevens. Her small "pleasing pink" nail-polished fingers grasped at the Jacks. On the sevens, Jackie didn't catch the ball. Instead she waited until the ball bouncing up and down, up and down...was ready, ready to stop.

Ave and Tonie looked at each other. "Ooo, she's weird. Your sister is weird," squealed Ave.

"Grandma," Tonie yelled, jumping up, stomping her feet. "Grandma. Jackie won't play right."

Grandma."

"Hush. I can hear." Grandma shuffled into the living room, wiping soapsuds from her hands and arms. "I got enough troubles without worrying about some kids' game. Don't you know I have work to do?"

"But she won't catch the ball," said Tonie, pointing her finger at Jackie. "She's ruining it. Messing up the game for me and Ave."

"That's right, Mrs. Thornton. The ball just rolled across the floor. Stuck under the TV."

Cheat. She knows she can't win so she cheats." Tonie's chest heaved up and down. Ave smirked.

Jackie loved seeing her Grandma's false teeth shifting in her mouth. It was like seeing a horse neigh with its lips exposing too much gum, too much tooth. Grandma didn't have her teeth in when Jackie got hit by a car. Grandma rushed outside forgetting them. "First time," Grandma said. "Never been outside without them 'til then. Just left them in the jar when I heard the screams." She wore her teeth to the hospital though. Jackie remembered Grandma leaning over her like now, and being able to see into her red and white-caverned mouth while Grandma kept asking, Don't you remember anything?

No, Jackie didn't remember any pain.

No, she didn't remember colliding with a '51 black topped, red car.

No, she didn't remember her Dad crooning, crying at her side. (Her mother had run off long ago.)

The last "no" was a lie. She remembered her Dad arriving at the hospital with his latest girlfriend, Lonette, who had sat in the corner smoking a cigarette until a nurse came and told her to put it out. Her Dad had begged her not to die. He smelled of whiskey. She'd kept her eyes ruthlessly shut.

"Don't you remember anything?"

Yes, she remembered everything.

"Jackie, girl. Answer me," demanded Grandma. "Why you stop playing? Don't you feel well? Are your sores hurting you?"

Jackie blinked. She wanted to reach up and touch her Grandma's sagging face. Instead she nodded.

"Well, next time say so when you're feeling sick. Else I can't help you," the old woman muttered, tugging nervously at her gray threads of hair.

"I will, Grandma." Jackie threw her arms around her Grandma's neck. She straightened up, rubbing her lower back.

Grandma was tired, Jackie could tell. She looked haunted like a Halloween ghost. Her eyes were dark circles. Her skin was dry. For a week now, she'd heard Grandma in her bedroom, tossing and groaning in her sleep. Heard Grandma calling softly, "Jackie? Come back here. Jackie." A low moan ended her dreaming. Each night Jackie waited for the moan, waited for that bittersweet sound to lull her back to sleep. She imagined her Mom making that sound.

Grandma cocked her head. "Jackie child, are you all right?" Jackie didn't say anything. Grandma sucked whistling air from the space between her teeth and gums. "Ave, I think it's time you went home. Jackie needs some quiet." She shuffled back toward the kitchen.

"It isn't fair," Tonie whined.

"It's almost dinnertime," Grandma hollered over her shoulder. The kitchen door creakily swung back and forth, slapping the air, slowing to a halt.

"Come on, Ave," Tonie mumbled. The ceiling fan whizzed again.

Tonie pinched Jackie. "I'll get you for this." Jackie bit her lip.

"I wouldn't want to be you," cooed Ave.

Jackie moved to the window. Nothing but concrete. Street, sidewalk, steps flecked with soot. Ave was skipping across the same street where Jackie was hit. Tonie, scowling, had her hands on her hips, her foot digging at the spot where the sidewalk and street both began. She looked up at the house.

Jackie started counting cracks on the window sill. Six—seven—eight. She was going to be 8 in December. The front door slammed.

"See what you done."

"I didn't do anything." Window cracks lead to a dull, white ceiling. Nine.

"I'm telling Dad."

Ten like Tonie.

"Just you wait."

"There must be more than a hundred cracks in this house."

"You make me sick," said Tonie.

Jackie's nail slipped beneath paint.

"You're always causing trouble for me and my friends. Maryanne won't speak to me no more."

"She shouldn't have hit me." Jackie remembered pug-faced Maryanne. Her yard was cement.

"You're the one that wouldn't get off the swing."

"So?"

"So, it was hers. You wouldn't swing and you wouldn't get off. You just sat there. Frozen. Like a zombie."

## The Accident from previous page

Slivers of paint fell to the floor.

"Why didn't you move?"

"Didn't feel like it."

"Are you crazy?" Tonie paced, flailing her hands. "Two weeks ago at Ave's you wouldn't play right."

"We came home," Jackie said softly, turning from the window.

"Yeah. 'Cause of you." Her feet kicked at Jacks. "You're always causing me trouble. I'm going to the playground.' 'Take your sister.' I'm visiting friends.' 'Take your sister.' I can never leave you. Always the baby. And you never play right."

"You pushed me. There was a car."

Tonie paled.

"I never got home."

"I thought you didn't remember anything."

"I remember you pushing me."

"That's a lie."

"You kept saying 'go'. 'Cross the street, Jackie.'"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were mad like now."

"Wasn't."

"Finally you pushed me. Pushed me when you knew the car would hit me." Jackie shoved her. "Didn't you?" She shoved her again.

"I yelled for you to stop. To come back. But you—."

"You knew the car would hit me. Kill me even."

"Naw."

"I'll tell Dad that."

"—you wouldn't listen to me. You never listen to me." Tonie moaned. "Why wouldn't you move? We were just playing. Why wouldn't you jump the rope?" Shaking her fist, Tonie ran from the room.

Jackie thought how pretty her sister's thick black hair was whipping against her back.

Jackie felt tired from all her soreness. Should she sit? Lay down? She could read, but it was slow with one eye. The florescent glare of the TV made her eye ache. She could explore. But that was all she'd done during the week of choreless days since she'd come home from the hospital. She'd come to hate the house. There was nothing pretty or nice in it. Just three brick stories filled with cheap furniture and a damp basement where Grandma laundered clothes. Nothing was as cool or as nice or as clean as the hospital. None of the rooms gleamed with bright, stainless steel scrubbed with Pine-Sol.

On the second floor, she and Tonie shared a bedroom with a scratched brown dresser. Their twin beds were minus head-

boards. A damaged hobby horse frightened Jackie most nights. Shadows and moonlight made it seem evil and real.

Her dad slept on the top floor. Weeknights while she lay in her bed, she could hear him coming home from work and climbing the first flight of stairs. Then he'd bypass her and Tonie's bedroom door and more slowly, climb the second flight. Afterward she'd hear him pacing and hear the stains of his cherished phonograph playing, "How Long Blues:"

*How long, baby, how long*

*Has that even' train been gone?*

*Standing at the station watchin' my baby  
leave town Sure am disgusted-for where could  
she be gone- For how long? How long? I say,  
how long?*

Jackie heard the song so many times, she wanted to scream and cry. She used to cry but since the accident, she couldn't. Crying wet the straw tucked inside the bandage of her damaged eye. Weekends she'd hear her Dad dancing and laughing with Lonette. Later there'd be quiet except for the rhythmic creaking of bedsprings. She wasn't allowed in her Dad's room nonetheless she hated it because of the sounds.

Grandma slept in the bedroom next to her's and Tonie's. Grandma's room was the worst room of all. It was filled with boxes of books, clothing and snapshots of Grandpa. Grandma said "a cancer killed him" before she was born. Mothballs stunk over everything. The smell was worse than the steel-mill smell. There was barely enough room to walk. The bed and dresser were almost invisible among the aging junk. If she had died in the accident would the have filled her room with a dead person's things.

Jackie wondered if her dad kept any of her Mom's things in his room. Grandma and Dad said she was too young to remember her Mom. But she remembered being held by a woman in the bathtub. The same bathtub as the one down the hall, which had the funny footed claw legs. Daily, one summer, she remembered being washed clean in a sea of bubbles smelling of pineforest perfume. When she was clean, she remembered the woman holding her and dancing, spinning happily in front of the bathroom fan. The fan was wedged in the window frame, clicked on "high." It brought what little fresh air there was, in. Then they stood like two trees in front of the fan-a big tree, and a little one. The woman told her "imagine soft needles growing from your arms and head." The whirling fan dried their hair and bodies while the bubbles slipped down the bathtub drain.

"Three years ago," Grandma and Dad said, since her Mom run off. "Left in September. At the end of summer."

Maybe her Mom had an accident too. Maybe she died. She could explore her Dad's room to see if she could find her

continued on page 12

**Reform and Correction**

she stumbles  
through growing  
still she tries  
she pains  
with the rising  
of development  
clings  
to efforts cultivating expansion  
picks thorns from her hands  
she trades sleep  
to plan change  
gambles certainties for improvements  
she breaths in the eye of hurricanes  
cries tears left from puberty  
over losses that cut  
deeper than her height

she flourishes  
when successful  
dresses  
in new esteem  
adorns with smiles  
that dull gold  
writes bouquets of poetry  
her stub toes searching  
darken knees praying  
she stumbles through growing  
still  
she  
tries.

*Jaleelah Karriem  
East Orange, NJ*



*Photo © by Sean Anderson*

## The Accident from page 10

Mom's things. She would know her Mom wasn't dead if she couldn't find any of her things. There was nothing she wanted to do or see inside the house. She didn't want to risk finding out her Mom was dead.

Walking down the hallway toward the kitchen, Jackie belledowd, "Grandma."

"Yes, child. In here."

"What's dinner?"

Grandma turned around in time to see Jackie scratching at the straw in her eye. "Put you hand down. You want to go blind?" She grabbed Jackie's thin wrist and yanked. "I'm too old to watching after kids. I've done raised one set. Ain't meant to raise another. Lawd, I still don't believe that car hit you." Grandma stared at gauze bandages.

Jackie pursed her lips and counted squares of black and linoleum. Grandma wanted something from her but couldn't figure out what.

"These streets are dangerous." Grandma unnecessarily began rearranging pots and pans on the stove top. "Neighborhood rotting down."

"Oh?" answered Jackie.

"Three years ago the city tore down all trees. You remember?"

"Yes." Wood chips lodged in screens.

"Put up stinky projects. Things been getting worse. Used to be you could cross the street without looking either way. You wouldn't have gotten hit then, Jackie."

"No."

"Now too many nasty young mens in the street. You go to learn how to be more careful, Jackie. Fast cars. Fast girls. Dangerous streets."

Jackie wanted to tell her it was more dangerous inside the house. Memories. Squirmed in her seat. "Fast."

"Half the kids your sister plays around with have no manners. Little Miss Ave is sneaky. She think I don't know. I know she's not good for your sister. Bad influence. Bad neighborhood. You kids always trying to fool someone." Grandma spun around. "Aren't you?"

Jackie stopped counting the checkered squares.

"What happened?"

Jackie looked up at the sad face. She could say the accident wasn't an accident. Instead she asked, "What's for dinner?" Grandma sighed. I blame myself. I'm too old for watching kids." She turned her wide hips back toward the stove. "Kids are different now. More cruel. If I thought—." She shook her head.

"Pork chops. Your Daddy sliced them extra thin." She brushed her sleeve across her eyes. "So they'll be nice and crisp for you." Grandma dashed salt and pepper into the pan. "He said he'd try and get home early tonight."

"Will Lonette be coming?"

"I've been praying against it," Grandma muttered.

Jackie smiled.

Grandma grinned. "Don't tell nobody I said that, hear?"

Jackie nodded. On the stairwell, late at night she'd heard Grandma telling Dad lots of time she didn't like Lonette. "A black scarecrow," Grandma liked to holler. "Eats all the time but don't gain nothing but bone."

"Do you feel like setting the table?" Grease popped and gurgled about the flour-smeared chops. Jackie said, "Kay. I'll do it" In front of the cabinet she complained, "When we going to get plates that match?" In the hospital, in a magazine, she'd seen a table set for 12 everything matching. Silver forks, blue napkins white plates with gold trim.

"Plates don't need to match. All the same to eat off."

"Nicer if they match," she said stubbornly. Turning around, she saw Grandma pouring dry grits into boiling water. "I'm tired of grits." "They're good for you. Easy on a sore stomach. You're lucky I'm letting you have a chop."

Now go call your sister to dinner."

At the top of her lungs, Jackie yelled, "Tonie. Dinner."

"Why can't you walk to where she is and tell her?"

"You said call her, so I did. She can hear me from here."

"Don't you be rude." Grandma waved her greasy spatula.

"Yes, m'am."

Grandma put a pork chop on a plate, a scoop of mustard greens, and bland hominy grits. "Jackie, you can start eating. You don't need to wait. No sense in cooked food getting cold."

