

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS & CULTURE

VOL. XXV, No. 3 & 4 \$5.00

## New Writing from the Working- Class South

**Downsizing in Dixie:  
Who has the  
good jobs?  
An Institute Report**

**ALSO: Special Photo Essay:  
We Are All  
Housekeepers**

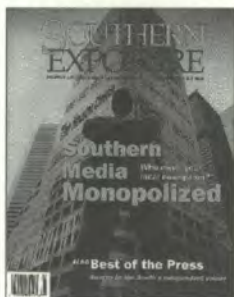
David Terry  
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## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

**SOUTHERN EXPOSURE** has been published since 1973 by the Institute for Southern Studies. With its combination of investigative reporting, historical perspective, oral histories, photography, and literature, the magazine has earned a national reputation. In the past few years, the magazine has received two Project Censored Awards, the Sidney Hillman Award for courageous reporting on racial injustice, two Alternative Press Awards for best regional publication, a National Magazine Award, and the John Hancock Insurance Company award for economic reporting.

**THE INSTITUTE FOR SOUTHERN STUDIES** is a nonprofit center working for progressive change in the region. Since its founding in 1970, the Institute has sponsored research, education, and organizing programs to (1) empower grassroots organizations and communities with strong local leadership and well-informed strategies, (2) provide the information, ideas, and historical understanding of Southern social struggles necessary for long-term fundamental change, and (3) nourish communication, cooperation, and understanding among diverse cultural groups.

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FALL/WINTER 1997

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**CORRECTION:** In the Spring/Summer 1997 issue, we neglected to thank Michelle Hughes and Matt Stiegler for their generous assistance. Also, Jordan Green was Associate Editor of the Spring/Summer issue.

In the 1997 Institute for Southern Studies/Southern Exposure report "Dislocation and Workforce Equity," Peter Braasch's name was misspelled.

**P**ublishing an issue on working-class writing in the South is a project that presents many challenges — the first being the whole notion of a southern working class.

It's very unpopular to talk about the working class these days, and southerners seem particularly allergic. Of course there's resistance to the term among the well-heeled, who have always had an interest in promoting the idea that "class" is a fiction, and anyone who works hard will get ahead. But aversion to the words "working class" has seeped into every strata of society — even among workers, and those who want to work. Reading a poem like Sharon Shelton's on page 32 is powerful: while stating that she uses food stamps and lives in the projects, she also says, "I am middle class."

It's deeply ironic that the words "working class" are being discarded now, when the divide between those who must work for a living, and those who don't, is wider and clearer than at any point in recent history. As the Institute's report on job equity shows, the working class label is especially fitting in the South — the region with the most poverty and the highest percentage of workers in blue-collar and low-paying jobs.

Which is not to say that the southern working class hasn't changed. For over a hundred years, the image on our cover — the white, male, blue-collar worker — was held as the symbol for all working people. That image was never accurate, and is even less fitting today. People of color and women have made inroads into once-exclusive jobs. Industrial work is being increasingly replaced by the exploding service and contingent occupations. And even doctors in Florida are gaining class consciousness and organizing unions.

But as the photo essay on the UNC Housekeepers shows, what's remarkable is how much has stayed the same. Job titles and labor markets, but what remains at the end of the day is a class of working people fighting for power and justice.

Underlying the way people use terms like "working" and "middle" class, I suspect, is something cultural — and profoundly political. Being "middle class" is to be part of that broad social group that constitutes the bedrock of American, and southern, values. Working people, on the other hand, are discouraged from seeing themselves as a group—a class, if you will—with a cultural identity, much less political and economic power.

That is what makes the stories in this issue so important. Working-class writing, at its best, is a vessel for the culture of those who work for a living. In these pages, we are told that the greatest enemy of the working-class writer is isolation; and that they seek other writers and voices, to create a sense of culture.

But such writers are faced with another obstacle: the lack of support working-class writing finds in established literary circles. In my calls to dozens of writing centers and literary networks in the South, I was often met with skepticism and confusion: "Working-class what?" "Do blue-collar people really write?" Go through the catalogue of any publishing house, and you'll find dozens of genres and identities from which to choose — everything, it seems, except that of working-class writers and writing.

I believe what Nancy Peacock says, that "what is needed is a movement...for writing to be returned to the masses." It takes movements to create change, and to create a culture among those who cast their lot with the working class. — *Chris Kromm*

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** The Institute welcomes two new staff members to our "dream team!" Kim Diehl and Keith Ernst will both serve as Research Directors, moving our community research programs forward. Welcome aboard! — *Pronita Gupta*

*I believe what Nancy Peacock says, that "what is needed is a movement ... for writing to be returned to the masses."*



## WHEN THE BIG HOUSE CALLS, WHAT'S YOUR ANSWER?

Lisa Hammil



NC ALLIANCE FOR DEMOCRACY PRESENTS THEIR PETITIONS FOR CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM TO THE STATE LEGISLATURE.

Suppose you're at home and get a call from the head of the state Department of Transportation. He's offering you a seat on the Board of Transportation (BOT), overseeing a \$2 billion budget, if you deliver on your promise to funnel \$25,000 into the governor's re-election campaign.

That's what J.A. Cartrette says happened to him. A North Carolina building contractor, Cartrette desperately wants a planned interstate to cross his coastal county, spur-

ring development in its rural interior. So when Gov. James B. Hunt's top fundraiser came calling, Cartrette pushed for a seat on the powerful BOT.

Cartrette thought he had a deal, confirmed by Transportation Secretary Garland Garrett's call. (Garrett now admits he offered a "seat at the table," but contends he didn't mean THAT table.) Later, the governor himself called, looking for more money and reassuring a worried Cartrette that "I look out for my friends."

Cartrette says his family eventually gave \$30,000 for Hunt's 1996 re-election — and now he's steaming because he didn't get his BOT seat. "I lost all confidence in the system," he wrote the governor in August 1997.

"Each of you [the fundraiser, Garrett and Hunt] misrepresented the truth to us. We gave the money and would have given more if you would have asked. We are very disappointed and feel that the money should be returned."

Cartrette believes a powerful state senator, whom Hunt recently named to the Utilities Commission, blocked his appointment. He's so mad, he's gone public with the whole affair. A district attorney has begun an investigation; the state auditor, Board of Elections, and legislative committees may also get involved.

Gov. Hunt denies Cartrette's charges, but evidence is mounting that even in this "good government" state, patronage and

dealmaking are integral to political fundraising. Studies by Democracy South of Chapel Hill show that Hunt raised one-third of his \$10 million war chest from families with members appointed to various boards and commissions. Most of the rest came from road contractors, developers, rest-home operators, major polluters, lobbyists and others with a direct stake in state spending and regulation.

Cartrette's story adds fuel to efforts to win campaign finance reform in North Carolina. Earlier this year, the legislature balked at changing how soft or hard money flows, but a broad coalition of reformers did maneuver a public-financing bill into position for debate next year. A grassroots campaign by the N.C. Alliance for Democracy (NCAD) also forced passage of a disclosure bill that requires more frequent reports from more campaigns of more information (e.g., identifying the donor's business).

When a key committee chair vowed to kill the disclosure bill because "no one in my county cares" about campaign reform, NCAD began a petition drive in his home district. Having barely won his last election, the legislator responded quickly — and became an NCAD ally. The tactic snowballed; hundreds signed petitions at a rodeo in the Republican House Speaker's home county, and a powerful Democrat finally urged colleagues to pass the bill to "get these people off my back."

The disclosure bill passed on the last day of the legislative session, despite backroom opposition from business lobbyists. NCAD plans to carry its people-over-money lessons into a grassroots education campaign and a fight for a Clean

## THIS IS MY CAR

NEW ORLEANS, La.—Louisiana license plates claim the state is a "Sportsman's Paradise," a reference more to hunting than to football. According to *The Economist*, state residents will get to use their guns to fight car theft, now that the state legislature has passed a "shoot-the-carjacker" law.

The new law says that if a "criminal-looking" person approaches your car and you "reasonably believe" your life to be in danger, you can shoot him or her without fear of prosecution. Louisiana already has a "shoot-the-burglar" law which allows deadly force to protect your home, and last year legalized the carrying of concealed weapons.

Laurie White, a New Orleans lawyer, thinks the law sends a dangerous message. "Have we come to the point in our society where we can kill each other and not answer for it?" What if a presumed carjacker is in fact an innocent passer-by seeking directions? Or an African American boy whose squeegee is mistaken for a gun?



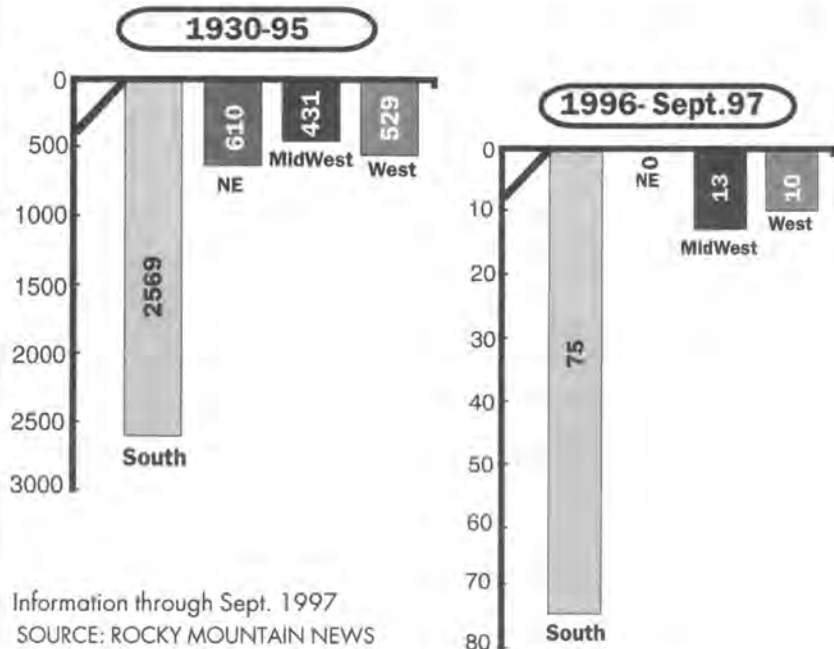
Illustrations by Ted May

Pete Adams, head of the state district attorney association, says "the notion that people are just going to be shooting people and getting away with murder is exaggerated." But critics charge such violence has sometimes gone unpunished in Louisiana, as when a man was acquitted three years ago of killing a Japanese student who knocked on the door of his house in search of a Halloween party.



## EXECUTIONS IN THE U.S.

### EXECUTIONS IN THE SOUTH



STATE	1930-95	1996-97
Ala.	147	4
Ark.	129	5
Del.	17	3
Wash DC	40	0
Fla.	206	3
Ga.	386	2
Ky.	103	1
La.	155	2
Md.	69	1
Miss.	158	0
N.C.	271	0
Okla.	66	3
S.C.	167	7
Tenn.	93	0
Texas	401	30
Va.	121	14
W.Va.	40	0

Information through Sept. 1997  
SOURCE: ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Money election system. The Clean Money option offers full public financing for candidates who accept spending limits and reject all private donations.

"Privately financed elections breed quid-pro-quo campaigns, more J.A. Cartrettes and more taxes to pay for their favors," said Warren Murphy, NCAD president. "We want an alternative that encourages candidates to depend entirely on the public, for their money and their votes." Have you got a better answer?

**Update:** The state auditor has decided to conduct a performance audit of the N.C. Department of Transportation, following a request from an odd coalition of liberal, conservative and grassroots groups. The group's request detailed "widespread abuse within DOT that involves political

money linked to jobs, promotions, board appointments, highway contracts, and the location of roads."

One board member has resigned after revelations that he steered several DOT projects to help his company and friends. Meanwhile, District Attorney Rex Gore dropped his investigation of J.A. Cartrette and the Hunt fundraisers. "I might get a conviction at the corner store, but I could not in the courtroom," Gore said. "It's too easy to flirt with violations of the present campaign laws, but not cross the line. Successful fundraisers learn all the buzz words [that] leave wiggle room under the law."

"If we want to restore public confidence in the political system, we must stop 'playing the game' and change the rules."

—Bob Hall,  
Research Director,  
Democracy South

### SOLITE'S SECOND-HAND SMOKE THREAT

RALEIGH, NC—Gov. Jim Martin lost his five-year effort to build a commercial hazardous waste incinerator in North Carolina as citizen groups in 21 successive counties fought off the heavily polluting ThermalKem facility, a struggle that ended in 1993. But in rural Stanly County, Carolina Solite was already picking up the slack, using an Environmental Protection Agency loophole to burn industrial poisons to fuel its 1952-era cement/aggregate kilns — and calling it "energy recovery."

Since that time it has become clear that Solite would like to expand. The company, which also burns at two plants in Virginia, has become central to the migration of industry into the South because, due to the absence of waste reduction

regulations, polluters rely on cheap incineration to "dispose" of their toxic by-products. This sham recycling is a serious threat to the health of Stanly residents through direct exposures and to the rest of the public through contamination of our food chain. Also, Solite is allowed to dump its toxic ash into the product which becomes cinderblocks for our homes and schools.