The food was unappealing-beige, dull green-tinted brown, and white mound on the cracked pink plate. Jackie began making designs in her grits while Grandma fixed two more plates. She was placing a sun in the sky when Tonie came in. Tonie with her slanted black eyes and long lashes. Before the accident, Jackie often spent hours in the bathroom staring into her own round, protruding eyes.

Tonie, avoiding her sister's glance, sat to the right of her Grandma.

The kitchen was hot from the warm stove, the steaming food, the setting sun. It was hotter inside than out. The yellow glow showed all the strains on the walls from years of Grandma frying pork chops, catfish, and hamburger. For a while there was silence, except for the clink of ice water, scraping of knives against plates. Jackie figured Dad would never get home. His empty plate at the head of the small kitchen table looked forlorn.

Jackie squirmed in her seat. "Why are Tonie's eyes different than mine?" she piped, then scowled as her sister kicked her beneath the table.

"Cause she took after my grandmother who was a Cherokee," said Grandma, stuffing dripping mustard greens into her mouth.

continued on page 14

# NUCLEAR WASTE KNOWS NO BIAS

Sonja Haskins

*"Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring and because it has fresh peaches in it."*

Alice Walker

**T**hey may some day dump nuclear waste in Goochland County Virginia. My Mother's Mother's Mother had land there. There is corn and cabbage and beets, my Grandmother had said. There are pine trees and a creek, she said.

One fall, not long before my Grandmother died, five of us drove "down home" for the first time. The day was blue and fine and we walked around in our city skins and saw with our city eyes and touched with our city thoughts, the melancholy loveliness. It was late into the season and we had missed autumn's way with color for the trees stood ancient and solemn against the sky.

We found the creek easily enough — a silvery thread with a serpentine life of its own. Once there was a saw mill by that creek. I discovered a family of manic blue jay and some birds we thought magpie in the branches of some magnificent, nameless trees.

The house where my Grandmother was born had long ago disappeared. Burned, my Grandmother had said, and only part of the stone chimney from another house was discovered. I put one of the weather-mellowed stones in my coat pocket. Nuclear pollution was as foreign to my urban lifestyle then as the planet Jupiter is distant. Today I can no longer make that claim.

Jupiter, of course remains those millions of miles hence. Nuclear waste dumps are not.

According to reports, radioactive waste, the toxic, often lethal byproducts of the atomic energy industry, has been

dumped or buried in/on sites across the American landscape for 40 years. Sometime these sites border private real estate, some of which may be Black owned.

The waste consists of high level radioactive substances, for example, the left overs from the production of nuclear weapons, and low-level radioactive material, the contaminated protective suits, gloves and boots used in experimental labs or hospital treatment centers. Although some of the radioactive matter is hazardous to living organisms for only days or weeks, others are dangerous for centuries.

Waste products are handled according to type (high level or low level). One method is to place the material in cement reinforced steel drums and bury the drums in pits, deep pools, abandoned mines or in the ocean. But the drums often become damaged and toxins can leak undetected for years.

Although government and others responsible are moving to correct the problems, cleanup will cost millions in tax dollars while time and natural resources are running out. How much waste now poisons land owned by Blacks remains to be documented, however an ELF (Emergency Land Fund) report states that Blacks are losing their land at an alarming rate per year to a complexity of circumstances, and radioactive poisoning cannot be overlooked.

Radiation and pollution endanger the godly and ungodly alike. In the words of Alice Walker: "The nuclear industry, powerful, profit-oriented, totally unconcerned about our health, aided and abetted by a government that is its twin, is murdering us and our children every day."

A few years ago, I dreamed of my Grandmother. She was smiling, something she rarely did, and she had in her arms bags of beets and corn.

I want some day to build again my Great Grandmother's house.

"I didn't know that," said Tonie, looking up, startled.

"That's where you got your hair and coloring, too," said Grandma, punctuating the air with her fork. "My Grandmother was a beautiful woman. Proud woman. Cherokee."

Self-satisfied, Tonie rested back in her chair, her arms criss-crossed over chest.

"Now Jackie —her yellowness comes from her father. Her eyes, well, there never has been a thing in this family."

Jackie scanned her sister's face. It wasn't fair that she might have just one eye and even that one beady. "Someone's at the door," said Tonie, starting to get up.

"Finish eating while I get it."

"Aw, Grandma."

"And Jackie, I want you to finish them grits."

After Grandma left, Tonie leaned toward her sister, whispering, "There's a hula-hoop contest tomorrow. At Conroy Elementary. They giving prizes and everything. I'll win for you if you want me to. I'll even use my new purple hula-hoop."

Jackie wanted to smack her sister's chubby cheeked face. She knew what Tonie was up to. After pushing her in front of the car, she wanted to win a contest so all could be forgotten. "How you know you gonna win?" Jackie asked, sticking her fork into a mountainside of grits.

"Cause I'm doing it specially for you. To make up." Tonie walked around the table towards her. "To make for the car hitting you." She swallowed. "Why do you do it? Sit...stand still. Like a zombie."

Jackie scraped her grits into the trash pail.

"Next time I'm going to stick needles in you."

Jackie stuck out her tongue.

Tonie grabbed her hand. "The contest. Want me to win it for you?"

Without looking at her sister, Jackie said, "Kay," and left the room.

She passed Grandma at the door gossiping with Mrs. Charmers. Counting, Jackie went up the stairs. Eighteen steps. She would need to know that if she went blind. Or if the lights blew out. Or if a burglar entered through her bedroom, she would need to know—eighteen. Just as she would always need to know, hula hoop or not, that it was her sister who pushed her in front of the car.

Jackie went into the bathroom and climbed onto the toilet seat; from the toilet, she climbed over into the sink. Her bowlegs dangled from the bowl while she stared into the mirror. An eye stared back; the other, blinked beneath straw. Its motor would buzz and grind, but it wouldn't slice air. The huge tree that had been outside the window was cut down. She could peep right into a concrete apartment house.

"Girl? What are you doing?"

Jackie slid her bottom around in the bowl. Her Dad, framed in the doorway, loomed. He lifted her down from the sink. Through her T-shirt, she could feel butcher-knife scars on her Dad's hands. At least he didn't work in the mill. He smelled of blood, sawdust, and beer.

Jim gently shook his daughter's arm. "What are trying to do," he asked angrily, "have another accident?"

"Dad? Why did she leave?"

Jim was caught short. "Money. She said I didn't make enough green. Said the marriage was a mistake, an accident. Said you kids were an accident." Jim flinched.

The invisible side of Jackie's face was trembling. her gauze wrapping didn't move.

Jim knelt, his cupping his daughter's shoulders. "Jackie. These things happen. Sometimes a man and a woman don't get along. It's nobody's fault. Understand? No one's fault."

Jackie stared at her toes. She didn't like seeing the longing in her Dad's face. It wasn't right that he was pleading. Everything that happened was somebody's fault.

"You'll understand when you're older."

"Where'd she go?"

"Canada, she said." Jim cleared his throat. He reached out to stroke Jackie's face then, pulled back. Helpless, he stood, shrugging his shoulders. "Your Grandma is holding supper for me. I just came to see how you were doing."

"When did she leave?"

"Three years ago."

"No. When?"

"At the end of summer."

She stood perfectly still.

"Jackie? Jackie?" He clenched his hands. "Jackie, honey? She didn't say anything. He escaped down the steps.

Dad was wrong. She understood. All this summer she'd been remembering what she'd forgot—remembering Momma saying "smell the green." Pineforest in the bathroom. Cool. Fresh air. Clean. "Be a tree." Then she'd whisper, I'm going to live someplace green. Green inside and out."

She figured it out. Her Mom stole the green. The little bit there'd been. Inside and out. Green just slipped out of the house...the streets...the neighborhood, when she went away.

"Smell the green. Be a tree." And all along, Mom was planning on doing it by herself. It'd been their last summer together.

It didn't matter that the car hit her. Didn't matter that Tonie pushed. The accident was waking up knowing that Mom would never come back.

Jackie plugged in the bathroom stopper and turned on the hot and cold water full blast. No sweet smelling bubbles. No comforting, tickling arms. She undressed and laid her slim body full-length in the tub. She floated some. Voices drifted up through the window. Outside children were howling as their mothers called, "Night. Time to come in."

# A.K.A. Lucy's Mom

by Bettye Griffin



Photo © by Curtis Reaves

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***Kelly and Desiree were planning a night of dancing at a local club when Lucy surprised them by asking if she could go, too.***

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he sighed contentedly as she replaced the receiver. Here, at last, was a relationship that was going somewhere.

It was a good feeling, this optimism. Most of Kel's romances fizzled out before they could even be classified as such, but Greg Blackwell had just called for what would be their third date. And there had been a tenderness in his voice she'd never heard before, from him or any other man.

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*continued on next page*

She stretched out lazily on her bed, her clasped hands supporting her head. It was about time her luck changed. It hadn't been easy, trying to convince all the naysayers in her life that she, Kelly Austin, would amount to something. Heaven knows no one had been very supportive, except for Pam. Even her own parents maintained that her success was merely a fluke.

The phone beside her suddenly jangled, the shrilled sound disturbing the quietness of the room. She reached for it listlessly. Greg had already called, so surely this person was of little importance.

"Hello."

"Hi, Kel."

"Pam! I was just thinking about you. What's up?"

The hesitation on the other end of the line immediately told Kelly that her sister wasn't calling merely to chew the fat. "Well ... it's Lucy ... She's going to college in the fall, you know."

"I know," Kelly replied cautiously. "I can't believe she's 18 already. Is she going to Bethune-Cookman?" Lucy, she knew, had expressed an interest in the Daytona, Florida institution.

"No ... Oh, I might as well come right out and tell you. She got accepted at Columbia."

"Columbia? Here in New York?" Suddenly Kelly knew why her sister was calling. Room and board were outrageously expensive, and Lucy was acquainted with only one person in the area. "Pam, you don't mean that she wants to live here with me!"

Pam sighed heavily. "That's it in a nutshell, Kelly. She's well aware that it's up to you..."

"Oh, fine," Kelly interrupted. "I get to be the bad guy. We both know that if I don't tell her it's okay it'll just be one more thing for her to hold against me."

There was a brief silence before Pam spoke again. I'm afraid I can't help you with this one, Kelly. The decision is entirely yours. But if you don't mind a suggestion..."

Kelly softened. "Of course not. What is it?"

"All you have to do is introduce her as your niece from Florida who's attending college in New York. It really shouldn't be very difficult."

"But I'm involved with someone, Pam. It actually looks like it might be serious." Kelly laughed, but it was a bitter sound. "God, can you believe it? My first serious relationship at the age of 31." She paused. "I just couldn't keep a secret like that from him."

"I don't know what else to say except that I understand."

"Thanks, Pam. I'll have to think about this for a while. Let me call you back, okay?"

"Sure."

Kelly rolled over on her stomach and shut her eyes tightly to keep the tears from falling. Why was it that every time things went her way it never lasted more than a day or two, she wondered. She'd barely had time to savor her happiness before this latest warning.

But in her heart she knew that there was only one way to go. Pam and her husband Al Cooper had done everything for Lucy from the day she was born, and even before. It was time for her mother to take over.

Mother. Kelly would never forget the fear she had felt so long ago when her period hadn't come at its usual time. She had let fifteen-year-old Reuben Vega—actually her sister Desiree's boyfriend—talk her into allowing his hand to go inside her shorts, planning not to let things get out of hand, but they had. Only once. After it was over she had felt so ashamed...

Her mother found out when she discovered the pile of unused sanitary napkins in the back of Kelly's closet. She took her daughter to a discreet gynecologist, and soon after the test results were given, Kelly was on a bus bound for Jacksonville, Florida, to live with her married sister Pam.

She shuddered in the warm room as she recalled Desiree's harsh accusations when she was told the identity of the boy

who had gotten her twelve-year-old sister pregnant. "Sure, he wanted me to do what you did, but I told him that I wasn't a cheap slut," she screamed. Her parents, too, had been scandalized. So called "nice girls"—daughters of black middle-income parents—didn't get pregnant, and Kelly had never heard of a girl as young as she having a baby. If only she could go back in time and have another chance ... do it over ... She cried all the way to Florida.

Kelly remained there four years. The first months were lonely ones, as she wasn't allowed to leave the apartment of her sister and brother-in-law lest someone see her. Never as long as she lived would Kelly forget her mother's response when, over long distance, she cried that she was being treated like a prisoner and would soon go crazy from seeing only Pam and Al. Instead of words of compassion or forgiveness, her mother coldly replied that Kelly was lucky not to have been sent to some far-away home for unwed teen-age mothers, where she would be around complete strangers.

It was Pam who provided Kelly with comfort. Only 21 herself, she cradled her youngest sister in her arms, assuring her that Mommy hadn't meant to be so cruel. And as for Daddy-well, if Mommy said he wasn't home, then of course he wasn't.

Kelly's daughter Lucy (named after her favorite television star) was born the March after her arrival in Jacksonville, but an elaborate plan had been worked out to conceal the baby's parentage from everyone, including Pam's and Al's friends. Kel's presence at their home was not announced until three months later, when school let out for the summer. She was there to care for the Coopers newly "adopted" baby while Pam went back to work part-time, the story went. Once she was able to make her presence known, Kelly made it a point to tell everyone who would listen that she liked Florida much better than the Bronx, so no one thought it odd

when she stayed on and registered in school.

She was 16 when she returned home. The only time she had seen the rest of her family was during their annual auto excursions south. Kelly hadn't missed them. They had all ignored Lucy during their visits, never talking to her or picking her up unless it was absolutely necessary. And the senior Austins constantly voiced their fears that someone in the Bronx would discover Kel's secret. Everyone thought it strange that she went off to Florida so suddenly, they said. There was plenty of gossip going around, and they just didn't know what they would do if it ever got out. Kelly listened to them with fears in her eyes. It hurt to see they were more concerned with their standing in the community than with giving love and support to their own flesh and blood.

There was one plus to her return. She and Desiree, once so at odds, enjoyed a late-blooming closeness. Desiree, now 19, had long since shifted her attentions to another boy. Rerun, she told Kelly, had joined the Marines. What they couldn't know at the time was that he would be killed years later in a Middle Eastern terrorist attack.

Lucy, meanwhile, was growing up in the suburban home Pam and Al had purchased, playing big sister to two children that had since been born to them. It wasn't until she was 13—the onset of her sexuality—that she was told that Aunt Kelly was actually her mother.

And now she wanted to come to New York.

Kelly tossed and turned in an uneasy sleep that night. Even another call from Greg the next day failed to lift her mood.

Saturday night they drove down to Greenwich Village, strolling around the area and ultimately seeing a musical review at a Greene Street cabaret. It was still early when they headed back uptown. Kelly raised an eyebrow when he turned into an unfamiliar area.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"My parents have been asking to meet you. I thought it would be nice if we stopped by."

She bit her lip nervously. She had made up her mind to tell him about Lucy before the evening ended. The words were all but memorized, and now he was bringing her to meet his folks. She was a victim of extremely bad timing.

Immediately after Greg performed introductions, Joanne Blackwell took Kelly's arm and walked her over to their bar. "I'm so glad we got this chance to meet you," she said. "Greg has mentioned your name several times."

"It's nice to meet you, too."

The woman was looking at Kelly as if she expected her to say more. "I understand you're a Bronx girl," she prompted,

"Yes. We lived on Laconia Avenue."

Mrs. Blackwell nodded. "Nice area. Are your parents still there?"

"No. They retired last winter. Now they live in Florida, near my oldest sister, Jacksonville," Kelly added, knowing that that would be the woman's next query.

The questions continued, and by the time Kelly was handed a vodka and orange juice she'd been through a subtle interrogation. Greg's mother was determined to know the complete background of the woman her only son was seeing. She'd probably faint if she knew the truth, Kelly thought wryly.

They didn't stay long, to her relief, but she wasn't prepared for Greg's words as they drove home. "You charmed them, you know," he told her. "Not that I had any doubts about that. They've sensed you've become an important part of my life, Kelly. And..."

"And?" In spite of her apprehension, she was anxious to hear the rest of the sentence.

'Greg eased the car to stop at a red light. "And they're right," he whispered, his face coming in close to hers.

As they kissed Kelly was reminded of the old saying, "Lips don't lie." Please don't let him sense I'm holding something back, she prayed. The opportunity

to tell him was gone, at least for tonight. Friday night I'll invite him over for dinner, and I'll tell him before he has a chance to get romantic.

But Friday he invited her to a party. Once again Kelly found herself losing her nerve. The week after that Greg attended a job-sponsored convention in Boston, and before she knew it, it was time for her to fly down to Jacksonville for her vacation, from which Lucy would return with her. Greg had expressed a desire to go with her, but she convinced him that a meeting between him and her parents would be better at another time, since her sister Desiree would also be spending her vacation there. It was really more of a family reunion than a vacation, she told him.

Kelly disliked visiting Jacksonville. Not because of the city itself—for the most part she had been happy during her years—because of the presence of her parents whose attitude towards their youngest daughter was that she had blown all her chances for happiness and success when she was 12. Time and time again Kelly had tried to impress them with her excellent grades in high school and college, and with her progress from junior accountant to Director of Accounting, but they remained unmoved. Now she simply didn't try anymore, consoling herself with the belief that it was unnatural for parents to stop loving a child because of one awful mistake.

Both Kelly and Desiree stayed at Pam and Al's lovely home when they came to Florida. Their parents' condominium was nearby, and almost daily the older people made an appearance to fawn over their two younger grandchildren. It angered Kelly that Lucy was not given a share of their attentions. Nothing had changed in 18. They still looked upon their eldest grandchild as an accident of nature, something that never should have materialized. She realized their treatment of Lucy must have had a negative effect on the girl, and resolved to talk to her about them. It would be just

*continued on next page*

like years ago, when Pam had eased her own hurt...

The problem was getting the time to be alone with Lucy. Gina, Pam's fourteen-year-old, adored her only-four-years-older-aunt, and wanted to tag along everywhere she went. Kelly couldn't bring herself to hurt the child's feelings, so she allowed her to tag along on shopping trips and roller-skating sessions.

There was one place that was closed to Gina, however. Kelly and Desirée were planning a night of dancing at a local club when Lucy surprised them by asking if she could go, too. "I'm 18 now," she reminded them.

"You're still not old enough to legally drink in this state," Desirée retorted.

"And did you know the drinking age in New York is 21 now?" Kelly asked sternly. Lucy made a face, but in the end she did accompany them.

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Once at the club, Desirée was quickly cornered by a man whose company she seemed to enjoy. They took a table together, leaving her sister and niece on their own. Kelly was surprised at the amount of male attention Lucy received. Then she realized that her daughter was indeed striking, with her father's bushy eyebrows and fair complexion, and the prominent cheekbones. It was awfully difficult to adjust to this grown-up Lucy. "I know you want to dance, but can we sit and talk for awhile? This might be our only chance to be alone until we get to New York until we get home."

Lucy nodded in agreement, and they found a secluded table. Kelly wasted no time in getting started. "I can't help noticing the favoritism Grandma and Grandpa have for your cousins. Surely you feel it, too."

"Yes," Lucy answered shyly, but without hesitation. "They're always telling me to make sure I don't end up like you, Kelly." They had long since agreed that Lucy would address her mother by her first name. "Mom" was reserved for Pam, the woman who had reared her. "It makes me mad— they act like you're a criminal or something, instead of a successful businesswoman. Aunt Desirée's marriage didn't last, and her job isn't as good as yours, but they keep telling me I should try to follow her example. It's not fair, Kelly. All you did was make one mistake, and I'm damned glad you did, otherwise I wouldn't be here! She stopped momentarily to compose herself. "I guess I was a lot happier before they moved down."

"Is that why you want to come to New York? To get away from them?

This time Lucy paused. "Well... I originally planned to go somewhere relatively nearby, like Bethune-Cookman or Spelman, where I could get home for long weekends. But then I got adventurous and started thinking that it might not be so bad an idea if I went farther away. And I've heard it said that New York is the most exciting city in the world," she added with a smile.

Kelly's heart went out to her. In her own way, Lucy, too, had had it rough. She had every right to resent Kel's leaving to return North while she was still a toddler, to interpret it as desertion; but instead she understood. To think that she was actually proud of her! I've got to get her away from here, Kelly thought fiercely. I owe it to her.

"Mom and Dad have been good about it," Lucy continued. "They tell me not to pay any mind to what Grandma and Grandpa say, that they're just mixed-up old folks who couldn't see the truth if it hit them on the head. And they told how brave you were. It was awful for you, they said. You were shut up in a four-room apartment for almost a year because Grandpa and Grandma made them promise no one would know you were pregnant."

So Pam and Al had been concerned about Lucy's welfare. She should have known. Bless those two, Kelly thought. They hadn't been long married when she was sent to them. It

couldn't have been easy for them, taking on both a teenager and a baby.

"It wasn't a happy time," she admitted. "But I suppose it was a wise move." Perhaps the only one her parents had made, she thought. "You see, I lived here for several years, and made new friends. It might not have been that way if everyone knew I had a baby at my age. Parents probably would have thought I would be a bad influence on their daughters." She paused, not sure if she could continue. "I abstained from sex for seven years after that one time, Lucy. I was almost 20 on my next experience."

Lucy nodded. "You might not believe this, but I'm still a virgin, Kelly. There've been times where I've been tempted, but I figured I would regret it. And now, what with everything going around...I don't know when I'll get around to it."

"You'll know when it's right," said Kelly, beaming. She felt closer to Lucy now than she ever had before. The prospect of having her live with her was getting brighter by the minute. "So tell me, what's the first thing you want to do when you get to New York?" she asked her daughter. Her beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter, whose life was just beginning.

"I want to go to a disco," replied Lucy without hesitation.

"Okay. We'll go out Saturday night." Ordinarily Kelly shied away from discos, finding most of the men there too young for her; but dancing was just the type of lighthearted activity she would need if Greg reacted negatively to her confession. She would call him as soon as she got home and ask him to meet her at a nearby bar. There, finally, she would tell him that she had given birth to a baby girl when she was 13. A girl whose life she would now play an important part in.

No longer did Kelly dread telling him. She knew now that her life wouldn't end if he couldn't cope. For nearly two decades she had escaped responsibility for the life she had borne, but this trip had brought rediscovery of Lucy.

And of herself.



Bettye Griffin is from Yonkers, NY

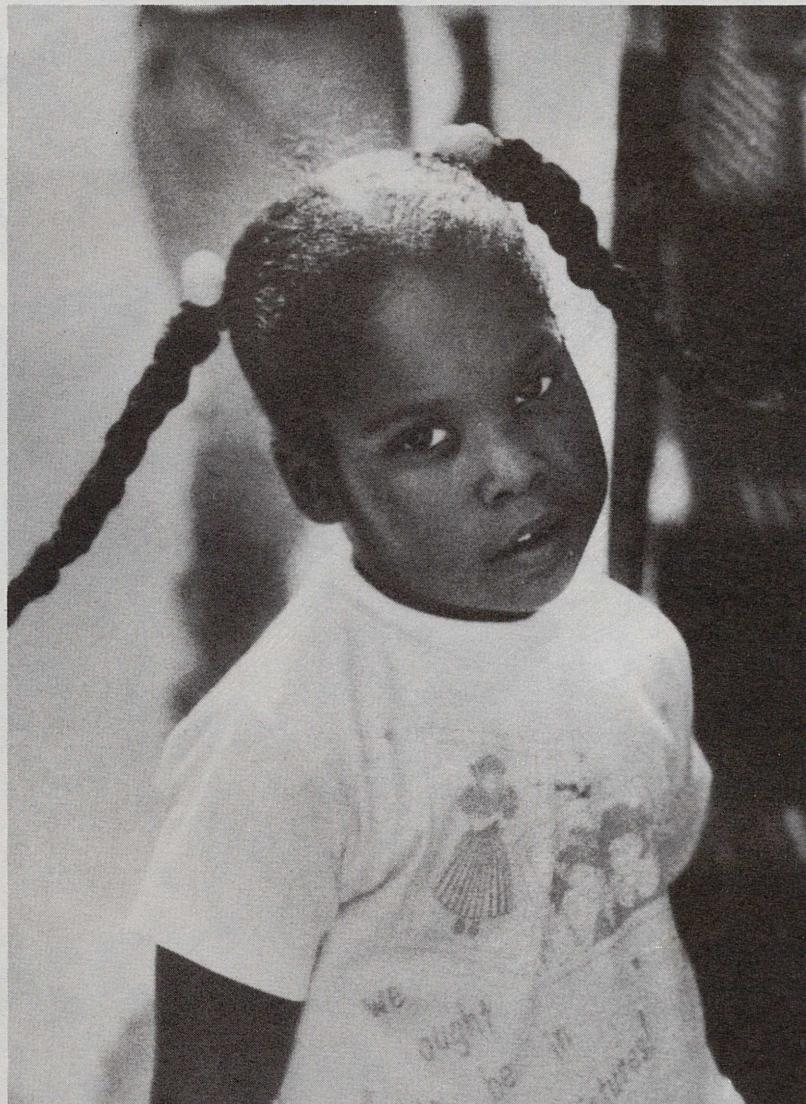


Photo © by Denetric Craig

### Moon Dreams

*Dreams  
bright as the New Moon in  
May  
fade  
in a world of lily-white reality*

*Eyes burning wide with hope  
yield  
themselves quickly to fury*

*The soul of youth  
does not give  
itself freely to  
patience*

*but alas  
the faith of those gone before  
challenge  
the young*

*Dream  
Dream  
again*

Ruby Lee Sexton  
Charleston, SC

# Made That Way

Rob Penny, Pittsburgh, PA

Blue wail      a purple sound etched elegantly  
out thru the Eyes, the blood's memory, you sd it,  
a longing      so strong & beautiful  
as a visionary's rope re-knotted pumping  
the heart  
beneath

an August sun touch light w/yr tongue: revolution revolves, too  
round as the sun  
musical as the African kora  
you know you go from here to there  
like from a calabash to a gourd.  
you're made that way, too.  
Mbulu

I say to you  
from Maulana's Nguzo Saba  
& Nyerere's Ujamaa  
that this is the message we share  
on the continent of our faces: this, too, here, now  
as robins alight in yr palms, is yr message  
& sources from whose woman's thighs  
spring a rifle in yr left Eye  
& a olive branch in yr right eye.  
you're made that way, too.