The EPA admits that the burning of hazardous wastes is among the leading sources of dioxin and mercury pollution. And the agency has confirmed independent research showing that dioxin has accumulated to dangerous levels in the body tissues of the general U.S. population, primarily due to fall-out from waste incinerators into the food chain. People living near incinerators are at greater risk. A potent carcinogen, dioxin is also the



grand-daddy of a wide range of endocrine-disrupting chemicals and is linked to reproductive, immune and developmental disorders even in minuscule doses.

The company's litany of permit violations over the years led a regional state inspector to recommend in 1996 that the company not be allowed to burn toxic waste. Citizens agree. SCOTCH

*MJ Sharp/The Independent*



**CAROLINA SOLITE HAS BURNED MILLIONS OF POUNDS OF HAZARDOUS WASTE IN NORTH CAROLINA.**

But despite high levels of dioxins found by the EPA in Solite's smokestack gases, in June the state allowed Solite to burn PCBs — a precursor to dioxin — at levels ten times higher than previously allowed. Also, a previous "limit" of 1,850 pounds of annual mercury emission was eliminated in the new permit.

After burning hazwaste for years without telling its neighbors, the company was sued by Stanly Citizens Opposed to Toxic Chemical Hazards (SCOTCH). The case was settled in 1993 with Solite agreeing to comply with the state's Air Toxics Regulations (Solite has operated for many years under "interim" federal status). Four years later the company still hasn't shown compliance with the state standards yet it is allowed to burn 12,000 tons of waste annually and makes a substantial percentage of its revenue from hazardous waste processing fees rather than on its cement products.

and the NC Waste Awareness and Reduction Network (NC WARN) are pressing the state to force Carolina Solite to use only natural gas for its cement kilns. With volunteer legal support, the two nonprofits have administrative appeals pending against

the state for what they consider the illegal granting of air pollution permits to Solite.

Desperate to avoid exposure of its practices, Solite continued a long history of intimidation against locals by filing a S.L.A.P.P. (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) suit against SCOTCH and its grandmother president, seeking to bury the group financially and to end their ability to contest Solite's pollution practices. Despite losing two attempts for a preliminary injunction to silence the citizens, Solite asked another Superior Court judge to grant them summary judgment, a ruling that basically contends the polluter's case is so compelling that the judge should rule in their favor without a trial.

To the astonishment of many lawyers and citizens, the judge agreed with the company, ignoring a late-breaking discovery by SCOTCH that the toxic giant had for six years claimed to own twice as much property than it actually does. The

NC Division of Air Quality called this issue "critical to compliance" regarding the public health and welfare since neighbors are twice as close as previously believed. State law limits the amount of toxic air pollutants that area residents can be exposed to; these so-called "acceptable levels" are based on theoretical calculations of exposures to the surrounding community of carcinogenic chemicals and other poisons.

In fact, the discrepancy was so egregious that the state decided in July to terminate Solite's pollution permit. Citizen victory? Not in a political climate where polluters constantly fill politicians' pockets with campaign money.

Solite's president and his wife — both of whom are Virginia residents — gave NC Gov. Jim Hunt the legal maximum \$16,000 for his 1992 campaign; the company's polluter customers also weigh-in heavily with the governor and state legislators. Also, Hunt's law firm represents Solite (as it did ThermalKem) in the

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a.	4353	3150
b1.	828	695
b2.	2246	1581
c.	3074	2276
d.	100	100
e.	0	0
f.	100	100
g.	3174	2376
h1.	997	774
h2.	182	0
i.	4253	3150
Percent paid and/or requested	96.84%	95.79%

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(17) Date: October 1, 1997



SLAPP suit and the legal challenges by NC WARN. Not surprisingly, state regulators have backtracked on the permit revocation and plan to let Solite start all over with its pollution calculations — a process destined to take months or years.

In addition to the legal challenges, SCOTCH and NC WARN are generating attention across the state and within Stanly County, where opposition has been chilled over the years due to the enormous influence and intimidation of the toxic waste giant.

This issue is playing all across the South as citizens fight “energy recovery” at cement kilns. But the dioxin factor spreads the issue of toxic incineration well beyond county borders. Maybe even the politicians will realize that you can’t escape toxic chemicals in the food supply — you don’t have to live near an incinerator to reap its poisons.

— Jim Warren,  
Director of NC WARN

## INTERNET COPS IN SEARCH OF “FAR-OUT IDEAS”

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.—When University of North Carolina students were gearing up for a rally last September, the school’s Public Safety officials went beyond their regular beat — going so far as to monitor the activist’s email and personally visit activists before the protest.

Members of the Carolina Socialist Forum had planned a small rally to greet Alan Greenspan—the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank—when he visited campus last September. The main activity was to hand out testimony by Rep. Bernie Sanders (Vt.), critical of Greenspan’s conservative economic policy.

According to activist Elin O’Hara Slavick, the day before the rally the Chief Investigator for Public Safety paid her a visit, carrying copies of



correspondence between Slavick and the activists. He asked whether anyone in the group had “far-out ideas,” and informed her that “everyone loves Greenspan.” He left by saying that he planned to research members of the Forum.

Faculty and students on campus quickly criticized the policing of the protester’s email, and the Investigator’s personal visit as a threat to privacy and free speech. Ninety instructors signed a letter to the school’s Chancellor demanding that the role of security be clarified.

As Law Professor Daniel Pollitt said, “No matter how sugar-coated the denial, when public authorities authorize the police to interrogate political protesters, what you have literally is a police state.”

Slavick believes it had more to do with politics than public safety. “[The Investigator’s] visit was more about his problems with the content of speech rather than anyone’s safety,” she says. “We should be clear on this: the group was investigated because it was ‘a socialist group.’”

She added, “Visiting dignitaries have the secret service and other such protection. What protection do we have?”

## BUYING THE RACE CARD

NEW ORLEANS, La.—When Louisiana Gov. Mike Foster heard there might be opposition to constructing the second largest chemical plant in the world in his state, he made a calculated decision. If you can’t beat ‘em, buy ‘em.

According to *CounterPunch*, an investigative newsletter, Foster has been pushing a plan for Shintech to build the plant in Louisiana’s “cancer alley”—a poor, African-American region with astronomical rates of cancer, which many attribute to the dozens of chemical and manufacturing plants in the vicinity. Community and environmental groups have labeled the proposed siting as a classic case of “environmental racism.”

Foster quickly befriended Ernest Johnson, head of the state NAACP chapter, putting \$2.5 million of state funds into the Johnson-led Louisiana Community Development Capital Fund.

On the same day the fund received the grant, Johnson went public with the NAACP’s unyielding support for Shintech with these words: “I am sure you all remember Susan Smith, who killed her two sons. In order to solve her problem, she too turned to the black community and said a black man hijacked her car and kidnapped the boys. Like Charles Stuart and Susan Smith [the environmentalists] turned to the black community to solve their problem by playing the race card, and claiming ‘environmental racism.’”

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# JOB EQUITY

## in the Downsized South

A Special Report on Work in the 1990s

by Anne Eckman & Jordan Green with Peter Braasch and David Schulman

This is an excerpt from the report "Dislocation and Workforce Equity: The South at Work in the 1990s," released by the Institute for Southern Studies in November 1997. For a full copy of the report, complete with state-by-state rankings on workplace equity, please send \$5 to the Institute for Southern Studies Publications Order, P.O. Box 531, Durham, NC 27702.



**S**outhern workers are in a crisis. Real wages have stagnated over the past twenty years. Workers have become all too familiar with the trend of downsizing. It is harder than ever to count on keeping a good job. Secure jobs with good wages and benefits are now being filled by an expanding contingent labor force that has little hope for advancement and faces major legal barriers to forming unions and gaining other rights on the job.

The changing face of the workforce—the entry of those once excluded from these occupations, such as women and people of color as well as new immigrants—has contributed to rising tensions as well as unprecedented opportunity for solidarity across the lines of gender and race. In the face of this tremendous change in the region's workplaces, several myths have taken hold that blame certain people—women, African Americans, Latinos and other people of color for negative change in the job market.

The Institute for Southern Studies has conducted a study of workplace equity in our region: where the jobs are, who are the workers, and the impact of job and workforce changes, using the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's data in *Job Patterns for Minorities & Women in Private Industry*.

Taken together, our findings show what southern workers already know: Better jobs are more scarce for all workers, and all workers face significant job insecurity. Our findings also show that far from being the cause of white men's loss of better jobs, women and people of color remain concentrated in many of the lowest paid, most insecure occupations.

We cannot afford to be misled by myths that encourage workers to pit themselves against each other. Rather, we need to put our energy toward understanding and transforming an economy increasingly unaccountable to the needs of all workers and their families.

## What Kind of Jobs? The Growing Divide

Losses in traditional manufacturing jobs have dramatically changed the work Southerners do. In broad terms, data collected by the EEOC indicate a shift of 10 percent of the South's jobs from blue-collar work to white-collar work. Blue-collar jobs, which dropped from 57 to 47 percent of all jobs in the South, remained the largest job category for southern workers in 1994, while the number of white-collar jobs grew from 29 percent of all the workforce in 1975 to 39.2 percent in 1994.

The South's growth in white-collar positions comes from a boom in sales and technician jobs, as well as those designated as professional—a mixed blessing, because many of these jobs are being filled by the influx of highly-educated migrants from the North and Midwest rather than applicants from the region. The South is the most miserly region in the country in per-student education spending, suffering the consequences in low rates of high school graduation, and significant numbers of workers who are unprepared for the new technician and sales jobs.

At the same time, the South's best blue-collar jobs—skilled craft and semi-skilled operative positions—dropped in number from 40.3 percent to 28.2 percent of the job market from 1975 to 1994, while the number of lowest paying blue-collar jobs—low-skilled laborer and service positions—increased from 16.7 percent to 19 percent of the job market in that same period.

Changes in what kinds of jobs are available reflect a growing divide between rich and poor. The growth in the numbers of professional and technician jobs promotes the movement of some southern workers into the upper-middle class. The number of middle-income blue-collar jobs, increasingly technical in nature, is shrinking. Previously-middle-income blue-collar workers are either moving to upper-middle class white-collar jobs or are being squeezed down to the lowest paying blue-collar work.

The only decline in white-collar work has taken place in official/managerial positions, which went from 11.2 percent of the jobs in 1985 and to 10.1 percent in 1994, after having grown during the previous decade.

## Jobs in the southern workforce

	1975	1985	1994
<b>White-collar</b>	<b>29.0%</b>	<b>35.7%</b>	<b>39.2%</b>
Officials & managers	10.1%	11.2%	10.1%
Professionals	5.9%	9.6%	12.0%
Technicians	4.3%	5.4%	5.6%
Sales workers	8.6%	9.5%	11.5%
<b>Blue-collar</b>	<b>57.0%</b>	<b>49.8%</b>	<b>47.2%</b>
Skilled craftworkers	14.8%	12.2%	10.2%
Semi-skilled operatives	25.5%	21.1%	18.0%
Low-skilled laborers	9.0%	7.6%	8.2%
Service workers	7.7%	8.9%	10.8%
<b>Pink-collar</b>	<b>14.1%</b>	<b>14.5%</b>	<b>13.6%</b>
Office/clerical workers	14.1%	14.5%	13.6%

Source: EEOC, Job Patterns for Minorities and Women in Private Industry, 1994

### JOB CATEGORIES

#### WHITE-COLLAR

##### Officials and managers

Officials and managers are the best educated, best compensated workers. They set broad policies, exercise overall responsibility and direct individual departments and workers. Nearly two-thirds of the officials and managers in the South are white males.

##### Professionals

This category includes teachers, researchers, physicians, and lawyers — positions generally requiring a college education.

##### Technicians

These jobs require a mix of scientific knowledge and mechanical skill, generally requiring two years of training beyond a high school education.

##### Sales workers

These are jobs relating specifically to direct selling such as cashiers, real estate sales, appliance sales, advertising, and news vendors.

#### BLUE-COLLAR

##### Skilled craft workers

This category, which includes auto mechanics, carpenters, and back hoe operatives, covers manual workers in jobs that require a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of specialized processes.

##### Semi-skilled operatives

This category, which includes textile workers, factory assemblers, and transportation workers, covers blue-collar workers in occupations that require more limited training.

##### Low-skilled laborers

This category covers workers in most blue-collar occupations who do the most menial tasks that can be learned in a couple days and require little independent judgment.

##### Service workers

Service workers include workers in a broad variety of occupations: food service workers, maintenance personnel, security guards, police and fire fighters. Service workers receive a variety of wages and benefits depending on their occupation.