This is an August Wilson wail: Joe Turner, a metaphor, in flesh &  
blood,  
for slavery for sanity's dance, wailing for Africans  
w/their feet on backwards, you told me this on the phone, this is  
for muscles around being realistic  
but as for reality, you sd, we must change it  
must change it  
must change it, kick it  
must change wine back to water  
now kick that jack  
not grape juice darkening greyish liberals  
on soap operas, playing patty-cake patty-cake  
& swapping Biblical quotes  
in the anti-apartheid movement

August is made that way  
a Pan-African dramatist: now kick that  
celebrate that, he told me, celebrate changing  
reality.

I say, the African is made  
that way wailing is the sound he  
makes on his horn's pencil is the rhythm  
of the train thru southern harmonies  
collecting us up & waving our image & interest  
over the blues of his twelve-stringed guitar  
not strung out cracked corners'  
waiting for the 'roll call' like  
heavens doors will open while chasing  
highs  
or

locked in dreadful dreams  
of backward lines  
from the King of Kings & the lion of Judah.  
I say, August told me  
he be wailing for national liberation  
like young Azanians want their land  
you preachers can have the vote,  
then you can vote beside F. (fascist) W. (white)  
de Klerk's pseudo-political science education  
because you stopped reading Carter G.  
Woodson.

I say, somebody better publish this poem  
instead of buying that latest Bobby Brown  
& Whitney Houston album.  
August, all of this is abt you & me  
Chawley & Nick & the songs we carry  
in our hip pockets  
& the depots we've visited  
& the trains we've rode.

Wail yr song, brother, large as God's left Eye  
& as pretty as a woman's legs  
have carried her thru her story



on soap operas, playing patty-cake patty-cake  
& swapping Biblical quotes  
in the anti-apartheid movement  
for civil rights

in the Blues wail      in the song's memory you spoke of  
                                into the planet's vault  
where elegance is the Blues reality & poetic literature  
where Wille Dixon whispered in Amilcar Cabral's  
agronomist's Ear:  
  
Mbulu, you heard waxed Ears turned into  
Malcolm X speech & Blind Lemon Jefferson kept the message  
from sliding out of yr other Ear  
afterwards, you left Wooster Street  
you left Crawford Street  
you left Fifth Avenue      &

you sd, wailing from the hull of the slaveship,  
I am African  
you sd, wailing from the plantation of Hazelwood  
I will still be African  
you sd, wailing from the white house on Broadway  
now read my lips & repeat after me, 1,2,3:  
I am African  
& you told me, yr name was Mbulu  
& that the people want national liberation  
to get their land back  
not TV shows  
to get back their land  
not civil rights  
not voting booths  
to take back their History  
not citizenship papers  
you sd, that's our people's song, Robwhat happen  
to it      what happen to it      when preachers  
& "porch niggers" took over  
& rhythm & blues joined the mineral world of rock  
& they took the (bank) roll out of our  
communities?  
  
Sun Ra in August wail when we woke up  
& he was still playing, wailing, "Next stop, Jupiter."  
The Blues wail is reality  
pump it up      pump it up  
Africa is kicking it  
pump it up      pump it up  
pump it up to national liberation

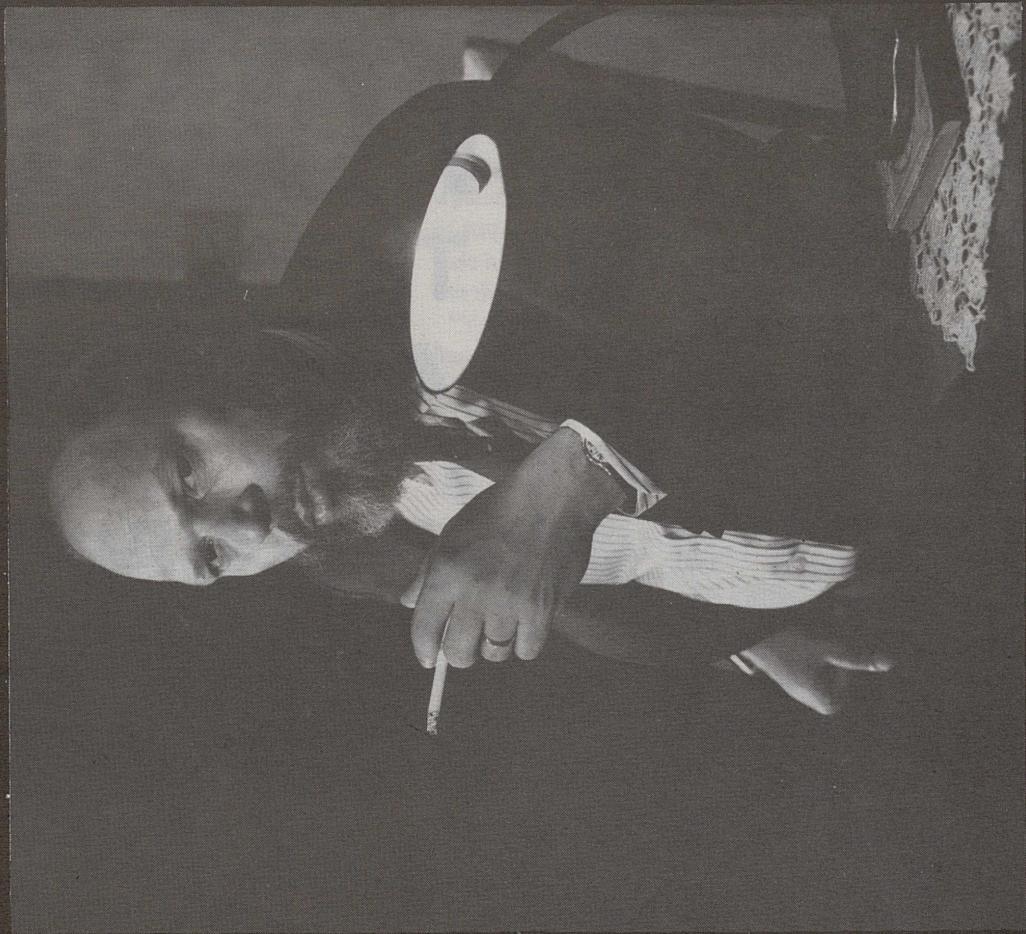


Photo © Geoff Kern

**August Wilson**



# BEYOND THE BAYOU

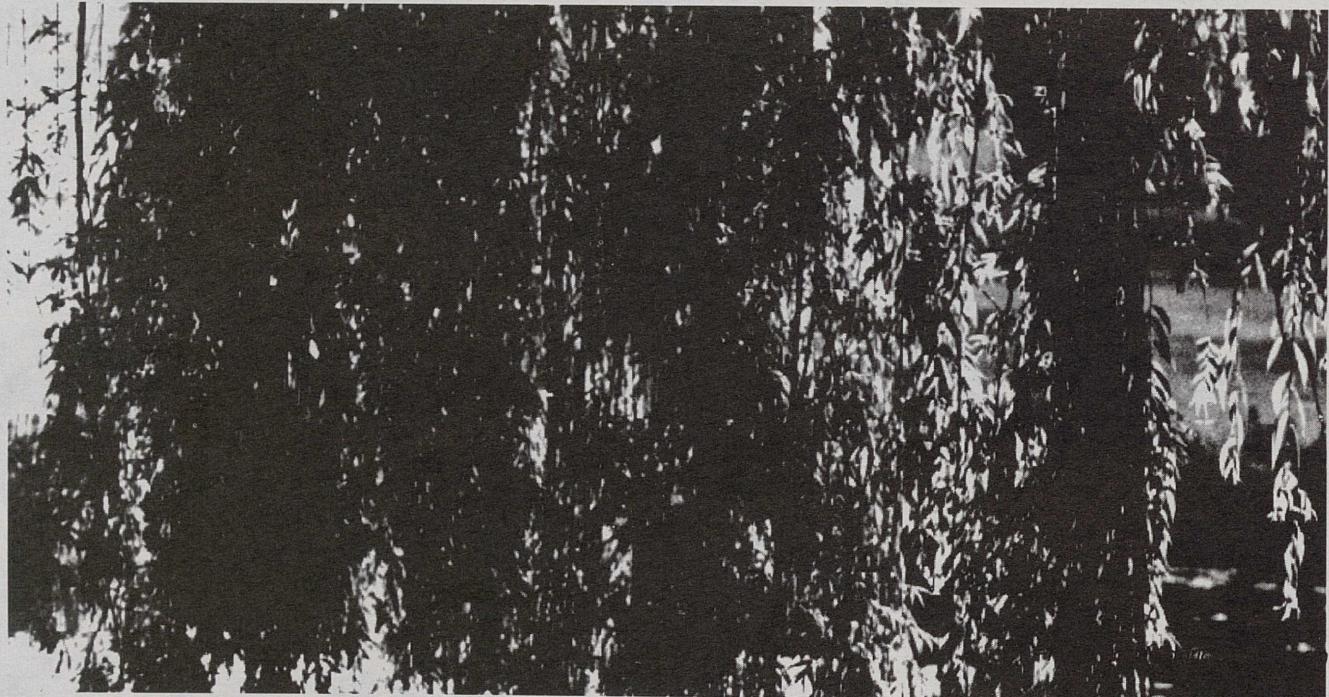


Photo © by Maurice Coleman

*"Don't cry, mon bebe,  
mon bebe, mon Cheri!"  
the woman spoke  
soothingly as she covered  
the ground with long  
strides. "La Folle goin'  
mine you; Doctor Bonfils  
goin' come make mon  
Cheri well again."*

Kate Chopin

L

he bayou curved like a crescent around the point of land on which La Folle's cabin stood. Between the stream and the hut lay a big abandoned field, where cattle were pastured when the bayou supplied them with water enough. Through the woods that spread back into unknown regions the woman had drawn in imaginary line, and past his circle she never stepped. This was the form of her only mania.

She was now a large, gaunt black woman, past 35. Her real name was Jacqueline, but every one on the plantation called her La Folle, because in childhood she had been frightened literally "out of her senses," and had never wholly regained them.

It was when there had been skirmishing and sharpshooting all day in the woods. Evening was near when P'tit Maitre, black

with powder and crimson with blood, had staggered into the cabin of Jacqueline's mother, his pursuers close at his heels. The sight had stunned her childish reason.

She dwelt alone in her solitary cabin, for the rest of the quarters had long since been removed beyond her sight and knowledge. She had more physical strength than most men, and made her patch of cotton and corn and tobacco like the best of them. But of the world beyond the bayou she had long known nothing, save what her morbid fancy conceived.

People at Bellisime had grown used to her and her way, and they thought nothing of it. Even when "Old Mis'" died, they did not wonder that La Folle had not crossed the bayou, but had stood upon her side of it, wailing and lamenting.

P'tit Maitre was now the owner of Bellisime. He was a middle-aged man, with a family of beautiful daughters about him, and a little son whom La Folle loved as if he had been her own. She called him Cheri, and so did every one else because she did.

None of the girls had ever been to her what Cheri was. They had each and all loved to be with her, and to listen to her wondrous stories of things "yonda, beyon' de bayou."

But none of them had stroked her black hand quite as Cheri did, nor rested their heads against her knee so confidently, nor fallen asleep in her arms as he used to do. For Cheri hardly did such things now, since he had become proud possessor of a gun, and had had his black curls cut off.

That summer-the summer Cheri gave La Folle two black curls tied with a knot of red ribbon-the water ran so low in the bayou that even the little children at Bellisime were able to cross it on foot, and the cattle were sent to pasture down by the river. La Folle was sorry when they were gone, for she loved these dumb companions well, and liked to feel that they were there, and to hear them browsing by night up to her own inclosure.

It was Saturday afternoon, when the fields were deserted. The men had flocked to a neighboring village to do their week's trading, and the women were occupied with household affairs, -La Folle as well as the others. It was then she mended and washed her handful of clothes, scoured her house, and did her baking.

In this last employment she never forgot Cheri. Today she had fashioned croquignoles of the fantastic and alluring shapes for him. So when she saw the boy come trudging across the old field with his gleaming little new rifle on his shoulder, she called to gayly to him, "Cheri! Cheri!

But Cheri did not need the summons, for he was coming straight to her. His pockets all bulged out with almonds and raisins and an orange that he had secured for her from the very fine dinner that had been given that day up at his father's house.

He was a sunny-faced youngster of 10. When he had emptied his pockets, La Folle patted his round red cheek, wiped his

soiled hand on her apron, and smoothed his hair. Then she watched him as, with his cakes in his hand, he crossed her strip of cotton back of the cabin, and disappeared into the wood.

He had boasted of the things he was going to do with his gun out there.

"You think they got plenty deer in the wood, La Folle?" he had inquired, with the calculating air of an experienced hunter.

"Non, non!" the woman laughed. "Don't you look of' no deer, Cheri. Dat's too big. But you bring La Folle one good fat squirrel of' her dinner to-morrow, an' she goin' be satifi'."

"One squirrel ain't a bite. I'll bring you mo' 'an one, La Folle," he had boasted pompously as he went away.

When the woman, an hour later, heard the report of the boy's rifle close to the wood's edge, she would have thought nothing of it if a sharp cry of distress had not followed the sound. She withdrew her arms from the tub of suds in which they had been plunged, dried them upon her apron, and as quickly as her trembling limbs would bear her, hurried to the spot whence the ominous report had come.

It was as she feared. There she found Cheri stretched upon the ground, with his rifle beside him. He moaned pitifully: "I'm dead La Folle! I'm dead! I'm gone!"

"Non, Non!" she exclaimed resolutely, as she knelt beside him. "Put you' arm 'roun' La Folle's nake, Cheri. Dat's nuttin'; dat goin be nuttin'. She lifted him in her powerful arms.

Cheri had carried his gun muzzle-downward. He had stumbled, -he did not know how. He only knew that he had a ball lodged somewhere in his leg, and he thought that his end was at hand. Now, with his head upon the woman's shoulder, he moaned and wept with pain and fright.

"Oh, La Folle! La Folle! it hurt so bad! I can't stan' it, La Folle!"

"Don't cry, mon bebe, mon bebe, mon Cheri!" the woman spoke soothingly as she covered the ground with long strides. "La Folle goin' mine you; Doctor Bonfils goin' come make mon Cheri well again."

She had reached the abandoned field. As she crossed with her precious burden, she looked constantly and restlessly from side to side. A terrible fear was upon her, -the last fear of the world beyond the bayou, the morbid and insane dread she had been under since childhood.

When she was at the bayou's edge she stood there, and shouted for help as if a life depended upon it:-

"Oh, P'tit Maitre! Venez donc! Au secours! Au secours!"

No voice responded. Cheri's hot tears were scalding her neck. She called for each and every one upon the place, and still no answer came.

*Continued on next page*

She shouted, she wailed; but whether her voice remained unheard or unheeded, no reply came to her frenzied cries. And all the while Cheri moaned and wept and entreated to be taken home to his mother.

La Folle gave a last despairing look around her. Extreme terror was upon her. She clasped the child close against her breast, where he could feel her heart beat like a muffled hammer. Then shutting her eyes, she ran suddenly down the shallow bank of the bayou, and never stopped till she had climbed the opposite shore.

She stood there quivering an instant as she opened her eyes. Then she plunged into the footpath through the trees.

She spoke no more to Cheri, but muttered constantly, "Bon Dieu, ayez pitie La Folle! Bon Dieu, ayez pitie moi!"

Instinct seemed to guide her. When the pathway spread clear and smooth enough before her, she again closed her eyes tightly against that unknown and terrifying world.

A child, playing in some weeds, caught sight of her as she neared the quarters. The little one uttered a cry of dismay.

"La Folle!" she screamed, in her piercing treble. "La Folle done cross de bayer!"

Quickly the cry passed down the line of cabins.

"Yonda, La Folle done cross the bayou!"

Children, old men, old women, young ones with infants in their arms, flocked to doors and windows to see this awe-inspiring spectacle. Most of them shuddered with superstitious dread of what it might portend. "She totin' Cheri!" Some of them shouted.

Some of the more daring gathered about her, and followed at her heels, only to fall back with new terror when she turned her distorted face upon them. Her eyes were bloodshot and the saliva had gathered in a white foam on her black lips.

Some one had run ahead her to where P'tit Maitre sat with his family and guests upon the gallery.

"P'tit Maitre! La Folle done cross the bayou! Look her!

Look her yonda totin' Cheri!" This startling intimation was the first which they had of the woman's approach.

She was now near at hand. She walked with long strides. Her eyes were fixed desperately before her, and she breathed heavily, as a tired ox.

At the foot of the stairway, which she could not have mounted, she laid the boy in his father's arms. Then the world that had looked red to La Folle suddenly turned black, —like that day she had seen powder and blood.

She reeled for an instant. Before a sustaining arm could reach her, she fell heavily on the ground.

When La Folle regained consciousness, she was at home again, in her own cabin and upon her own bed. The moon rays, streaming in through the open door and windows, gave what light was needed to the old black mammy who stood at the table concocting a tisane of fragrant herbs. It was very late.

Others who had come, and found that the stupor clung to her, had gone again. P'tit Maitre had been there, and with him Doctor Bonfils, who said La Folle might die.

But death had passed her by. The voice was very clear and steady with which she spoke to Tante Lizette, brewing her tisane there in a corner.

"Ef you will hive me one good drink tisane, Tante Lizette, I b'lieve I'm goin' sleep, me."

And she did sleep; so soundly, so healthfully, that old Lizette without compunction stole softly away, to back through the moonlit fields to her own cabin in the new quarters.

The first touch of the cool gray morning awoke La Folle. She arose, calmly, as if no tempest had shaken and threatened her existence but yesterday.

She donned her new blue cottonade and white apron, for she remembered that this was Sunday. When she had made for herself a cup of strong black coffee, and drunk it with relish, she quitted the cabin and walked across the old familiar field to the bayou's edge again.

She did not stop there as she as she had always done before, but crossed with a long, steady stride as if she had done this all her life.

When she had made her way through the brush and scrub cottonwood-trees that lined the opposite bank, she found herself upon the border of a field where the white, bursting cotton, with the dew upon it, gleamed for acres and acres like frosted silver in the early dawn.

La Folle drew a long, deep breath as she gazed across the country. She walked slowly and uncertainly, like one who hardly knows how, looking about her as she went.

The cabins, that yesterday had sent a clamor of voices to pursue her, were quiet now. No one was yet astir at Bellissime. Only the birds that darted here and there from hedges were awake, and singing their matins.

When La Folle came to the broad stretch of velvety lawn that surrounded the house, she moved slowly and with delight over the springy turf, that was delicious beneath her tread.

She stooped to find whence came those perfumes that were assailing her senses with memories from a time far gone.

There they were, stealing up to her from the thousand blue violets that peeped out from green, luxuriant beds. There they were, showering down from the big waxen bells of the magnolias far above her head, and from the jessamine clumps around her.

There were roses, too, without number. To right and left palms spread in broad and graceful curves. It all looked like enchantment beneath the sparkling sheen of dew.

When La Folle had slowly and cautiously mounted the many steps that led up to the veranda, she turned to look back at the perilous ascent she had made. Then she caught sight of the river, bending like a silver bow at the foot of Bellissime, Exultation possessed her soul.

La Folle rapped softly upon a door near at hand. Cheri's mother soon cautiously opened it. Quickly and cleverly she dissembled the astonishment she felt at seeing La Folle.

"Ah, La Folle! Is it you, so early?"

"Oui, madame. I come ax how my po' li'l Cheri do, 's mo'nin'."

"He is feeling easier, thank you, La Folle. Dr. Bonfils says it will be nothing serious. He's sleeping now. Will you come back when he awakes?

"Non, madame. I'm goin' wait yair tell Cheri wake up."

La Folle seated herself upon the topmost step of the veranda.

A look of wonder and deep content crept into her face as she watched for the first time the sun rise upon the new, the beautiful world beyond the bayou.



### WHAT DO YOU THINK ???

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

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

Write to:

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

### 1990 Shooting Star Showers

During the earth's orbit around the sun, we regularly pass through meteor clusters. Sometimes, our planet's voyage through these dust fields takes days or even weeks. When the meteors enter the earth's atmosphere, they become what we call shooting stars. Here are the best days to see shooting stars in 1990:

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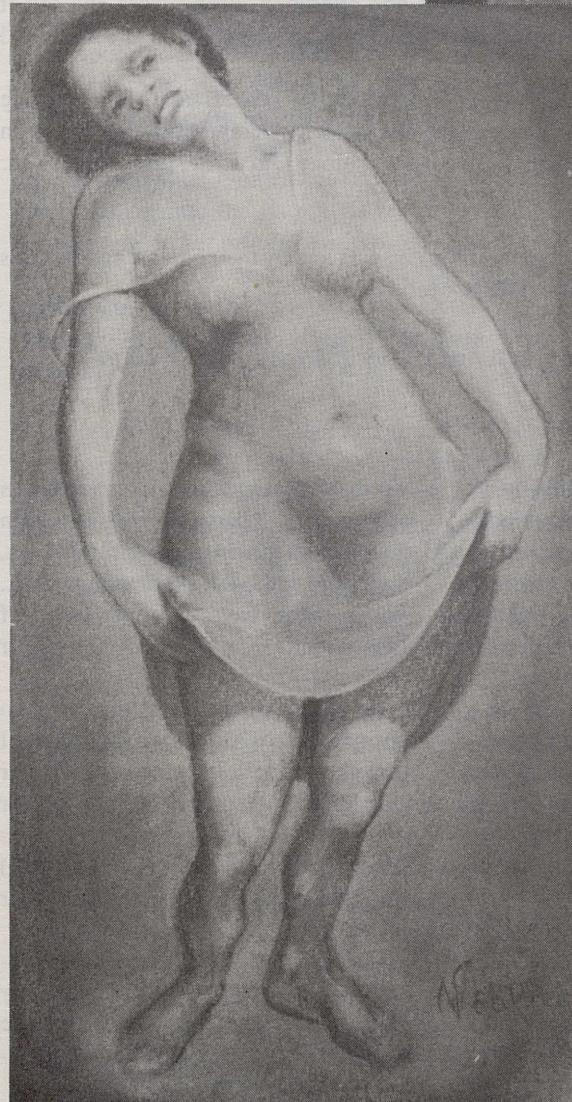


Life, 1973

# Harold Neal

Harold Meredith Neal's oils, pastels and acrylics are in private collections throughout the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. Litchfield, 12th Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh, John Millsop, the Chairman of National Steel Corporation and Pennsylvania's Governor Shafer are a few of Harold's portrait commissions. Recently, this native of Duquesne, PA began sculpting in bronze with the theme "figurative realism."

I was even more interested in the  
then when I saw the painting  
OUT TURNS HIGH AMERICAN FOLK  
very naive style and less refined  
planned to be that they were  
not to be seen. But now I  
not to remain in W.H.A.  
A painting of  
and could not complete it.  
TWO OF THESE WORKS FORMED BY  
W.H.A. IN 1972.



*Slip, 1972*

# Denigration



by Cathleen Richardson

**T**n April, 1987, an article in "The WREE-VIEW of Women For Racial and Economic Equality" said: "Writings Wanted for Anthology," and explained that nearly all women have suffered some sort of abuse. This "call" would "provide a creative and constructive expression of our anger as we use it to heal, recover and create."

Sister Boneventure was my high school history teacher. I remember her piousness, her correct stature as she would glide to and from classes. A quiet and unassuming woman, she was almost sweet. But, something about me either personally or as representative of a group touched a nerve in her, and one afternoon during class she felt it necessary to embarrass me fully without provocation. I learned to avoid her at all cost.

The following essay—"Denigration"—comes from the exchange between Sister Boneventure and myself. Denigration also has been accepted for publication in the anthology *Our Eyes Have Found You: Angry Words From Honest Women*.

"Our victims know us by their scars and by their chains, and it is this that makes their evidence irrefutable."

*Preface, The Wretched of the Earth, Franz Fanon*

I am not black. My daughters are not black. No one I know in my family, or anyone I know, is black. What we are is a delectable fusion, a kaleidoscope of colors ranging from white-white to down-brown-brown and every shade and nuance in between and beyond.