#### PINK-COLLAR

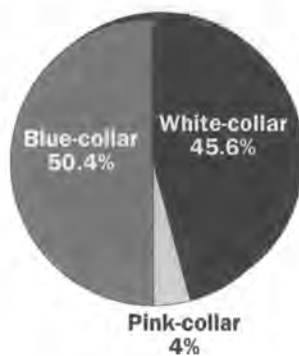
##### Office and clerical workers

This category includes receptionists, typists, data entry keyers, and secretaries — generally administrative support positions that pay relatively low wages.

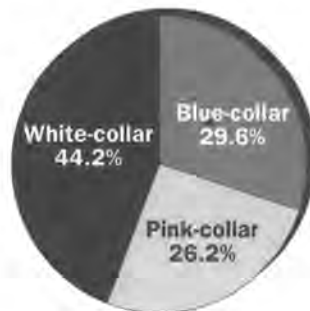


## Who's Working Where?

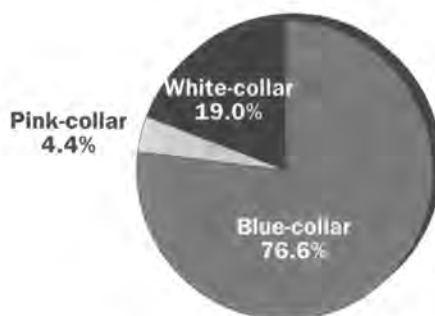
**White men  
38.9% of  
southern  
workforce**



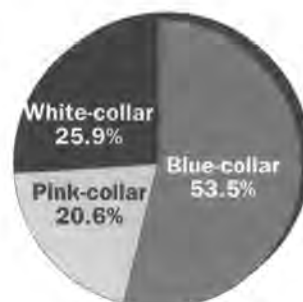
**White women  
31.5% of  
southern  
workforce**



**Black men  
9.7% of  
southern  
workforce**



**Black women  
10.8% of  
southern  
workforce**



## Who's Working Where? The Persistence of Segregation

Which people are working which jobs in the South? People of color and women remain overwhelmingly concentrated in lower-paying, lower-status jobs. Comparing ratios for people of color in white-collar versus blue-collar work indicate the continued segregation of our workplaces.

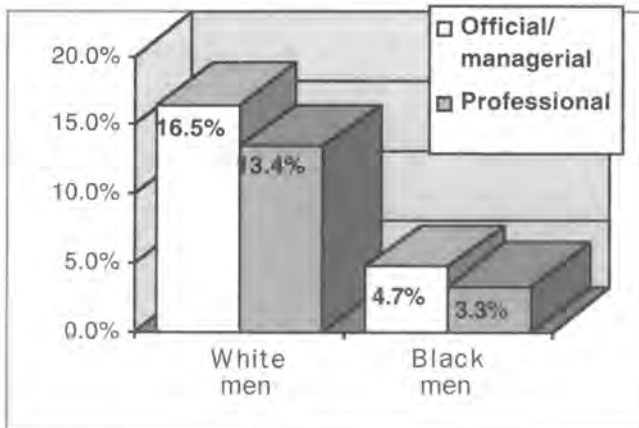
In 1994, close to 30 percent of white men worked in the two highest-paying categories of white-collar jobs—officials/managers and professionals. Meanwhile, only 13 percent of employed white men worked in the more poorly compensated laborer and service positions. By contrast, in 1994 over 40 percent of all black men worked in laborer and service positions, and only 8 percent of all black men worked as officials/managers or professionals. Such disparities in white and black men's work—essentially workforce segregation—help explain why southern states continue to have the highest rates of black poverty in the nation.

The statistics for women also show continued disparities. Men outnumber women of all races more than two-to-one in the best compensated white-collar position of officials/managers. The concentration of both white women and women of color in gender-stereotyped occupations remains virtually unchanged from 1975. Despite substantial gains in professional positions, white women have continued to find the largest share of their work in pink-collar and sales jobs. In 1994, fully 41 percent of employed white women worked pink-collar or sales jobs—a concentration little changed from the 1975 rate of 43 percent.

The majority of black women still work in the least secure, poorest paid occupations: pink-collar, service and laborer jobs. In 1994, 50.8 percent of black women were employed in these jobs, a proportion virtually unchanged from 51.4 percent in 1975. Moreover, black women's largest gains in white-collar work have been at the bottom rung in the traditionally white female occupation of sales. Where 5.5 percent of all black women's work in 1975 was in sales, 1994 saw sales work make up more than 12 percent of jobs held by black women.

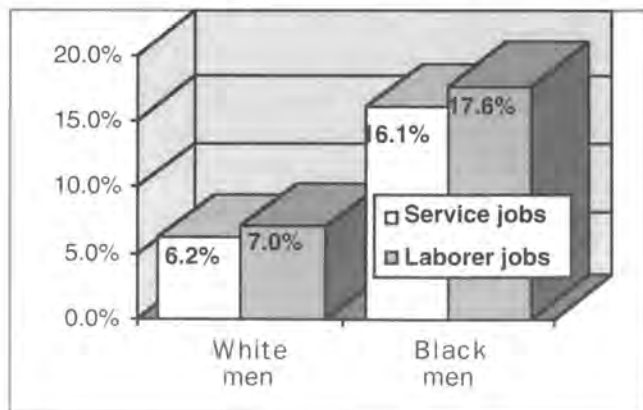
## The best jobs:

**% of men working  
the highest paid,  
most secure jobs in 1994**



## ...and the worst:

**% of men working  
the lowest paid,  
least secure jobs in 1994**



Source: EEOC, Job Patterns for Minorities and Women in Private Industry, 1994

## Who Bears the Burden of Job Insecurity?

While 20 years of dramatic redistribution of jobs in the South has affected all groups of southern workers, the repercussions have not been felt equally. While all southern workers now face proportionately fewer jobs in the most desirable occupations, white men have not been dislocated by people of color. Rather, the strain of a shrinking pool of better jobs has been most severely felt by people of color.

Job losses for black and white men in the South have been most strongly felt in blue-collar skilled crafts and semi-skilled operative positions, which accounted for 46.7 percent of the male workforce in 1975 and now only accounts for 37.7 percent of men's work, a 19.3 percent loss. Available data suggests that white men are more likely today than 20 years ago to work in laborer positions and that men, both black and white, are going to work in the service industry in significantly higher numbers than 10 or 20 years ago.

However, it also shows that people of color have always had less job security when it comes to layoffs than their white counterparts in the workforce, and despite the efforts of affirmative action, this has changed little in terms of recent history. In the recession of the early 1980s, when job loss was especially concentrated in manufacturing, 9.1 percent of black working men were displaced, compared to 6.6 percent of white working men. Even during the recovery from the early 1980s recession, black men remained about 20 percent more likely to be displaced than white men.

Women are also facing increasing rates of job loss, making up 42.4 percent of the workers displaced in 1993 and 1994—up from 34.3 percent in the period from 1981 to 1982.

It is important to note both the wider reach of job insecurity and to recognize the reality that job loss continues to be more serious for people of color and women. Black workers continue to remain longer without work after being fired, have a lower rate of re-employment and suffer greater losses in benefits—especially health care—upon re-employment. And women workers, when compared to men, are less likely to be re-employed, and, if re-employed, are more likely to end up with part-time jobs.

## Who Really Benefits?

EEOC data confirm what southern workers already know: better jobs are more scarce for all workers. Job growth is expected to continue in lower-paid, less-secure positions. And all workers face significant rates of job loss, with white workers being affected by unprecedented job loss while people of color bear the brunt of the strain of economic restructuring. Clearly, workers of all racial backgrounds have suffered from displace-



ment and the resulting loss of income and benefits.

The relatively new experience of displacement for white workers has encouraged the myth that unqualified minorities are taking white workers' jobs. The EEOC data show that workers' increased job insecurity is not the result of job losses to "other" workers, but rather the effect of larger structural changes in the workplace. Far from demonstrating a trend of white men being displaced by people of color and women, EEOC data shows that white men are holding onto the best jobs better than anyone else. Nobody in the workforce has benefited from the trend toward less secure, less desirable jobs.

The real beneficiaries are the companies and corporations. Record increases in productivity and profits have been fueled by an increasingly globalized economy where, among other things, companies have more freedom to move jobs where labor is cheapest, replace full-time workers with a disposable workforce of contingent workers, and shut down companies in the wake of mergers that provide record stock increases.

## Agenda for Change

For southern workers, the bottom-line is clear: to achieve an equitable workplace, we need to see the increasingly widespread economic insecurity for what it is—the result of an attack on workers' earning and negotiating power, not the result of affirmative action or "set aside" programs. White industrial workers have experienced unprecedented displacement and real loss of wages and benefits in recent years. Black workers have been hit even harder by the downward loss of jobs. Economic hard times have heightened existing tensions in working class communities between Latinos, African Americans and whites.

There are two possible responses to the hurt and frustration that hard economic times bring. One is resentment against black workers, who have long struggled for economic survival in the South, and against Latino and Asian American immigrants, who have come here in search of a livelihood. This would be a tragic mistake that would result in a weakened bargaining position, weakened job security and weakened health and safety protections for all workers.

The other response is for workers to organize against the conditions that stand in the way of decent, dignified work with fair wages in a sustainable economy. This involves the hard work of challenging racial resentment that pits workers against each other. And it involves the process of developing a widespread strategy to hold corporations accountable to the needs of working people, their families, and their communities.

The challenge for all workers is to turn shared insecurity into the basis for an alliance across race, class and gender lines that can envision—and fight for—better jobs and an economy that provides a living wage and the basis for strong communities for all Southerners.



A UPS WORKER DURING THE SUCCESSFUL TEAMSTER STRIKE THIS SEPTEMBER.

**The bottom line is clear: to achieve an equitable workplace, we need to see the increasingly widespread economic insecurity for what it is — the result of an attack on workers' earning and negotiating power, not the result of affirmative action or "set aside" programs.**

# Writing from the BOTTOM UP: *A Southern Tradition*

by Gary Ashwill, Chris Kromm and Jordan Green



**A**mong the most indelible images of the South are images of labor: from slaves to sharecroppers, coal miners to chain gangs, housekeepers to migrant farmworkers. And as long as Southerners have worked, they have written about it, creating a body of literature by and for those who work, but don't own: a working-class literature of the South.

In the following pages, we've brought together some of the best new contributions to this proud history. There are short stories and poems, as well as testimony from working-class writers about why they write — how the act of putting a pen to paper fights isolation and helps them beat the odds.

While putting together this issue, we've been asked — and have had to ponder ourselves — the question: what makes a story "working class?" A precise definition may be impossible. But looking back through our region's history, the South has a tradition of writing that is unmistakable.

Southern working-class writing springs from the rich, murky soil of this land with lyric intonations of real people's speech, a strong class consciousness, and a hard-nosed realism born through the experience of class and racial injustice. Sometimes it's fiction, often not; sometimes it's been written by those who are working class, often not. But at its best, it has always been writing that has started and ended with the struggle of ordinary folks not only to survive, but to understand and transcend the circumstances of their lives.

**Working-class writing has started and ended with the struggle of ordinary folks not only to survive, but to understand and transcend the circumstances of their lives.**





Some writers have focused more on survival, some on transcendence; the difference has often been closely related to the political and economic climate of the day. During the '30s, for example, radical movements inspired "proletarian novelists" to describe the glamour of struggle and the possibility for social change.

In today's corporate era of downsized workers and expendable communities — and popular opposition with its back against the wall — hard times are reflected in writing that often dwells on the

personal struggle to persist.

But these stories published here stand within the South's unbroken history of writing from the bottom-up, the southern working-class tradition, which began some 200 years ago.

### ***The Color Line***

Of course, working-class writing in the South has always been about race as much as it's been about class. In fact, the first significant body of southern working-class writing were slave narratives,

which included literally thousands of writers, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown.

Work — both in slavery and after freedom — figures importantly in slave narratives. There's Douglass' experiences in the Baltimore shipyards, where he was beaten up by white apprentices fearful of the competition of slave labor; and Brown's work as a slave preparing other slaves for auction: making older slaves seem younger, and more valuable, by shaving their whiskers and using shoe

**Working-class literature has never been just about work. Perhaps in the South more than anywhere else, it's also about community identity, and the ordinary people whose small actions and great courage make up the fabric of culture.**

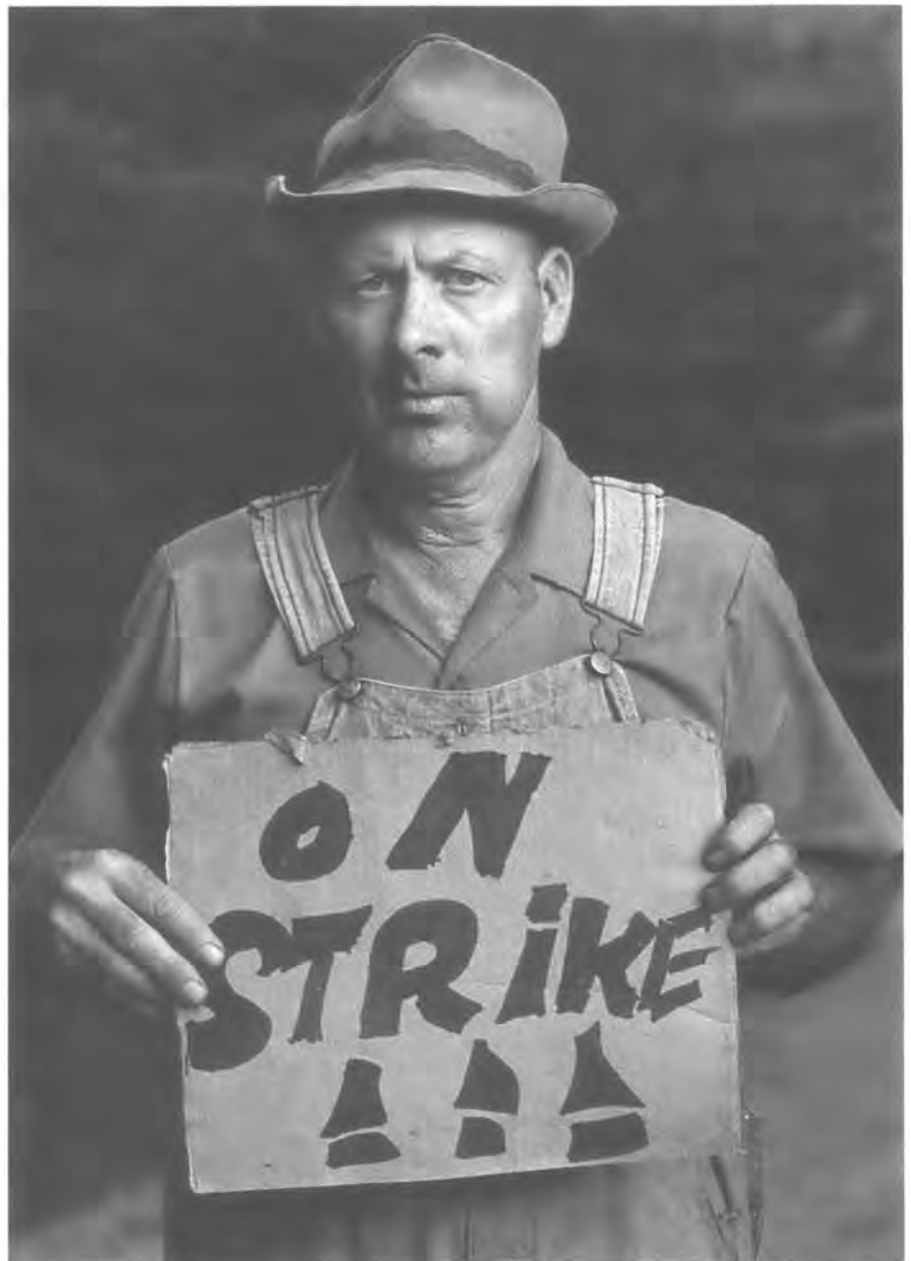
polish to darken their gray hair.

And many slave writers were fully aware of their relationship with the white working class. They often realized that the southern power structure had a strong interest in stoking racial resentments among poor whites to keep them from making common cause with their black counterparts.

But while the energies of resentment could be harnessed to maintain white rule, they made for dangerous, unstable weapons. Jacobs, who escaped slavery by hiding in a cramped attic for almost seven years, writes in her 1861 autobiography that white paranoia seized Edenton, North Carolina, following Nat Turner's insurrection in 1831. The town raised a militia made up of "low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge . . . not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation." But the angry vigilantes did not only attack slaves and free blacks; their rampages ultimately threatened privileged whites, too — and the posse had to be disbanded.

Perhaps this racial solidarity based on "whiteness" is the reason that whites were slow to join African Americans in understanding the role economic class played in the "race problem." For example, America's first well-known industrial novel, *Life in the Iron Mills*, was written by a Southerner—Rebecca Harding Davis of western Virginia in 1861. With righteous zeal, the novel movingly described the indignities of factory life. But missing was the role of race, or any sense that a new class was

*Photo by Rob Amberg*





**These stories, taken alone, can sustain us through hard times; taken together, they become a broad expression of beauty and resistance.**

being created: the industrial working class.

### **Southern Writers "Go Left"**

It was not until the 20th century that a large body of white class-conscious writers began to appear. As factories and mills began to industrialize the South, writers such as Ellen Glasgow, T.S. Stribling, Lillian Smith, Harry Harrison Kroll, Erskine Caldwell and Paul Green wrote about — in a wide variety of styles and genres — the social, economic and racial injustices of the day.

Some of these writers were working people. Most were not, creating a dilemma that has always confounded southern writers who have taken the working class as their subject. When James Agee and Walker Evans were sent by *Fortune* magazine in 1936 to document black tenant farmers in rural Alabama — resulting in the classic *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* — the writer Agee soon became tortured by his relationship to what he was attempting to describe. By the time the book was published, it had become unbearable. Agee repeatedly states his self-disgust at his inability to accurately render "the cruel radiance of what is," and eventually reveals his scorn for his sponsors, himself and even his readers: "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings."

This tension continued when the 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion of explicitly socialist and communist writers — the "proletarian novelists" — who were in-

fluenced by the radical movements gaining currency among workers and intellectuals alike. "Go left, young writers!" was the cry, and it was heard in the South as much as anywhere, myths of southern "anti-communist sentiment" aside.

Southern proletarian writing had two aims. One was to simply open a window to the life of working and poorer classes, such as Nelson Algren's *Somebody in Boots*, the tribulations of a down-and-out Texan written in 1935. The second was to highlight the possibilities and tensions of class struggle. One of the country's most famous proletarian novels was Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, a heroic portrait of the 1929 textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, which inspired a series of stories and books.

Race was never absent. One reason, as Alan Wald has pointed out, is that white leftists often used "African-American protagonists to dramatize their views and concerns." A prime example is Alfred Maund's *The Big Boxcar* (1957), in which a group of black drifters and a white man exchange stories of their lives and bond in solidarity. The male and female protagonists leave the train in Birmingham at the novel's close, destined to become leaders in the civil rights movement.

Race was also central because African-American writers were part of the southern radical writing tradition, which extended into the 1950s. These included famous writers like Richard Wright, but also William Attaway, Arna Bontemps and Sarah Wright, among many others. One of the most prominent post-war novelists in this category is John O. Killens, whose *Youngblood* (1953) follows a southern black family as they develop both a racial and class consciousness and a spirit of resistance.

### **New Writing, New Generations**

Since the decline of organized worker radicalism after World War II, fewer southern writers have identified as working class writers. But the tradition continued into the 1960s, with the flowering of Appalachian literature, the Cajun renaissance and writing drawn from the African-American and Chicano liberation movements.

As the new generations of writers make clear, working-class literature has never been just about work. Perhaps in the South more than anywhere else, it's also about community identity, and the ordinary people whose small actions and great courage make up the fabric of culture — which is increasingly under siege. As Richard Walker, co-editor of the anthology *Getting By: Stories of Working Lives*, says: "This writing is important because we have a whole class — the working class — in danger of losing its culture, and therefore its identity."

So maybe it's not surprising that there's a common theme among the writers in this issue: that the greatest enemy of the working-class writer is isolation. Bringing these writers and their writing together is the first step to rebuilding a sense of culture.

These stories, taken alone, can sustain us through hard times. Taken together, they become a broad expression of beauty and resistance. **S**

*Gary Ashwill teaches English at Duke University. He has published articles on nineteenth-century American literature, and is a contributor to the Oxford Companion to African American Literature. Chris Kromm is Editor of Southern Exposure. Jordan Green is Fiction Editor of Southern Exposure and Publisher of Tilt-A-Whirl Press.*



# Surprises

by Barbara Barnett

The first thing that surprised me about killing someone was how much energy it took. It was damn exhausting, stabbing somebody over and over and over again. I felt like I'd been pitching in the World Series, my arm was sore for near about a week.

My grandma always said we should learn from every experience, and one thing I learned from this is what a bunch of candy-assed cowards the gun-toting criminals are. I mean, if you hate someone enough to kill them, you ought to do it right — up close and personal. Shooting somebody from a distance — don't that take some of the satisfaction out of it? It seems cold to me. They ought to make a law that anybody who commits a murder has to use a weapon other than a gun. People ought to be creative about killing, and guns, in my mind, take some of the imagination out of the process.

The day I killed Wiley Duster, I hadn't planned to do it. Sure, I'd had my moments when I thought, "I'm gonna kill that bastard," but you know how people say they're gonna kill someone, and they really don't mean it. Like, you say, "I'm gonna kill that kid if he don't quieten down," or "I'm gonna kill that man if he comes home drunk again." You wouldn't really do it. It's just a wild thought that darts across your mind, like when you're camping out overnight and you think you see a coyote dashing across the hills. One minute it's there, the next it's not, and you just go on your journey, and things are like they were before. But that Saturday night, the Saturday I killed Wiley, I had the thought of killing him, and then I had a second thought I'd never had before: "I think I really will."

Now everybody in Castroville, Texas, and points beyond knows that Wiley Duster was a Grade A, card-carrying asshole, and he deserved to die. To me, it was an absolute miracle nobody had bumped him off sooner. But the police didn't see it that way. When Sheriff Pug came to arrest me, he said, "Janey, why the hell did you pull a stunt like this? Why did you kill off

ol' Wiley?" And I said, "I killed him because he was an asshole." And Pug said, "Lord, Janey, you can't go around killing everybody who's an asshole. There wouldn't be hardly no people left on the planet." And I said, "Well, at least there's one less idiot in the gene pool now."

I got to say, I ain't heard nobody claim they're sad that Wiley's gone. Oh, his mother shed a couple of tears over the casket, but that was pretty much for show, to make everybody in town think she was grieving. But I think even she was relieved she didn't have to be responsible for him anymore, bailing him out of jail a couple of times a year, loaning him money to get his motorcycle repaired — things his wife and his girlfriend got tired of doing after a while, and can you blame them?

When the news people interview me about the murder, they always want to know the details, so here's what I tell them. I tell them it was about 10:30 on Saturday night, just about a half-hour before quitting time at the Dairy Queen on State Highway 90. Wiley was working as the second shift manager, and I was in charge of the dairy orders. Meena was working the cash register, and Glenn was working the grill. When the urge came over me, I was fixing a Peanut Buster Parfait for Junior Davis and a Snickers Blizzard for his new girlfriend, Tina Dooley. Wiley came up behind me, and put his hot breath on my neck, and he said, "Go easy on the peanuts." I slammed down the plastic cup, and I said, "All right, you no-good, slimy creep, that does it." I told all the customers to get out, I told all the employees to get out, and then I took the knife that we used to slice the lemons for lemonade, and I stabbed Wiley 24 times. I might have stabbed him more, but my arm was getting a cramp.

After it was over, I washed my hands, sat down in the manager's office and smoked a Camel. I turned on the little radio we keep back there, and they were playing "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue." I was thinking how I always hated that song because it was so whiny — he's got somebody new, well get the hell out there and find somebody new yourself — and I was just about to change the station, when I heard the sirens. At first I thought, "Is there a fire close by?"





and I went to the front window to look out. I didn't see no smoke, so I decided to go back to the kitchen and fix myself a chocolate dip cone, when I hear on the radio that there's a "police emergency" in Castroville. Well I think, "A police crisis? They must be down to the last dozen glazed at the Krispy Kreme." A few minutes later I hear a banging at the door, and I go to answer it, and it's Sheriff Pug. I say, "Come on in. It ain't locked. You don't need to beat it down." He looks over at Wiley and says — like I don't already know this — "Wiley's dead." And I think to myself, "Well, no wonder you're the sheriff, big guy, 'cause you got an eye for details." But I didn't say that. Instead, I say, "Yeah, I know. It's a mess, isn't it? I guess I better get a mop."

The reporters just love this story. They always tell me how colorful it is, and how I got a special way with words. I was on the nightly news at every channel for just about two months after it all happened, and I've done two interviews with "Hard Copy." Even now that I'm in prison, I still get cards from

Geraldo Rivera and Diane Sawyer begging me to come on their shows for "exclusive" one-hour interviews. I might one day, but I haven't said yes yet. I like to toy with the big-time TV folks the way a cat likes to toy with a mouse. It's just a lot of fun to play with 'em, making 'em wonder whether you're gonna keep 'em or gonna let 'em go.

The trial went pretty quick, but it attracted a lot of national attention. Lawyers came down from Harvard to argue my case. They told me not to worry about money because the publicity of the trial would be worth every penny they had to spend to defend me. Celebrities flew in from Hollywood and held a protest march outside the Medina County Courthouse, carrying signs that said I was being railroaded by a corrupt judicial system that treats the rich different from the poor. (Although how they know that about the poor, I don't understand, since they all rode up in chauffeured Mercedes.) Feminists came down from the college in Austin and said on the TV that I was a victim of male oppression and that the only way I could truly be free

was for women everywhere to dismantle the patriarchal system that dominates the world's economic order. The people from the American Civil Liberties Union flew here like a flock of starlings and said I was being denied my Constitutional rights — they were never specific about which rights, but it sounded good to everybody who heard it. The people from the AFL-CIO came and organized a whole bunch of unions, including the "Janey Union" for restaurant workers. And when the conviction came down, Billy Graham and a gaggle of religious leaders held a prayer vigil in San Antonio to keep the community from rioting.