We have come full circle since that first slave ship docked on America's shores. We emerged from the shit and vomit encrusted hulls of those great ships scared, bewildered and stinking of our own waste. I am not black, please call me what I am

I attended a Catholic high school and once, in Problems of Democracy class, we were reading a current events periodical much like the "Weekly Reader" only not so juvenile. This particular issue was dedicated to "us" and to the

civil-rights movement sweeping the nation at that time. One article centered on the controversy of titles. They were interested in knowing what name we wished to be referred to as a group or nationality. It gave us three choices: Negro, black and Afro-American. This was 1968 and as the class went on to read about the so-called militancy of such noted revolutionaries as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela Davis, George Jackson and the Black Panthers, I contemplated the three choices.

I never liked the word Negro. Pronounced knee-grow, it sounded formal and foreign in speech and made one think of kneeling as in bowing and scraping. Or, a dressed up nigger. Black was very closely associated with the

words black nigga. Afro-American was appealing but I had a bagging sensation that after all these years, centuries even, they were still holding something back. For instance, have you ever heard of Japo-American, or Italio-American or Native-O-American?

Just as I had made up my mind to choose Afro-American because, I thought, something close was better than nothing, I happened to read further in the article that the popular consensus (from where or who, it didn't specify) was black. Black? How could I be so far off the mark?

So when the teacher, Sister Boneventure, naturally called on me (the only knee-grow in the class) and asked me what I wanted to be called, I was embarrassed and ashamed to answer.

I was even more embarrassed and ashamed at that moment, than when collectively, as a class, from an accredited textbook, our junior high American History teacher taught us why slavery came about and how slavery was a good thing. He explained to us that slavery was an honest commodity, a cheap source of labor needed to build America, and after all, the slaves were a happy lot. The slaves were given food, clothing and shelter. There were pictures in the textbook of slaves in colorful clothing. Women in colorful print head rags, smiling broadly, eyes bulging, gayly kicking up their heels so happy to be slaves, they were ecstatic.

That whole chapter was a lie. It was an embarrassment and an insult to our intelligence. I remember looking around the room. We all sat there, stock still, heads bowed in our knee-grow-ness, listening to the white teacher teach us about ourselves, all the while praying that it would be over soon. As a silent group, we crawled through that one and were able to find the spot in our brain where the vault was hidden marked "embarrassing situations" and throw that in.

This was different. I couldn't throw this in the vault. Now was my individual moment of reckoning and I was failing, slowly falling into the murky waters of denial. That Sister Boneventure, in her infinite wisdom, was able to pick on this. Now here was a woman who had taken vows of chastity, poverty and, in fact, had married Jesus Christ.

She said to me, in front of the whole class. "Why are you nervous? Are you sweating? You're so dark, I can't see you."

I knew who I was. My mother had already told me. But with the help of dear Sister Boneventure, my gift from America of knee-grow-ness was choking me. It had enveloped me and blocked off all air passages. My knee-grow-ness and my adrenaline constantly battled. This would be a fight to finish. Sister Boneventure was correct in her assessment of my weakness. After all, a strong person, emotionally or physically (man, woman or child), would have resisted her abuse. I swallowed in it.

My knee-grow-ness forced my adrenaline to open my sweat glands and water ran freely from my arm pits. I fidgeted in my chair. The room perfectly quiet and sea of faces from Polish, Spanish, Russian, German, French and Italian ancestry waited for my answer.

I did answer but with head bowed and in a teenie, tiny knee-grow voice whispered, "I like black."

I am American. Of this there is no doubt. Five generations of my people (at least two of those generations lost in slavery) guarantee my place here. This land is my land. It was built by the brawn of my foreparents' backs. Their backs bent by the relentless thrash of the whip. Their spirits bent (but not broken) by the many "yessa massas" they uttered and the white people (men, woman and children) they pretended to worship while suppressing seething anger inside. I deserve better than small

"b" black. I deserve a heritage, an ancestry and roots deeper than America's soil because these things are inherently mine.

My hushed answer to Sister Boneventure in 1968 in "Problems of Democracy" class gave my knee-grow-ness the victory. Everyone stumbles and falls. But the precious blood of those five generations of my people pumps through my veins and becomes my question, my answer —my reason for being. I have flung away my knee-grow-ness with finality and scream to its back, "Get thee away from me, Satan." I am no longer embarrassed. Nor am I ashamed. I am African American.



*Cathleen Richardson studied English Writing at the University of Pittsburgh and is a secretary for Duquesne Light Company. She is married, the mother of four daughters and grandmother of two.*



## **Desire**

*I want a poem to wrap around me,  
To make me feel good.*

*I want a song to shout and sing  
A dance—so I can whirl and sway  
A tambourine to roll and rattle  
A star that glimmers and shimmers.*

*Most of all—*

*I want a poem to wrap around me,  
To make me feel good.*

*Connie L. Chivers  
Minneapolis, MN*

★

# CONFES SIO NS



Photo © by Sandra Gould-Ford



by Martin Terrell  
Athens, OH

*Editor's Note: Martin Terrell was wrongfully convicted of burglary and sentenced to prison for 6-25 years in 1976. He is a Master's journalism student at a Midwestern university. Writing to one of his friends inside, he is also speaking to us.*

**W**hen I picked up my mail yesterday and saw your handwriting, I felt like throwing the letter away unopened. Not that I didn't want to hear from you, but seeing the postmark on your letter opened too many old wounds in me. I'm doing ok in my new life, people know me for who I am and I've found some measure of peace with myself. But no one knows the me that you remember-I doubt if they'd even care to know if I could tell them.

When I saw your handwriting with the six-digit number after your name, the air got hotter all of a

sudden. My breath came a little quicker and for the smallest fraction of a second I was awash with guilt and revulsion. Guilt at having failed to keep my promise to keep in touch, and revulsion that my past, with all its fears and uncertainties, could reach out and grab me with such force.

I have never quite outdistanced those uncertainties we share. But they are balanced by a recent discovery that keeps me moving forward. It's the realization that my safety lies in letting go. The less I try to control my environment the freer my life becomes.

You remember how I used to write letters to different women, always couching my words to create the proper image to manipulate their most favorable response? Today I'm able to communicate without weighing my words; consequently, people are responding to me instead of to the image I project. It calls for quite a different kind of awareness, one that I have yet to become fully comfortable with.

I used to think that once I was installed in my new life old doubts and fears would surely vanish. That hasn't proven to be the case. If anything, I have discovered a whole new knapsack of uncertainties about myself. When we were together it was like traveling on the desert floor and seeing our eventual freedom looming before us as a promontory against the horizon. That promontory was always before us, dominating our present and future with its promise. If only we could reach it and somehow reach its summit, we believed we'd find answers to the things that had kept us floundering. Viewed from the desert floor, even the slightest rise looks like a mountain. But once you've left the desert, it begins to look more like a hill.

Do you remember how we used to talk about how unfair the system was and what a rotten break it had given us? I do, and I can still hear you telling me that there was no fundamental difference between innocence and guilt, freedom and slavery. I disagreed with you at first, but I too came to hold the same opinions. Receiving your letter brought all those opinions back to me, almost as vividly as if I had just discovered them. It's not something I wanted to delve into again.

Reading your letter took almost more than I was willing to give. After confronting the guilt I felt upon receiving it, for I did want to write to you, I opened the envelope carefully. I knew that whatever I found inside would touch me intimately—and wasn't sure I wanted to be touched that deeply any longer. Your letter lived up to my fears. It sucked at my heart like a dog sucking on tender marrow, making my nerves twitch anticipating my father's belt.

You ask uneasy questions. Questions that strike at the very heart of my complacency and make me go to my mirror again. I'm not talking about that external reflective ornament we use to prepare our image for others, but the mirror we turn inward upon ourselves when faced with questions about our inner image, the one that we work a lifetime preparing for and seldom are honest enough to face.

I imagine that's why I'm really glad in one sense to get your letter; for I can once again talk about those things that consume me. I can share my real feelings about who I am without having to worry about how I'll sound or what people will think. For as you know too well, I have yet to fully divorce myself from what others think of me. Even you.

A year ago things seemed so much clearer for me. I knew there wasn't any truth or justice, just as surely as I knew I wasn't guilty of the crime I'd been sentenced to prison for. I spent more years than I'd choose to admit trying to convince others of my innocence. I even recall pouring all details of my failed appeal on you and your trying to write a new brief for me. I fought tooth and nail trying to prove my innocence, and failed—in the courts, with friends, and even with my family.

My sisters were fed up with my protestations of innocence and wrote for me to stop crying and go on with my life. "You wouldn't be there if the jury hadn't felt you were guilty," my oldest sister wrote. After getting that letter, I never wrote to her again.

You see, to be completely honest, I knew it then but couldn't admit it. My sisters realized it instinctively, even though they couldn't define it. Although I may have been innocent in the small sense of not having committed that particular burglary, in a much larger sense I was as guilty as hell. That knowledge was always below the surface as I dealt with others about it, and it colored my perceptions of who I was. How could it not?

The one time in my life I get accused of something I didn't do, I scream bloody murder. But did I scream that way for all the times I wasn't caught? When you look at it like that, I was hypocritical too—at least as much as the court that condemned me. I too harped on a technicality—the

meaning of "not-guilty." Looming between "not-guilty" and innocent lies a world of truth. In that purer world of innocence, the moral one, lives a truth that neither I nor the court was prepared to face.

When you're in prison it's easy to think that those on the outside are free. They can go to and fro nearly without restriction, eat and sleep almost when they please, and enjoy the company of dogs, children, and the opposite sex. From the perspective of someone denied those choices, it really seems like freedom. I guess the first thing I learned when I re-entered this world of choices, was how sadly alike these two worlds are.

Iron bars do not a prison make, is a trite but true expression. There are countless invisible institutions, inhabited by inmates of all kinds. Husbands and wives imprisoned by each others' expectations, businessmen and women imprisoned by their

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*Continued on next page*

## Confession from previous page

needs to belong—they all twist and turn on the rack of self-imposed prisons.

I'm trying to say this: be careful of your condition. Don't allow it to blind you to your kinship with the rest of us just because your imprisonment is different. In some respects you have an advantage over those who perceive themselves as free. by having your choices taken from you and being placed in a physical setting of deprivation, you at least are brought face-to-face with the reality of your limitations. The real treasure in being forced to realize your condition is what you cannot help but conclude that you alone are ultimately responsible for your success in life, however you choose to define it.

You probably realize how much you and I are alike, but I wonder if you understand how much you share with others who aren't so like you on the surface. If I can give you any insight, I'd like it to be this — that underneath our differences we are all united by a common bond. That common bond is pain, sure. But it is also joy. Without the two, there would be no revelation. How else would we find love, or satisfaction?

The trick is this: don't spend years trying to avoid or bury pain like I did. It always reappears, and is often destructive when it does. This may not make sense to you immediately, but if you're patient, as you have been with me, I know it will: when we learn to embrace the pain of living, we touch upon the frontiers of love.

You know the story. I was a pleasure seeker for much of my life, and pain never seemed worthwhile. Because of that I was never able to experience anything beyond superficiality. I came to see a startling discovery: nothing is more divine than love. Through it we are connected to the divinity in our own humanity.

You've heard this story, too, line from the Bible that I never understood till recently: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believed in Him should not perish, but have life everlasting." I understand that now. Getting in touch with something that powerful can occur in any setting, even yours. So don't deny the pain you're feeling, for not only is it your link to yourself, it's a link to something far grander — a lifeline to all of us, and to God

Prisons come in many forms, not all them concrete and steel. An in-law of mine, a wealthy man in his 80's has gradually built a wall of disillusionment so high around himself that he exists on an island ever smaller than your cell. A successful businessman who retired as president of an oil company, of all things, he has erected a prison for himself that only death can free him from. There are everyday crimes too. Formerly a Rotarian, this man chose to resign when women were ordained as priests. I've often wondered how God will appear to him when he applies for admittance into heaven; my bet she'll be female and black.

The saddest thing though, is that this man isn't unique. There are thousands of personal prisons that keep people isolated from their true selves. Erected out of bias instead of stone, these prisons of our own design often follow us to our graves.

I know I haven't addressed your final question- how this new life has been for me? I wish I could answer that with certainty and give you something profound and encouraging to hang your hopes on. The truth is I have only begun to scratch the surface. I have nothing profound to give.

The certainties I constructed and placed on a shelf of expediency have failed to meet the test. Confronted with the rigors of my having to be real, many of my past truths fell victim to my own insight. Unlike I expected when we were together, the more I "get my act together" the more holes I discover in my act. I guess that's a function of my seeing more because I am seeing more clearly

Last week I ran across someone who knew me from my former life, an administrator at the prison. Forgetting how hard it is for some of us to reconcile change, especially when it goes against all we've learned for our own protection, I said hello to him just as I would say to anyone else he had seen my wife and me approaching and pretended not to recognize us. We both hailed him from across the street, but because of being imprisoned by his own fears, of not wanting to appear to condone our union, he was unable to greet us.

His failure to return our greeting is only a small courtesy in the grand scheme of things, but it is a perfect example of how constraining our own prisons can become.

Because my wife is a former prison employee and I am a former prisoner, we represented something very frightening to him. She being white and my being black didn't make things any easier for him. We had crossed the self-inscribed line that people in his profession have drawn to keep themselves separate from their charges. My wife and I had been able to escape that imprisonment by acknowledging our common humanity. By failing to acknowledge his common bond to us, this administrator had erected a prison for himself that was more restricting than any steel cage.

I had come to realize it vaguely before, but seeing him entrapped so completely, this made the point crystal clear. Each one of us is encased in some kind of prison. Yet, we can all experience a measure of freedom by giving ourselves permission to recognize how alike we are. Denying that commonality only makes our prison smaller.

So I hope you don't let yourself get trapped by those false dividing lines where you are. Regardless of our titles or labels, nothing separates us from others like our own inability to see and accept ourselves. Once we have found the courage to do that, we will find the compassion to accept others.

I am still discovering now.



by Egyirba High, Kesho Scott, Cherry Muhanji: co-authors

Every once in a while words fly by; demanding, titillating, warm. And sometimes they hover right by your ear, like an angry swarm of bees.

"Take it out!" His words. His solution

The only solution there was for us, according to him. His eyes looked straight through me...[and] snuffed out the hidden lies I had told myself. Like how he really loved me. Or just a little more time—he'll come around....Tears made crystal paths down my brown landscape and slurred my speech. I marveled at his composure. His spine was erect and his hands were motionless in his lap. I focused on his spiral hair. I wanted to give John one more chance for humanity.

There is a "Sistah" at the Downtown Pittsburgh branch of Carnegie Library who catches demanding words and unobtrusively, places them on shelves. They are not gathered together and put out separately on their own display. Like when you go in the drugstore to buy shampoo and conditioner and the one you want is not where the shampoos and conditioners are but rather on display under ETHNIC.

I caught this Sistah's attitude during Black History Month when she was showing movies of African Americans in the room where they usually show lunch time travelogue films of Hawaii and Italy to packed crowds. It didn't matter to her that there were three or two or sometimes only one person in the audience. She showed the movies anyway. So I began to watch her and I began to walk up down her aisles searching, and I began to find.

On one such day, three names caught my attention—Kesho Scott, Cherry Muhanji and Egyirba High. *Tight Spaces* is written by three ordinary women like you and me. An aunt, her niece and niece's childhood friend.

These three women decided they had something to say about life, about their lives, about

how their lives intertwined with each other and about the tight spaces Detroit and America offered them. It is prose, it is confessions, prayers and apologies. It is also painful memories.

*Tight Spaces* is a collection of 36 short pieces, each individually written by one of the authors. None are over four pages and the whole book is divided into three sections—"Talkin' Real Honest," "Listen To Me Good, Now" and "You Must Be Lyin'".

Ehyirbra, I think the more powerful writer of the three, tells the story "Take It Out" (quoted above), which is about what her man wanted her to do to their unborn child.

When writing true incidents as fiction, the author must convey specific characterizations as well as strong, clear story lines. The author must keep in mind the reader will not have been present when the situations occurred. In fiction, an author may take broader risks and experiment a little more with subtlety because ultimately the reader will walk away with his own evaluation of what the author meant. The fault of *Tight Spaces* lies in the sometimes thick and overpowering imagery. It is distracting and the prose becomes cumbersome. The reader will ask over and over, "Who is this person and what does the author mean here?"

But, these few stumbling blocks are small when compared to the celebration of the book as a whole. *Tight Spaces* is adult reading, yet it would also be excellent for the discerning high school and college-aged student.

It is important that the Black community continue to support this type of literature. *Tight Spaces* is available from: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, P.O. Box 410678, San Francisco, CA 94141.

Enjoy.

Review by  
Cathleen Richardson Bailey  
Pittsburgh, PA

# Gorrilla, My Love

Toni Cade Bambara

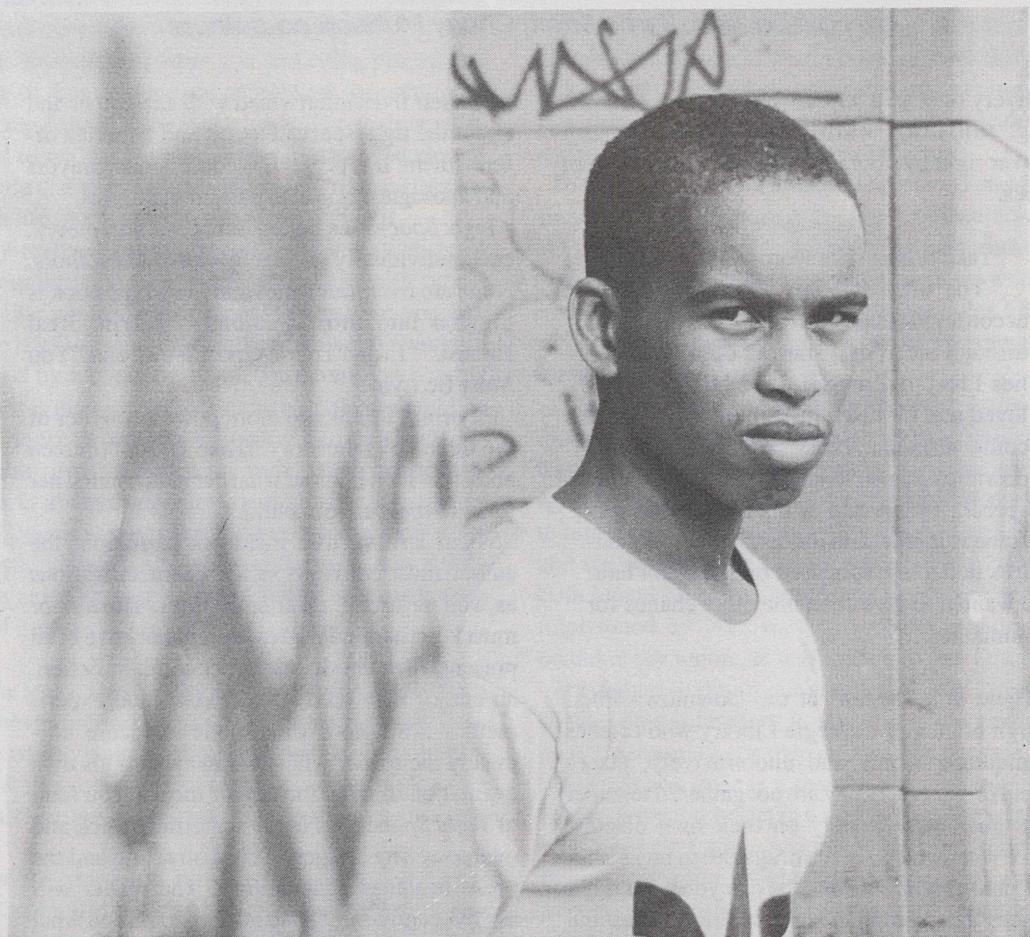


Photo © by Sandra Gould-Ford

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*Then there comes Bugs  
Bunny which we already  
seen so we know we been  
had. No gorilla my nuthin.  
And Big Brood say  
Awww sheeet, we goin to  
see the manager*

---

S

hat was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name. Not a change up, but a change back, since Jefferson Winston Vale was the name in the first place. Which was news to me cause he'd been my Hunca Bubba my whole life, since I couldn't manage Uncle to save my life. So far as I was concerned, it was a change completely to somethin soundin very geographical weatherlike to me, like somethin you'd find in a almanac. Or somethin you'd run across when you sittin in the navigator seat with a wet thumb on the map crinkly in your lap, watchin the roads and signs so when Granddaddy Vale say "Which way, Scout," you got sense enough to say take the next exit or take a left or whatever it is. Not that Scout's my name. Just the name Granddaddy call whoever sittin in the navigator seat. Which is usually me cause

I don't feature sittin in back with the pecans. Now, you figure pecans all right sittin with. If you thinks so, that's your business. But they dusty sometime and make you cough. And they got a way of slidin around and dippin down sudden, like maybe a rat in the buckets. So if you scary like me, you sleep with the lights on and blame it on Baby Jason and, so as not to waste good electric, you study the maps. And that's how come I'm in the navigator seat most times and get to be called Scout.

So Hunca Bubba in the back with the pecans and Baby Jason, and he in love. And we got to hear all this stuff about this woman he in love with and all. Which really ain't enough to keep the mind alive, though Baby Jason got no better sense than to give his undivided attention and keep grabbin at the photograph which is just a picture of some skinny woman in a countrified dress with her hand shot up to her face like she shame fore cameras. But there's a movie house in the background which I ax about. Cause I am a movie freak from way back, even though it do get me in trouble sometime.

Like when me and Big Brood and Baby Jason was on our own last Easter and couldn't go to the Dorset cause we'd seen all the Three Stooges they was. And the RKO Hamilton was closed readying up for the Easter Pageant that night. And the West End, the Regun and the Sunset was too far, less we had grownups with us which we didn't. So we walk up Amsterdam Avenue to the Washington and "Gorilla, My Love" playin, they say, which suit me just fine, though the "my love" part kinda drag Big Brood some. As for Baby Jason, shoot, like Granddaddy say, he'd follow me into the fiery furnace if I say come on. So we go in and get three bags of Havmore potato chips which not only are the best potato but the best bags for blowin up and bustin real loud so the matron come trottin down the aisle with her chunky self, flashin that flashlight dead in your eye so you can give her some lip, and if she answer back and you just turn the place out. Which I love to do, no lie. With Baby Jason kickin at the seat in front, eggin me on, and Big Brood mumblin bout what fiercesome things we goin do. Which means me. Like when the big boys come up on us talkin bout Lemme a nickel. It's me that hide the money. Or when bad boys in the park take Big Brood's Spadeen way from him. It's me that jump on they back and fight awhile. And it's me that turns out the show if the matron get too salty.

So the movie come on and right away it's this churchy music and clearly not about no gorilla. Bout Jesus. And I am ready to kill, not cause I got anything against Jesus. Just that when you fixed to watch a gorilla picture you don't wanna get messed around with Sunday School stuff. So I am mad. Besides, we see this raggedy old brown film King of Kings every year and enough's enough. Grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow. Which burns me up. There I am, my feet up and my Havmore potato chips really salty and crispy and two jawbreakers in my lap and the money safe in my shoe from big boys, and here comes this Jesus stuff. So we all go wild. Yellin, booin, stompin and carryin on. Really to wake the man in the

booth up there who musta went to sleep and put on the wrong reels. But no, cause he holler down to shut up and then turns the sound up so we really gotta holler like crazy to even hear ourselves good. And the matron ropes off the children section and flashes her light all over the place and we yell some more and some kid slip under the rope and run up and down the aisle just to show it take more than some dusty ole velvet rope to tie us down. And I'm flingin the kids in front of me's popcorn. And Baby Jason kickin seats. And it's really somethin. Then here come the big and bad matron, the one they let out in case of emergency. And she totin that flashlight like she gonna use it on somebody. This here the colored matron Brandy and her friends call Thunderbuns. She do not play. She do not smile. So we shut up and watch the simple ass picture.

Which is not so simple as it is stupid. Cause I realize that just about anybody in my family is better than this god they always talkin about. My daddy wouldn't stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mamma specially. And I can just see it now, Big Brood up there on the cross talkin bout Forgive them daddy cause they don't know what they doin. And my Mamma say Get on down from There you big fool, whatcha think this is, playtime? And my Daddy yellin to Granddaddy to Get him a ladder cause Big Brood actin the fool, his mother side of the family showin up. And my mama and her sister Daisy jumpin on them Romans beatin them with they pocketbooks. And Hunca Bubba tellin them folks on they knees they better get out the way and go get some help or they goin to get trampled on. And Granddaddy Vale sayin Leave the boy alone, if that's what he wants to do with his life we ain't got nothin to say about it. Then Aunt Daisy givin him a taste of that pocketbook, fussin bout what a damn fool old man Granddaddy is. Then everybody jumpin in his chest like the time Uncle Clayton went in the army and come back with only one leg and Granddaddy say somethin stupid about that's life. And by this time Big Brood off the cross and in the park playin handball or skully or somethin. And the family in the kitchen throwin dishes at each other, screamin bout if you hadn't done this I wouldn't had to do that. And me in the parlor trying to do my arithmetic yellin Shut it off.