I guess this was the second thing that surprised me about killing someone: the amount of attention you get. All those years I spent going to church and raising my kids and ironing and keeping my nose to the grindstone at work, and I never got no kind of praise or acknowledgment for it. But I kill just one person — and a pretty sorry person at that — and I get my picture in the paper more times than the President. The world is a weird place, if you ask me.

I've been in prison for about three years, and we're deep into the appeals process now. The lawyers come a couple of times a week with their briefcases and their stacks of papers and tell me not to worry, that we're gonna take this thing all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if we have to. Great, I think, the same people who outlawed prayer in school. The same people whose fold includes a man who talks to women about pubic hair in Coke. These bozos are gonna decide my fate. I hope it gets settled before then.

I know prison is supposed to be my punishment for killing Wiley, but it really ain't so bad in here. I don't have to cook, I don't have to worry about scraping the rent money together, and I don't have to do any housework. In some ways, it's like a vacation. Sure, I miss my kids, but their daddy's got them, and he was always a better mother to them than me. I guess the best thing about being in prison is that I've got time to think, which I sure as hell didn't have time to do before.

My psychiatrist says it's good for me to do all this thinking. She says I need to analyze my actions so I can understand them. That I need to "own" this tragedy, so I can come to terms with it. She says it's important that I look deep into my psyche, wherever that is, and "consider" why I killed Wiley so I can forgive myself. She has about 10 dozen reasons for why she thinks I did it, and her favorite one — or at least the one she repeats over and over — is that Wiley reminded me of my father, and that I wasn't really stabbing Wiley but stabbing my "father figure." I smile a lot when she says this, because she's a nice lady, and she went to school for a long time, and she means well. She seems real proud of her theories, this one in particular, so I just let her go on. Besides, I want to keep some things private.

The truth is I might have killed my father, if he hadn't drunk his sorry self to death, but I killed Wiley because I wanted to, not because I was thinking about how some other body was a pitiful excuse for a daddy 20 years ago. Wiley had it coming, and I was proud to be the one to give it to him.

Before the trial, the lawyers and the police were always pestering me, asking me what it was that Wiley said that set me off.


*All those years I spent going to church and raising my kids and ironing and keeping my nose to the grindstone at work, and I never got no kind of praise or acknowledgment for it. But I kill just one person — and a pretty sorry person at that — and I get my picture in the paper more times than the President.*

What did he say or do that was so awful, I was moved to stab him 24 times? I never wanted to get specific because I didn't want to embarrass the others, but it wasn't one thing — it was years of things Wiley said and did. It was the way he made fun of Glenn, the retarded boy, who worked the grill. The way he said cruel things, like calling him "Armadillo" all the time because he was slow, or calling him "Brick" because he was one brick shy of a load. It was the way he made fun of Meena because she was fat. He'd pinch her on the bottom and say ugly things like "I'd like to get me some of that sweet stuff, Meena, if only I could find it under all that blubber." It was the way I'd see him act in town. Moving the old blind beggar man's cane so as he couldn't find it. Or telling Lucy Finder her husband was running around on her, when her husband was really working a second job at the gas station, and making Lucy cry and say she was gonna kill herself if she had to be alone again.

And I guess, if the truth be told, I did it for some selfish reasons, too. I got tired of the little things, like him interrupting me when I was talking, like I weren't even saying anything important. And him looking at me like I was some suit he wanted to try on and throw away. Mainly, I just got tired of feeling small just so Wiley could feel big about his self.

So, in all my thinking time, I been thinking about my crime and how everybody told me I'd be sorry.

But damned if I didn't get another surprise.

I ain't. 

*Barbara Barnett is a writer/editor living in Raleigh. A former journalist, she was a reporter and editorial writer for The Charlotte News and The Charlotte Observer. She has a master's degree from Duke University in writing and women's studies. In addition to Southern Exposure, her fiction has appeared in The Journal for Graduate Liberal Studies, Hurricane Alice: A Feminist Quarterly, and Voices.*





# Deviled eggs

by Crystal E. Wilkinson



**A**ddie Bea gathered up her Lone Star quilt, her two favorite dolls—Polly and Anne, and a tiny blue pot from a doll tea set. She placed them carefully in the bottom of the white cotton sack she dragged behind her most mornings.

"Addie Bea," her daddy hollered in to her. "You gonna make your mama late to work."

She kissed her teddy bear, Bo, on the nose.

"Sorry Bo, you'll have to go tomorrow," she whispered in his ear.

Emmitt T. and Oline stood outside the back door waiting for their daughter. Emmitt T. paced back and forth across the short length of the rock steps while he spun the skeleton key, which dangled from a string, around his forefinger. Oline held the screen door open, tapping her foot anxiously on the packed dirt that made a half circle around their back door.

"Lord, here she comes with all that stuff again," Oline said, shaking her head. "This child gonna make Miss Lula mad for sure. You know she don't take much a likin to kids anyhow."

"Girl, put all that ole stuff up under the kitchen table and bring your self on out this house," Emmitt T. said. "Now," he said when she hesitated.

Big, sad tears rolled down Addie Bea's cheeks as she squeezed into the front seat of the truck beside her parents.

"Mama, I don't want go to Miss Lula's," she tries to explain through wet eyes. "I don't like her, looking like an old haint. Biscuit dough, Elmer's glue looking ..."

"Well, I don't care if you like her or not," Oline fired back.

"...like an old haint," Addie Bea mumbled under her breath.

"And don't you go calling your elders names—be they black, white or green," Oline said.

"You going and I don't want to hear no more 'bout it. And don't bother that woman for nothing today. You best behave

yourself. You hear me?"

"Yes ma'am."

Addie Bea continued to cry and wished she could work the farm with Emmitt T. today. And her mama always did say that she was her daddy made over. So why couldn't she go with him?

She pursed her lips to ask, but when she looked up at her mama's face she could see there weren't no use in wasting breath asking.

Addie Bea's summers were most always spent playing in well-kept yards and roaming through other folks' houses while her mama worked for first one, then another white family. If they had kids, she didn't roam though. Sometimes the kids made fun of her clothes or called her names.

Like Red Pete and his brother Re-Pete, of course that wasn't their real names, except the Pete part, but everybody called them that 'cause they was brothers with the same name. They called her names all the time, like pickanny and jigaboo, but after Addie Bea beaned their heads with a rock or two, they seemed to get along all right. They had even managed to play ball together once they saw how good she could throw.

When the people her mama worked for didn't have kids or it was an old person whose kids were grown up and moved out, Addie Bea would bring her toys and pretend like she, Oline and Emmitt T. lived in the houses. They were always nicer than her own house, with big white columns on the outside and fluffy carpet that feet could get lost down in on the inside.

But Addie Bea did not like Miss Lula. Her face wasn't pretty

and her ways weren't either. She was the ugliest woman that Addie Bea had ever seen. The wrinkles in her face were cut deep like cracks in a dry creek bed. And always in the front of Addie Bea's mind was the day that Miss Lula had called her a "nigra girl" and Oline had just kept on dusting and humming "Amazing Grace" real low. That night she had asked "why" but Oline and Emmitt T., they just looked at each other and told her that still waters run deep.

"I'm gonna go get James today," Emmitt T. said, raising his voice a little above the rattling of the pickup truck. "I'm gonna try to get that field plowed, graded and sowed 'fore the rain hits. I smell it comin but the moon is right for plantin today."

"Yeah, look like rain'll be here 'fore long—'round 'bout supertime," Oline answered, looking out the front truck window toward the sky.

Addie Bea looked up at the sky, too, but she couldn't figure out what her folks were talking about.

"Looks blue to me," she said.

"Looks sometimes deceivin', girl. Things ain't always what they seemin' to be. Sometimes folks got to see thangs other ways 'cept with they eyes." Emmitt T. said, and winked and nodded toward Oline.

They followed the path of the gravel road till it ended, and Emmitt T. turned the truck onto pavement. White houses peered above green hills and continued to get bigger as they got closer to town. Emmitt T. pulled into the white gravel driveway of Miss Lula's house, got out and came around and opened the passenger door for Addie Bea and Oline.

"See y'all this evenin'," he said.

"Bye Emmitt," Oline said, and kissed her husband on the crest of his bald head.

"Bye Daddy," said Addie Bea in her softest 'Daddy's little girl' voice.

Emmitt T. kissed her pouting lips.

"Bye, baby girl," he said.

He shut the door, ran back around to the driver's side, jumped in and sped back toward the farm. "My Daddy ain't never been one to be too long in town," Addie Bea thought to herself. "He 's sure nuff in a hurry to get on back to what's his." At least that's what her mama had said from time to time as they stood on mornings like these watching him speed off into the distance.

Oline's shoe heels clicked against the concrete as she walked up the sidewalk to the entrance of Miss Lula's house. Addie Bea stalled in the driveway as long as she could, kicking white gravel dust on her brown shoes and watching the path of her daddy's truck long after it was clean out of site.

"Girl, come on here," Oline called. "And stick your lip back in 'fore I pull it off."

Miss Lula opened the door and poked her head out. Small bits of color, yellow streaks in her white hair and her fading blue eyes, gave her face some life. Other than that she was equally as white from the top of her head to her neck, where the pink of her dress began.

"Oh, it's you, Oline," she said, opening the door for both of

*Looks sometimes deceivin, girl.  
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them but ignoring Addie Bea. "I didn't know who this colored woman was on my step."

"Mornin' Miss Lula," Oline said, letting the foolish comment slip on elsewhere. Addie Bea walked into the screened porch, avoiding Miss Lula's face. She chose being ignored over being patted on the head, which Miss Lula was inclined to do at times.

It always made Addie Bea's insides churn to see her mother running around saying 'yes ma'am' and 'no ma'am' to white folks that weren't any more grown up than she was. The inside out feeling stayed with her all day, and resent settled like sediment in the pit of her belly.

"Oline, I don't need a whole lot done today," Miss Lula said, sashaying away, her back facing Oline. "If you could just touch up each room, clear out the pantry and freshen up the ice box that'll be fine. And I'm taking company this evenin'. I'll cook and get the linen off the line, if you'll just make sure they are washed. You can save your ironing for Wednesday."

"Yes ma'am," Oline said. "I don't see much problem ma'am, but it's gonna rain this evenin' and..."

"Don't be daft girl," Miss Lula laughed, turning facing Oline. "Look, not a cloud in the sky," she said, pointing toward the window. "You coloreds with your hoo-doo and what have you—thinkin' you can predict the weather." Miss Lula turned her back and laughed real snooty - like all the way into the other room.

Chills ran up and down Addie Bea's spine like she had just sucked the juice out of a lemon.

"Go on out in the backyard," Oline whispered to Addie Bea. "Just play out there for a little while. I'll call you when it's time for lunch. I got a couple of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper down in my pocketbook."

Oline kissed Addie Bea on her top plait and patted her lovingly on the backside as she skipped off to play. "Stay in line, child," Oline whispered, as much to herself as to her baby girl.

Addie Bea stood in the middle of the backyard looking around for something she could do without her dolls and her tea pot. Between the rose bush and the walnut tree looked perfect for the tea party she had planned, but she'd have to make do without them.

Addie Bea laid on her back in the grass looking up in the clear blue sky. Blades of grass pierced the backs of her legs and pierced through her cotton jumper. She stood up.

"Oline, I don't need a whole lot done today. I'm having a tea party," Addie Bea said, to the emptiness of the yard. She put one hand on her hip and jumped to the other side. "Look, you





ole pasty-face heifer, I ain't gonna work my fingers to the bone foolin' with your ole house," her imitation Oline voice fussed back. "Sides ain't you got the blasted sense to see that it's gonna rain."

"Well, I'm gonna fire you. I don't like your girl anyway."

"Well fine. Then I quit."

Addie Bea stormed across the yard walking her mother's walk.

She soon lost track of time. As the morning moved on, she claimed every corner of the yard for her own.

She played a concert to the trees at the edge of the woods that surrounded the far ends of Miss Lula's yard. She sang and played her own mouth horn formed by a blade of grass placed

between her thumbs.

Down the hill was her school; First Smell Good Baptist Church was over by the fence row; and her fishing hole was the concrete slab over the cistern.

"Addie Bea," Oline yelled out the back door of the porch. "Come on in here and get your sandwich out my pocketbook. I'm still workin' and can't take no break right now."

Addie Bea followed her mother into Miss Lula's kitchen.

"The child can eat with me," Miss Lula said, appearing from another room wiping her bony wet hands dry on the pleated front of her dress.

"No..." Oline starts.