Which is what I was yellin all by myself which make me a sittin target for Thunderbuns. But when I yell We want our money back, that gets everybody in chorus. And the movie windin up with this heavenly cloud music and the smart-ass up there in his hole in the wall turns up the sound again to drown us out. Then there comes Bugs Bunny which we already seen so we know we been had. No gorilla my nuthin. And Big Brood say Awwww sheeet, we goin to see the manager and get our money back. And I know from this we business. So I brush the potato chips out of my hair which is where Baby Jason like to put em, and I march myself up the aisle to deal

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*Continued on next page*

with the manager who is a crook in the first place for lyin out there sayin "Gorilla, My Love" playin. And I never did like the man cause he oily and pasty at the same time like the bad hut in the serial, the one that got a hideout behind a push-button and play "Moonlight Sonata" with gloves on. I knock on the door and I am furious. And I am alone, too. Cause Big Brood suddenly got to go so bad even though my mama told us bought goin in them nasty bathrooms. And I hear him sigh like he disgusted when he get to the door and see only a little kid there. And now I'm really furious cause I got so tired of grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can't take em to court. What is it, he say to me like I lost my mittens or wet on myself or am somebody's retarded child. When in reality I am the smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime and you can ax anybody. Even them teachers that don't like me cause I won't sing them Southern songs or back off when they tell me my questions are out of order. And cause my Mama come up there in a minute when them teachers start playin the dozens behind colored folks. She stalk in with her hat pulled down bad and that Persian lamb coat draped back over one hip on account of she got her fist planted there so she can talk that talk which gets all hypnotized, and teacher be comin undone cause she know this could be her job and her behind cause Mama got pull with the Board and bad by her self anyhow.

So I kick the door open wider and just walk right by him and sit down and tell the man about himself and that I want my money back and that goes for Baby Jason and Big Brood too. And he still trying to shuffle me out the door even though I'm sitting which shows him for the fool he is. Just like them teachers do fore they realize Mama like a stone on that spot and ain't backin up. So he ain't gettin up off the money. So I was forced to leave, takin the matches from under his astray, and set a fire under the candy stand, which closed raggedy ole Washington down for a week. My Daddy had the suspect it was me cause Big Brood got a big mouth. but I explained right quick what the whole thing was about and I figured it was even-steven. Cause if you say Gorilla, My Love, you suppose to mean it. Just like when you say you goin to give me a party on my birthday, you gotta mean it. And if you say me and Baby Jason can go South pecan haulin with Granddaddy Vale, you better not be comin up with no stuff about the weather look uncertain or did you mop the bathroom or any other trickified business. I mean even gangsters in the movies say My word is my bond. So don't nobody get away with nothin far as I'm concerned. So Daddy put his belt back on. Cause that's the way I was raised. Like my Mama say in on of them situations when I won't back down, Okay Badbird, you right. Your point is well-taken. Not that Badbird my name, just what she say when she tired arguin and know I'm right. And Aunt Jo, who is the hardest head in the family and even worse than Aunt Daisy, she say, You absolutely right Miss Muffin, which also ain't my real name but the name she gave me one time when I got some medicine shot in my behind and wouldn't get up

off her pillows for nothin. And even Granddaddy Vale-who got no memory to speak of, so sometime you can just plain lie to him, if you want to be like that-he say, Well if that's what I said, then that's it. But this name business was different they said. It wasn't like Hunca Bubba had gone back on his word or anything. Just that he was thinkin bout gettin married and was usin his real name now. Which ain't the way I saw it at all.

So there I am in the navigator seat. And I turn to him and just plain ole ax him. I mean I come right on out with it. No sense goin all around that barn the old folks talk about. And like my mama say, Hazel-which is my real name and what she remembers to call me when she bein serious-when you got somethin on your mind, speak up and let the chips fall where they may. And if anybody don't like it, tell em to come see your mama. And Daddy look up from the paper and say, me first. Like that. That's how I was raised.

So I turn clear round in the navigator seat and say, "Look here, Hunca Bubba or Jefferson Windsong Vale or whatever your name is, you gonna marry this girl?"

"Sure am," he say all grins.

And I say, "Member that time you was baby-sittin me when we lived at four-o-nine and there was this big snow and Mama and Daddy got held up in the country so you had to stay for two days?"

And he say, "Sure do."

"Well. You remember how you told me I was the cutest thing that ever walked the earth?"

"Oh, you were real cute when you were little," he say which is suppose to be funny. I am not laughin.

"Well. You remember what you said?"

And Granddaddy Vale squintin over the wheel and axin Which way, Scout. But Scout is busy and don't care if we all get lost for days.

"Whatcha mean, Peaches?"

"My name is Hazel. And What I mean is you said you were going to marry me when I grew up. You were going to wait. That's what I mean, my dear Uncle Jefferson." And he don't say nuthin. Just look at me real strange like he never saw me before in life. Like he lost in some weird town in the middle of the night and lookin for directions and there's no one to ask. Like it was me that messed up the maps and turned the road post round. "Well, you said it didn't you?" And Baby Jason lookin back and forth like we playin ping-pong. Only I ain't playin. I'm hurtin and I can hear that I am screamin. And Granddaddy Vale mumblin how we never gonna get to where we goin if I don't turn around and take my navigator job serious.

"Well, For cryin out loud, Hazel, you just a little girl. And I was just teasin."

" 'And I was just teasin,'" I say back just how he said it so he can here what a terrible thing it is. Then I don't say nuthin. And he don't say nuthin. And Baby Jason don't say nuthin

nohow. Then Granddaddy Vale speak up. "Look here, Precious, it was Hunca Bubba what told you them things. This here, Jefferson Winston Vale." And Hunca Bubba say, "That's right. That was somebody else. I'm a new somebody."

"You a lyin dawg," I say, when I meant to say treacherous dog, but just couldn't get hold of the word. It slipped away from me. And I'm crying and crumplin down in the seat and just don't care. And Granddaddy say to hush and steps on the gas. And I'm losin my bearins and don't even know where to look on the map cause I can't see cryin. And Baby Jason cryin too. Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grownups playing change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don't even say they sorry.



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*Your Momma, boy  
don fell down tween  
a rock and a hard place  
Her door  
ain't closed against  
she done closed de door to save herself  
in her mind  
Life seem to be  
grow'in round  
faster den she kin  
Her wresl'in with  
the weeds 'bout her feel' ins  
she busy pull'n  
Her down on knees  
inside herself wid God's light  
search'n for roads lead'n to yonder days  
she busy pull'in herself  
Your Momma, boy  
ain't hating  
naw naw  
she only real mad with  
her ownself and jest plain ack'in from de fall  
She done fell down tween a rock and a hard place  
she be busy  
pull'in herself  
up.*

*Jaleelah Karriem  
E. Orange, NJ*

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## Tourist, (Franconia, 1986)

*Because it is the route that is the work you could take the world itself to mean yourself. Into these hills you've taken for granite, like the present, you could take place and be one with the subject of your feeling arising before you. The way he Queen's Lace sways could be an indication of your breath coming and going. As if an outline for time itself, here I am stepping forth as an instance walking the mountain road to the hilltop where around he bend I'll hear someone working on a house the frame of whose parts, the material and the aesthetic and their perishing, linked together will stand for history. It is July, the Goldenrod drooping heavily at the road's edge, the daisies all over exploding with white rays, the Coltsfoot buttery, and Nodding Thistle rose-purple every where itself, the little water in the wind all at once reminding me of myself. I am toward the end of my 36th year, not nearly the person I'd dreamed I would be back in 69, Armstrong walking the nearer moon and me hot headed, twenty, with a future seeming never more soon, seed whose crazed circumstance among things yielded its mysterious blossoming. Now the people passing me in their cars, faces red and pink swollen like the climbing bittersweet berries, bouncing up and down like dice in trustless boxes, might just as well be me caught in a body no where completely at home. The little water in the wind reminds me of my sorrow, a quick gust I can't explain. What is happening is me even as I see the Bea Balm's bright star call the hummingbird into its circle, even as every doubt i am is my flowering home that you have called me into, world.*

Chris Gilbert  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## BLACK FAMILY PLEDGE

*Because we have forgotten our ancestors,  
our children no longer give us honor.*

*Because we have lost the path our ancestors  
cleared, kneeling in perilous undergrowth,  
our children cannot find their way.*

*Because we have banished the God of our  
ancestors, our children cannot pray.*

*Because the old wails of our ancestors  
have faded beyond our hearing,  
our children cannot hear us crying.*

*Because we have abandoned our wisdom of  
mothering and fathering, our befuddled children  
give birth to children they neither want  
nor understand.*

*Because we have forgotten how to love,  
the adversary is within our gates,  
and holds us up to the mirror of the world,  
shouting, "Regard the loveless."*

*Therefore we pledge to bind ourselves again  
to one another,*

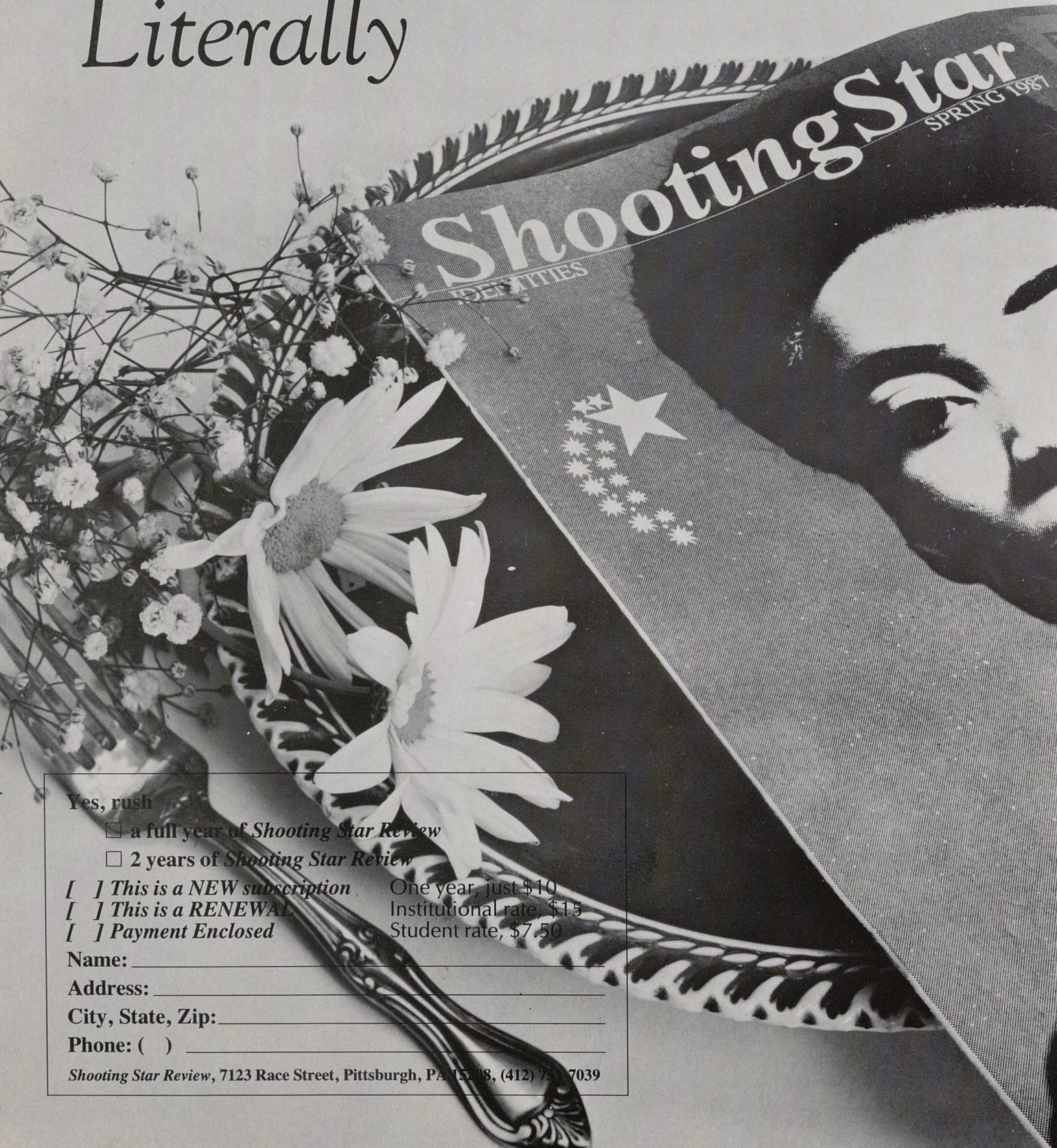
*To embrace our lowliest,  
To keep company with our loneliest,  
To educate our illiterate;  
To feed our starving,  
To clothe our ragged,  
To do all good things, knowing that we are  
more than keepers of our brothers and sisters.  
We are our brothers and sisters.*

*In honor of those who toiled and implored  
God with golden tongues, and in gratitude  
to the same God who brought us  
out of hopeless desolation.*

*We make this pledge.*

Dr. Maya Angelou  
Reprint from NCNW Publications

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

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

Reprinted from April, 1989 Small Press Magazine



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