"Why sure I can," Addie Bea interrupts, thinking whatever

*She winced and wiggled back and forth in her chair as she ate, occasionally looking at Miss Lula eating her steak, her wrinkled chin flopping with each bite.*

Miss Lula is cooking has to be better than a half-a-day old sandwich all squashed in her mama's pocketbook. "I sure am hungry."

Oline's eyes widened to that mama look that all little girls know and her hands flew to her hips. She was about to speak when she was interrupted again. This time by Miss Lula.

"Why Oline, 'course the child can eat with me. I'm gettin' ready to fix myself some lunch right now. I got some leftovers. It's no problem really. Is there a problem?"

Oline didn't finish her sentence and Addie Bea disregarded the look in her mother's eyes even though she knew she'd have to answer later.

Oline began cleaning out the pantry while Miss Lula prepared to cook. Addie Bea put on a real act for Miss Lula.

"Miss Lula, I like your dress," she said. "Mama says you cook real good."

Miss Lula began to warm up the leftovers, while Addie Bea sat on a wooden stool beside the entrance to the back porch and waited. She kicked her shoes one against the other in anticipation. She looked at first one and then the other rose-covered wall and up and down from plastered ceiling to wood floor, dodging her mother's eyes.

Oline finished the pantry and started in on the icebox before Miss Lula finished.

Addie Bea squirmed on the stool. Her mother's eyes were burning a hole clean through her. She turned her head toward the porch and concentrated on the smells. "Let's see," Addie Bea thought to herself, "roast, new potatoes, greens—no, green beans and a big dessert—apple pie—cobbler, maybe."

"Addie Bea, come on and eat," Miss Lula said, and picked up her plate of steak, new potatoes and string beans and sat at the far end of the lemon-oiled wooden table.

She motioned for Addie Bea to sit at the opposite end. Addie Bea walked the long length of the table toward the plate. It was covered with hard-boiled eggs from edge to edge. Addie Bea froze in her footsteps.

"Go on gal and sit down, so I can get started on my lunch. Don't you have any manners?" Miss Lula said.

Addie Bea plopped down into the wooden chair so hard she hurt her tailbone.

She eased her teeth into the peeled shiny whiteness. Soft, gooey egg yolk spilled into her mouth.

"Eggs is good for a growin' gal," Miss Lula said.

"You need some salt?"

Addie Bea shook her head, no.

She edged her mouth open and cupped her hands up to her

lips, but her mother raised her head up from inside the icebox and focused her most serious 'mama look' right between her daughter's eyes. Addie Bea chewed.

She winced and wiggled back and forth in her chair as she ate, occasionally looking at Miss Lula eating her steak, her wrinkled chin flopping with each bite. After forcing the last half-cooked egg down her throat and drinking two full glasses of water, she rose from her seat. Both women stopped their motions. She quickly sat back down.

"Can I be excused, please?" she pleaded.

Both heads nodded.

Addie Bea returned to Miss Lula's backyard but it was just a yard again now. She laid on her back in the grass and let the blades prick her skin like dull needles. She watched the sky above her spinning and turning from bright blue to hazy white. She watched the sun struggle to shine through the clouds.

She just laid there watching the sky playing tag with the sun until she heard Emmitt T.'s truck pulling onto the gravel. She heard voices coming from the back porch, but she didn't move.

"Yes. I got everything done, Miss Lula," Oline was saying. "'cept that load of bed clothes I put out on the line this mornin'. You sure you don't want me to go 'round the side and get it? Rain ain't far off."

"There you go with that hoo-doo again. I told you there's no chance of rain today," Miss Lula said.

"Come on Addie Bea," Oline said.

Addie Bea jumped to her feet and glimpsed Miss Lula placing a crisp five-dollar bill in her mother's hand as she ran toward the truck.

"See you Wednesday," Miss Lula said to Oline, acting like Addie Bea was never there.

Just as Oline and Addie Bea settled in the truck and Emmitt T. shifted into reverse, a clap of thunder broke loose and hard raindrops started beating down on the truck.

"Got it plowed just in time, baby," Emmitt T. said, smiling at Oline, his shirt still wet with the day's sweat. "Good," Oline said, as she kissed his sweaty face and patted her left hand on his right knee. "Good."

"What we gonna have for supper tonight, sweet woman? I sure done worked up an appetite today," Emmitt T. said, reaching over to squeeze Oline on the portion of her big bronze leg that peeked from beneath her skirt.

"Don't know," Oline said, staring out the window smiling. "But whatever we having, a big mess of deviled eggs sure sounds good to go with it."

"Don't you think so Addie Bea?" she said looking over at her daughter.

Addie Bea held her belly, pressed her forehead against the coolness of the rain-specked window and prayed to live to see Bo, Polly and Anne at the next tea party.

**S**

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# Kentucky Blues

I am a poor wayfaring stranger  
A wandering thru this vale of woe  
But there's no sickness, toil, or danger,  
In That bright land to which I go.  
I'm going there to see my mother,  
I'm going there no more to roam;  
I'm going over Jordan  
I'm only going over home

from Kentucky he came to east Chicago railyard to work  
he was gone  
and at night after 14 hour days  
Gideon's Bible and The  
Cheapest Wine warmed  
body and  
soul sacred ceremony  
in ramshackle bedbugnewspaperwalledbeersign  
neon hotel  
within eyeshot of "the yard"  
not far  
to lumber on frigid morn

early evening  
thru the night  
all night  
the wind whispers cries wails sings  
to her  
and thru the cracks  
of  
her attic walls  
she listens she  
listens listens  
and when  
the wind don't blow  
she  
turns an ear  
to the  
voice coming to her  
thru  
the stillness  
thru the  
stillness of gnarled cedar and pine  
blanketing like shrouds the old  
grayweathered woodslatted farmhouse  
nestled deep in this coalbarren wilderness  
and she turns an ear  
to the voice  
coming to her  
thru  
the stillness  
of  
cedar and pine

and thru the stillness

*continued on next page*



she turns and looks at his  
gray railman's hat hanging limp from 8penny  
nail on wormwood wall  
his hat and railroad manual  
were all  
he brought home  
the last time

•  
but that first Christmas visit  
from east  
Chicago and his new job  
he brought her a blue calico dress and red  
sweater with pearl buttons  
carried on the train with gifts for all  
he and they all proud

of him a man no longer boy  
but  
always hard worker of farm and mine  
in this pioneer Kentucky land  
but now he returns again so  
soon unexpected  
returns eternal  
presence  
home for good his body  
from east Chicago  
railyards he comes  
his body crushed between coal  
cars coal  
and like the bituminous gold shipped from Kentucky to  
foreign parts  
he's delivered by train  
long wailing whistle  
signals his arrival  
last stop of the L&N

•  
and a year later frail tired torn  
she drifts  
thru tears  
by candlelight she sees  
she  
sees his spirit at top of attic stairs  
at foot of her bed calming real  
presence he moves closer reaching to her  
his hand touches her forehead  
her eyes close finally  
to deep dream sleep

— Ron Whitehead  
excèrpts from "Beaver Dam Rocking Chair Marathon"  
to be published by Tilt-A-Whirl Press in Summer of 1998.



# Temporary Balance

by **Tony Peacock**

Fred spied Digger out the corner of his eye. He was coming from the balancers, where he and Chickenman had been whoopin' and hollerin' about God only knows what. Maybe Chickenman had told him about getting clotheslined over the weekend. Chickenman was always full of it on Mondays. Fred had only been working at Schwitzer Turbochargers three weeks, but he knew that; and he knew that before the night was out, Digger would be over there three or four more times for 20 to 30 minutes at a stretch.

Fred cracked the door to the Bupi Wash. He watched a thin sheet of steam ooze and climb over the back of the machine towards dangling air hoses and power cords, up through dull yellow lights, curl around one of the beige steel beams in the ceiling and float across the plant. No need to get blasted all at once. Schwitzer was a great place to work because it was air conditioned. In fact they had to keep the temperature here the same year round. "Variations in temperature affect the dimensions of the parts," Digger had told Fred his first day. "We are working with expensive metals here. The wheels on these shafts are nickel alloyed. The big ones cost about a hundred dollars apiece." Digger told this to all greenhorns from Manpower Temporaries first thing, and he was careful to lecture them over by the contour grinder where the huge pink grinding wheel and its pale blue safety guards blocked the view of steam spewing out of the Bupi Wash. Fred hadn't figured out why

Digger bothered. No steam from that washer could ever be as rough as scrubbing shirt collars at Biltmore Cleaners or pulling grocery orders at the Ingle's Warehouse or even washing dishes at the Grove Park Inn. Compared to those, this was a pie job. If Digger thought washing shaft and wheels was bad, he must not know much about the other places Manpower sent you.

Fred pulled the huge H-shaped metal handle down to the concrete floor while billowing clouds of steam blinded him for a second, maybe two, a fine hot mist enveloping his entire upper body. To ensure the handle was securely on the floor, he walked to one side and kicked it out just the way Digger had taught him. The handle now served as a pair of legs and the backside of the door as a tabletop to roll the parts out on. Fred used his utility rag to roll out the large iron rack holding the two orange baskets.

"You need to speed up!" Digger's voice was shaky. He was forcing a fake smile, fumbling at his plaid shirt pocket for a Winston.

"But I thought you wanted me to do a good job," Fred said.

"I do. But I want you to be here tomorrow, and the supervisor on first shift is riding my ass about you. If we don't start getting more parts out of here, they are going to let your butt go. Maybe mine, too."

Fred took the air hose and started blowing out the milky water that had collected in the centers on each part. He blew off the slick glistening shafts, the piston grooves. The piercing whistle of compressed air made him frown. He had grown immune during the last three weeks to the constant roar of machines throughout the building, but the pitch of compressed air hitting those center holes grated his spine.

"What'd you do this weekend?" Digger had his Winston lit and was puffing smoke right in Fred's face. He was dark-complected, bald and on the chubby side.

"I went up Mount Mitchell."

"What'd you go up there for?"



"Cause I hadn't ever done it before. And it was something to do."

"Well, did you like it?"

"Not really. The trees up there are dead."

"Well, try to get more parts over there to final inspection tonight. Randy says we ought to be averaging about 1,500 a night, and we ain't even coming close to that."

Digger walked off, worming his frame between the back of the washer and the threader. Fred watched him as he headed for the Tocco Induction Hardener. He wondered what Randy had told Digger to tell the guy over there. *Randy, the first shift supervisor, is crazy, and Digger hain't got the balls to tell him. Fifteen hundred parts a night!*

Fred started figuring in his head: 16 parts to a basket and two baskets to a wash with a 10 minute cycle time; that was 192 parts an hour. Multiply that times eight and you got 1,536. Fred was good at math, and he was good at hating people like Randy.

People like Randy sit at a desk in a white shirt and navy polyester pants and figure out how everything should work. They don't allow for blowing off parts or wiping off parts or deburring parts that get sent back by the quality control inspectors. They don't remember that parts sent back must be re-washed because the brush used to deburr those piston and compressor OD's make the shafts dirty again. They don't think it takes time to load and unload the washer. They have never

understood that when a machine goes down it slows production. And breaks for employees never factor into their game plans. All they really care about are numbers. They were born to kiss ass, fill out charts, and step on little people.

That was Fred's steam-cleaned view of the whole situation, and he felt that his animosity towards the Randys of this world was perfectly justified.

It was the Diggers of the world Fred couldn't understand. The first week Digger had preached to him about the importance of being careful. "Scrap is the worst thing you can create," he had said. "You are expected to treat every piece of material and every machine in this plant like you paid for it yourself."

Fred had taken him seriously. Though the building was full of old grinders and lathes, there were new ones, too — high-powered Okumas, where you punched numbers on a control panel, shut a door, pressed a start button, and listened to a high hum telling you that your work was being done. The plant was clean, and the operators seemed to take pride in their work. There were even signs attached to each machine reminding employees of its value: **I represent a \$34,000 investment in your company's future. Please take good care of me, or I cost \$56,000. Please keep me clean and serviced.**

Some people were cynical as hell about that, but Fred loved it. And he loved the smell of green coolant in the machines and the voices of the actual workers. He wanted to stay, so he



## Some people were cynical as hell about that, but Fred loved it. And he loved the smell of green coolant in the machines and the voices of the actual workers.

would have to do better. More parts. He'd have to concentrate on getting more parts.

Halfway through dinner break, Fred entered the cafeteria and found a young Chinese girl already taking serving spoons out of the mashed potatoes and string beans. She slipped them back and eased behind the cash register while he grabbed an orange tray and filled a styrofoam cup with sweetened iced tea. She might work out if the rednecks didn't scare her off. Fred already liked her better than the grumpy old fat woman, who was so concerned with portions that she charged Chickenman double for his French fries last week. Who the hell did she think she was feeding? Sparrows? Working men have to eat. Chickenman wouldn't ever buy another tater from her — fried or mashed.

Fred loaded a paper plate with meatloaf and large helpings of the two side dishes. By the time he got a dinner roll out of its plastic bag, the Chinese girl was calling out his total. He handed her a five, crammed the dime and penny she gave back into his pocket, and shoved off. He stopped at the round island in the middle of the floor for ketchup packets, plastic utensils, and paper napkins. Everything in here was too bright after four hours on the plant floor. There were white walls and white tables, and you walked on glossy tile. Fred wondered how much the company paid to keep such a slick shine on the tile. He wondered if a temporary did the work.

Fred breathed easy and long, pushing tense air from his stomach and chest. He walked over and sat at a table with Chickenman and Milky Way. Chickenman had a blue-and-white Igloo cooler by his chair and held a sloppy joe that his mama had packed for him. He also had a 20-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew from one of the machines. The new cashier would have to prove herself.

"Where ya been, Wilson?" Chickenman's mouth was round and small; his voice, like a bass drum.

"I needed to get two extra baskets of parts in the wash," Fred said.

Chickenman's face revealed nothing. He was red curly hair from cheekbones to belly, and his cobalt blue eyes stayed solid as marbles, deep in their sockets. If Digger had told him about riding Fred's ass for more parts, Fred wouldn't know until Chickenman wanted him to.

"You're burning it up ain't cha. You must be wantin' 'dem boys upstairs to hire ya. Have they said anything about hiring ya yet?" Chickenman took a swig from his Mountain Dew and grabbed another sloppy joe out of his cooler.

"How many of them damn sloppy joes you got?" Milky Way said.

"Five. This is the last one." A half circle of soda dampened Chickenman's mustache.

"Well, what else you got in there?" Milky Way was finishing up a microwaved bowl of spaghetti. Bringing food from home was popular if you had a wife or a mama, but Fred didn't have either.

"Oh, I got a little chocolate banana pudding," Chickenman said. "So what about it, Wilson? They said anything about hiring ya?"

"Nope." Fred squeezed packets of ketchup over his meatloaf.

"Well, you ought to go in that office and tell 'em to hire ya or fire ya."

"You think so, huh."

"Well, hell yeh! They ought to hire any man that'll work through breaks like you do. Tell 'em you'll go to school. Tell 'em you plan to stay here the rest of your workin' life. Tell 'em any damn thing."

Milky Way, chewing his last mouthful of spaghetti, reached back to his hip pocket and pulled out an *Asheville Citizen-Times*. "Sure, Chickenman. That's great advice. And if all else fails, Wilson can just step behind Randy's desk and offer to give him a blow job." Fred closed his eyes and shook his head while they laughed.

"You'd better not go raising cain in those offices, man." Milky Way fingered the visor of his red cap. "They don't keep many temporaries around here." He began to study the sports page.

"Well, you might want to ask Digger," Chickenman said. "He could put in a good word for ya."

"Damn!" Milky Way said. "The Braves lost again. That's the third time this week."

Fred swallowed hard, forked off more ketchup-smothered meatloaf. Milky Way's drooped head left the stitching on his cap eye level with Fred. *Schwitzer* in fat white letters. All permanent employees got one the day they were hired.

"Baseball sucks!" Chickenman said. He was digging into a Cool Whip bowl full of chocolate banana pudding. "I'll be glad when the NBA season starts."

"Wilson, tell this fat motherfucker baseball don't suck." Milky Way never looked up from his paper.

"Baseball don't suck." Fred shoveled in the mashed potatoes and green beans as fast as he could. Time was short. He could already hear metal chairs behind him, sliding against that slick tile.

"Wilson don't like baseball either. He's a tennis man. Ain't that right, Wilson?" Chickenman cupped one hand in his lap while using the other to rake fingers through his beard. Bread

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and vanilla wafer crumbs fell.

"Oh yeh?" Milky Way's wrinkled face rose from under the brim of his cap, lifting *Schwitzer* out of sight. The newspaper was folded and lying on the empty spaghetti bowl. "Randy likes tennis. He belongs to the Asheville Racket Club. Can't you just see that son of a bitch over there in his white shorts running down tennis balls?"

"I can't imagine belonging to a club," Fred said.

"Why, sure you can!" Chickenman said. "If Manpower rolled out enough dough, you'd be out there in your white shorts in a heartbeat."

"I mainly like to watch."

"You hear that, Milky Way. He likes to watch." Chickenman stretched his eyes like those words might be the last.

Fred stacked his trash. "Well, the thing I need to watch right now is the Bupi Wash — a \$27,500 investment in your company's future." He walked away from the table, but from the garbage can he could still hear Chickenman call, "You are full of shit, Wilson; pure fuckin' shit."

Fred pushed a buggy of parts to final inspection. According to the clock there, less than an hour had passed since dinner break, and he was already fighting a case of drag butt. He stared at the bright yellow steps by the far wall that led to engineering and management offices on the second floor. The lights up there were turned out. Fred had seen those workers leave at five o'clock every afternoon, strutting down the catwalk like they owned half the Great Smokies. They were in a rush to get to new cars and big, fine houses. He'd also seen them looking down on the hands that built their blueprints and carried out their game plans. But now all he saw was dark glass.

"Where you at?" Milky Way stood with his elbow propped on a basket beside Fred.

"What?"

"Where you at?" Milky Way rubbed the side of his nose with his thumb. "My machine's down, and they ain't got nobody here from maintenance to fix it, so Digger told me to come over here and help you."

"Oh!" Fred motioned him over to the Bupi Wash. "We've got two buggies that were sent back from day shift. They've got burrs on the piston OD's. You can work on those at the brush if you want, and I'll keep washing." Milky Way nodded.

They worked together for a couple of hours without saying anything. Milky Way deburred about two parts before deciding to get a stool to sit on. He must have walked all over the plant looking but finally came back with one in tow. There had been several nights when Fred had stood at that brush for ten hours deburring parts, and here was a permanent employee

who wouldn't stand there for ten minutes. Fred didn't know whether to be mad at Milky Way for finding a stool or at himself for never thinking to ask for one. Milky Way got parts out once he came back, though. Fred envied his speed, and told him so.

"Well, I've always been fast," Milky Way said. Then, he began talking about his high school baseball career. Some small colleges were interested, but his girlfriend got pregnant near the end of his senior year. "We got married and have stayed together." Milky Way said. "You show me half of 'em that would do that today."

Fred imagined a young Milky Way's stern round face staring down batters from a pitcher's mound. The man had wrinkled prematurely, but he was fitter than most machine operators in the plant — big arms, barreled chest. No beer gut. He said that he could still throw a decent fast ball, and Fred believed him.

"Did you play baseball in high school?"

"Basketball." Fred wiped shafts as fast as he could.

"But you didn't play around here, did you?"

"No." Fred didn't play much in Johnston County either. He rode the bench mostly, but that was a six hour drive and four and a half years ago. Nobody here knew what kind of player he'd been there.

Milky Way grabbed a can of Skoal from his hip pocket and pulled the lid off. "Chickenman says you're in these mountains all by yourself. That all your people live in the flatlands."

"That's right." Fred wiped the last shaft in that basket and stopped.

"Why come?" When he saw Fred shrug, Milky Way lowered his head and stuffed a thick pinch of tobacco in his back jaw. Then, he straightened up and waited for an answer.

"I came skiing with friends when I was a junior in high school and decided that I wanted to live here. So the week after graduation, I moved to Asheville." The ski part was a lie, and Fred didn't know what made him tell it. The trip had actually been summer church camp.

"Have some?" Milky Way held out the open can of Skoal to Fred.

"No, thanks."

Fred glanced over at Chickenman, taking metal off the backface of a part. A fine silvery mist sprayed specks of metallic dust into Chickenman's beard and onto his mint green goggles.

"I'll be in the john reading if anybody wants to know." Milky Way had gotten a *Field and Stream* out of his tool box and was walking towards the restroom. Fred pushed another buggy of parts to final inspection. He'd be alone for the next half hour. Following Randy's game plan, that was enough time to wash 96 parts.



The thought of getting too tight with Chickenman or Milky Way gnawed at Fred. He'd lost a job at Biltmore Cleaners by hanging out with a guy who was caught stealing money from the coin-operated washers and dryers. Fred didn't steal any money; but since he'd been seen shooting pool with that guy, and the two had taken some chicks to a few beer joints together, the manager canned him. Manpower sent him to Schwitzer with instructions to *stay away from persons of questionable character*. Fred took that to mean everybody.

Chickenman wouldn't let Fred just do his job and get the hell out, though. He started spitting out questions through all that facial hair on Fred's first night, pecking for information like a television talk show host, and mixing it in with stories about himself and everybody else in the plant. He was nosy as hell and persistent, but good-natured. By the end of Fred's first week they were car pooling.

Chickenman drove a '78 camouflaged Blazer and listened to Hank Williams, Jr. Everyday before work, he stopped at the Hot Spot and bought two Goldrush ice cream bars. "I could eat 'dem son bitches till my dick fell off," he'd say. He talked about riding his Panhead to Harley rallies at Daytona and Myrtle Beach, and he thought Magic Johnson was a bigger legend than Michael Jordan. He claimed to despise two things: any implication that somebody was better than him, and any negative comment about his mama.

Last Saturday, Fred played basketball for the first time since he'd moved to Asheville. Chickenman took him to the old Biltmore School gym, where a girl in gray sweat pants and a Grateful Dead T-shirt collected two bucks apiece from each player. She worked for the county rec department. The money wouldn't pay her salary but did help cover the light bill according to Chickenman. Eight people showed up, so they decided to run four on four — full court.

Chickenman could move despite his big gut. He blocked out.

Pulled rebounds. Cleared lanes. Drove the length of the floor. He was pickin' and rollin', shakin' and bakin' in purple paisley shorts that revealed ugly spindly legs.

Fred played soft until Chickenman called him aside after the first game. "Listen," he said. "You've got to start leaning on some people, or we're gonna trade your fuckin' ass to the Clippers or somebody. A big boy like you!" A giant drop of sweat dripped from his beard to the floor. "Don't play scared."

Fred became more aggressive with each game, thanks to continuous prodding by Chickenman; but the only way he could stop most players from driving was to reach in. Fred called so many fouls on himself that Chickenman swore he must be a Sunday School teacher. Finally, in the last game, they were on opposing sides when Chickenman intercepted a pass with Fred, the only player between him and the basket. Fred wasn't squared up, and his feet felt like lead; but he had been burned too many times to let Chickenman have an easy lay-up. He stuck out his arm and caught Chickenman right under the chin. The big guy's knees buckled, and he seemed to fall to the hardwood in slow motion. From midway the paint to the top of the key, Chickenman's body was stretched out like a corpse. Fred stood over the purple and red heap, holding his breath at the hush he'd caused.

"Gosh dang!" Chickenman's eyes shot into Fred like two sapphire lasers boring a hole through his windpipe. "I said lean on some people, Wilson, not clothesline my ass." He was laughing. And suddenly they were all laughing, except Fred, who just sucked in air.

"How many you got?" Digger made him jump. Fred hated when people came up from behind.

"I don't know exactly." He looked at the clock over at final inspection. "Somewhere around 700, but 96 in the last 35 minutes."

Digger lifted a part, twirled it in his nicotine stained fingers.



## A fine silvery mist sprayed specks of metallic dust into Chickenman's beard and onto his mint green goggles.

"Well, that's pretty good. If you can get 1,200, I might be able to keep you." He walked off without asking about Milky Way, who Fred noticed was at the other end of the aisle, easing their way.

Outside, Fred leaned against Chickenman's Blazer and watched taillights zip around the curve at the crest of the service road. Red lights zoomed in and out of sight like flickering cautions. He listened to the rhythms of vehicles accelerate on the main road and engines rev in the parking lot. Compared to the noise in the plant, the traffic sounds were small and easily absorbed into the cool night air; but according to the paper, residents had complained.

Chickenman pushed Fred's passenger door open from the inside, and while Fred was climbing in, Chickenman dropped his cooler on the seat between them and cranked up. The Blazer was the loudest and roughest sounding vehicle on the Schwitzer lot. Fred liked the way air seeped in around the windows and through cracks in the rusty floorboard. The faster they rode, the better the ventilation. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the back glass.

He could see parts — full buggies of shaft and wheels floating in the French Broad River. He'd see them in his sleep tonight. He'd seen miles of ring around the collar in his sleep before, and huge brown boxes of groceries stacked as high as the heavens. Once, he dreamed that there was an international dishwasher strike, and all of the fine china in the world was dirty. Rich people at the Grove Park Inn were eating out of paper plates. And weeping.

Chickenman was singing "A Country Boy Can Survive." He knew all of the words, but that didn't make him sound any better. Fred wondered if anybody had ever told him how bad he was.

"I'm gonna stop at the Hot Spot and get me a couple of dogs," Chickenman said.

Fred could feel the store lights on his eyelids as soon as Chickenman turned in. He wasn't hungry, but maybe a carton of milk would taste good.

Inside, Chickenman made himself two hot dogs with all the fixins, got a bag of barbecue French fries, a Mountain Dew, and an *Iwann*a paper. Fred settled for the milk. When the cashier asked if they'd like a bag, Chickenman said, "Yes, m'am. I would. I'd like mine in a poke to go." Chickenman had good manners around women.

Back on the road, Chickenman ate with one hand and drove with the other. He wanted to know why Fred was so quiet, and how he had enjoyed playing basketball on Saturday and if he really did like watching tennis as much as the NBA.

"Well, are you gonna try to get Schwitzer to hire you?" They were on the Interstate now.

"I would like for them to, but that's not likely. In fact, they might get shed of me if I don't speed up." Fred placed his hand

over his belly. The milk felt good in his stomach.

"Get shed of you? That ain't gonna happen. How many parts did you get tonight?" Chickenman was wadding up tissue paper from his hot dog.

Fred could smell the onions. "Eleven hundred."

"And?"

"Digger said that Randy thought I should be getting fifteen hundred."

"Listen!" Chickenman kept rattling his hand around in the paper sack. "I have been in that plant for eight years, and I can tell you they are not going to let you go as long as you keep doing as good as you are." The Blazer vibrated and hummed louder as Chickenman accelerated up a hill.

"The first night they put me on those balancers, I did seventeen parts all night long, and six of them were scrap." Chickenman's voice had slid into a drone that made Fred's eyelids heavy.

"You're supposed to balance eleven an hour, and they didn't fire me." They crested the hill where lights from the Grove Park Inn sparkled in the distance.

"I'm telling you man. Don't let them play with your mind and make you crazy. You're just as damn good as anybody in that place."

The Blazer began crossing the bridge that signaled home for Fred even though he wasn't quite there yet. High over river and railroad tracks, this bridge juiced the vehicle with a different sound. Fred couldn't tell if the pitch was lower or higher. He simply noticed the change, a muffled roar that jabbed its way into his brain at night once his body was worn down. He drank his last swallow of milk, then smashed the carton flat.

"You're mighty quiet," Chickenman said.

Fred squinted, for a bath of white lights were flooding the concrete bridge now. He was swallowed by the brightness and needed to soak it up. If Chickenman wouldn't think him nuts, Fred would have him stop right here. He'd get out and walk around. Just for a minute. He started chewing his bottom lip to keep from blurting out such nonsense. He glanced down at the water, at the old houses and businesses. Dark as it was below, everything seemed to catch a little light from here.

"Better be glad," Fred said. "And don't worry about them making me crazy because I'm already that way." He smiled to himself as they came off the bridge and headed for the next exit.

**S**

*Tony Elton Peacock grew up on a farm in southeastern North Carolina. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1984. Since that time, he has earned income preparing tax returns, scrubbing shirt collars, serving vegetables in a cafeteria, selling ice cream, and machine operator in a turbocharger factory — the impetus for "Temporary Balance." His poetry has appeared in the Mount Olive Review and The Thomas Wolfe Review. Tony currently lives in Chapel Hill, where he pays low rent and supports his writing habit by waiting tables.*



# Contacts, Pain and Pleasure

By Laverne Zabielski

**I**t was Griffiss Air Force Base, Rome, New York, 1962. I remember the gate to the base, the fence around the sergeant's section and the fence around the officer's section. The base hospital was a few blocks away and the pavilion was up on a hill behind it. They sold Kent cigarettes in the cigarette machine in the lobby of the hospital. They cost thirty-five cents and I bought a pack, took 'em up to the pavilion to try 'em out.

The pavilion was dark and damp. No one else was inside. It was a wet, rainy weekday after school and Lorraine and I walked up there. Lorraine smoked all the time. I hadn't tried anything and I was goin' on seventeen.

That summer between my sophomore and junior year when we moved up there from Topeka I decided to change my whole style. First thing I did was take my glasses off. I couldn't see without 'em but I felt I looked a whole lot better. Kathy Oliver was gettin' contacts. That was the latest. They had just come out with 'em and I wanted 'em, too, but they cost eighty dollars and that was with our base discount. They'd be twice that off base so if I was gonna do it I'd have to before I graduated from high school or I wouldn't qualify for the discount anymore.

Figurin' out how to get the eighty dollars was a whole 'nother matter and if I wanted 'em it was me that would have to come up with it. That'd be a lotta babysittin' so I started figurin' ways to talk myself out of wantin' 'em. For one thing I'd heard about the gettin' used to 'em part and I didn't too much like the idea of goin' through all that.

So I started sayin' to myself the beauty would be more than I could handle. There're benefits in lookin' good, but there comes a point where you can look too good. I hadn't reached that point, yet, but I wasn't sure I wanted to. Look at Francie Widston. In sixth grade she was my best friend and had a long blond ponytail and someone wrote "I like to f-u-c-k Francie" up on the water tower on Burnett's Mound where everyone went parkin'. I know it wasn't true 'cause Francie was my best friend and if it were true she woulda told me so. They musta just wrote that 'cause of her blond ponytail. So anyway, I figured it'd be best if I didn't get contacts.

Kathy Oliver got hers, though. There were a bunch of kids in her family, like mine. She worked in a beauty shop, sweepin' up hair and saved up. She ended up gettin' murdered by some guy hidin' out in some big restaurant bathroom in Florida the summer after we graduated. I decided then and there when I read the murder story in *True Detective* magazine and looked at her senior picture with no glasses starin' out at me, blown up to fill the full page, that I was never gettin' contacts.

The second thing I did movin' to a new base was I decided to not be shy anymore. I didn't know if you could just up and do somethin' like that, just decide not be shy. I always figured shy was somethin' you were born with but I figured I'd give it a try.

## **I AM**

**I'm proud  
I'm middle class  
I'm in school  
I'm getting my G.E.D.  
I don't do drugs  
I'm not a bad person  
I get food stamps  
I have two children  
I live in the projects**

— Sharon Shelton

I borrowed a white, low-cut, sleeveless, cinched waist, circular skirt dress from Lorraine. I had a suntan from bein' a water safety assistant at the pool all summer and that white dress next to my dark tan and no glasses, well, when I looked in the mirror I couldn't believe it was me.

We were going to a CAP dance, Civil Air Patrol. It was an outside dance and since I had this new attitude about not being shy it musta worked 'cause these cadets and airmen were askin' me to dance. It mighta had somethin' to do with the fact that guys outnumbered girls ten to one but I didn't think about that at the time. I just said yes and danced.

The cadets weren't bad, the airmen were too old, and the base kids who happened to show up were the best. Dominick Spinelli asked me to dance three times. He was a big football player at the school I'd be going to. He walked me home and I let him kiss me good night. That was the second kiss I'd ever

had. The first kiss was by Danny Sullivan back in Topeka. He was out of high school already and told Francie I didn't even know how to kiss.

Well I figured I'd done better with Dominick 'cause my period was due and not comin'. I was certain that sperm crawled out of him, down my borrowed dress and got up inside somehow. It had to, why else would my period not come. Thank God it finally did, six weeks later. I still didn't go out with Dominick anymore. I just stared at his butt at football games.

Lorraine lit my Kent cigarette in the pavilion and handed it to me. I sucked in hard like she said but it musta been too hard 'cause I coughed forever. This is not fun, I said. Why do you do it? I asked her. It gets easier, she said, but I decided, then and there I wasn't going through pain for pleasure.

... and I think of Kathy everytime I go into a public bathroom.

**S  
E**



# I was a WalMart CareBear Wannabe

it was the grand opening  
it was a great honor  
it was the third WalMart Supercenter to service  
the greater metropolitan Fayetteville area  
it was something the entire area really needed

and I was chosen  
my temp agency entrusted me  
with this awesome responsibility

at seven AM  
at the grand opening of the new WalMart Supercenter  
I would don a CareBear costume  
head out onto the floor  
and spend 12 happy hours  
meeting, greeting and entertaining  
kids of all ages  
I was flushed with excitement at the very thought  
told all my friends  
couldn't sleep for days

so imagine my disappointment  
when I got the call the night before my  
glamorous debut as a giant stuffed animal

seems CareBear corporate decided to send  
one of their own people to fill the estimable shoes  
of the lovable creature that means so much to so many-  
they weren't going to leave their image to chance

boy did they miss out!

If I had been their CareBear  
I'd take my job seriously  
I would comport myself with jovial avuncularity  
I'd hop, skip and jump down aisle after aisle  
of fine quality products  
that wouldn't dream of putting any cry-baby local merchants out of business  
I'd direct eager customers to merchandise  
crafted with pride in Third World countries  
by people enjoying optimal working conditions  
and I'd make it my mission in life to lead new WalMart Associates  
to the very back of the store  
through two warehouses  
and into the locked storm cellar  
in case any ecologically minded WalMart customer ever  
asked where they could recycle their five hundred thousand



**By Lisa Martinovich**

*continued on next page*

blue plastic sacks

and when I was through helping out with my political know-how  
I'd romp gaily with other gargantuan corporate mascots  
maybe make merry with a massive M&M  
in the Disguise the Smell of Women's Genitalia aisle  
or perhaps perambulate with Mr. Peanut  
in the Garden Poisoning section

my friends would have arrived en masse  
cameras at the ready  
eager to record this historic event  
sure to inspire giggles for generations to come

my enemies would vie for snapshots, too  
itching to collect evidence of my corporate sellout and  
financial desperation  
primed to sully my dignified reputation  
and determined to make me look even more ridiculous  
than I do performing poetry  
with a purple paper mache penis  
waving between my legs

but I'd leave my CareBear head on  
and they couldn't tell me from a six foot Vlasic pickle  
I'd later develop an extreme allergic reaction  
to the plastic lining of the CareBear head  
I'd sue WalMart for CareBear abuse and worker's compensation  
a messy public trial would ensue  
I'd settle out of court and be set for life  
but they don't know that yet, so first  
I'd scamper back to the toy department  
for an hour or two of jostling youngsters on my knee  
before long the media-savvy tots  
-conveniently misconstruing my innocent gestures-  
would band together in a class-action lawsuit  
claiming attempted sexual molestation  
by a perverted CareBear!  
I'd slip into the bathroom and  
ditch the costume in a diaper changing station  
only to emerge as just another satisfied WalMart consumer  
forever pushing that shopping cart through the  
Save! Save! Save! Family Pak, Single Serving  
Happy Meal, one size fits all, artificially-flavored and sweetened  
aisles of life



# A Stone at the Tomb

by Evelyn Miller

She could see the curve in the road ahead, pressed between the rock of the mountain on the right and the brown, diaper-coated river bed on the left. Unlike most curves that seemed to narrow and squeeze, this one expanded where she needed the most space, an extra foot to maneuver, more depth of vision to prepare for the bulldog coming at her on the Mack truck. In the winter, icicles lined the curves. When night air got below freezing and the next day's light hid its face on the north side of the mountain, dripping water stopped in long exclamations. Now the days pushed away the long hold of the night. Lavender shells of crocus began to uncurl their lavish, inner selves.

Her English 101 instructor, Mrs. Turpin, said, "You've got to believe in yourself. You'll never know if you don't try."

Darlene wrote that down in her yellow spiral notebook to read against the nights when she had a paper due the next day, when words stalled somewhere between her head and the paper. That terror of the night, that knowing she was wrong, that she had made a mistake, came at her more than she would ever say.

She had passed the G.E.D. when the boys were little; now they were almost as tall as she. Here she was at 33, the same age that high blood claimed her own momma. Here she was, taking a night class, going to college. Those last words, going to college, curved through her mind, the way the car followed the road without a guard rail. She thought of suns and moons, unknown planets, and wished for the certainty of the orbit. If she failed, Butch would look at one of his buddies and give a long, knowing wink.

The trailer felt steamy with a stuffiness that begged for relief. Fake wood paneling sweated a mixture of humidity and frying pan grease. Before Darlene started the hamburgers, she went from window to window, clicking the latches, pushing up on window frames that stuck. She had finished a five-hour shift at Wal-Mart and had the night to reread a chapter about process essays, to begin again with her composition. Her green shirt with the tiny flowers felt sticky in the armpits; she fanned her face with one free hand.

"Don't you know how hot it is in here?" Darlene said to Butch.

"What's it to you, if I like it hot?" Butch's chest looked pale, unprotected against the attack of brown, spiralling hairs. A false impression, for he knew no fear. His rounded stomach rested easily above his lap while one hand held the remote control: the entrance to his kingdom.

"It's fuel oil," she said. "That's what it is to me. I pay the bills, remember? I'm the one who goes to work, if you want to get exact."

In the middle of winter Butch sat around shirtless, with his Old Milwaukee. In the summer he pulled on a plaid short-sleeved work shirt over his white tee shirt when he worked on





"Hey, that's my sneaker!" Pooch grabbed the shoe with the red and black swirls that tailed like comets. The laces flapped against the brown folding chair as he lifted the shoe by the tongue and held it above his head. "Use your own shoe next time and clean up this muck," he said. Darlene heard a fast-moving body and saw the screen door bounce open behind Billy Joe. Pooch could never catch his younger brother. His words were never tough enough and, with the way Pooch devoured hot dogs and RC's, he would never match the slight one on foot.

Her teacher said, "Think, think, all the time. While you're ringing up someone else's Hi-C and Fruit of the Looms. Think about ideas. Think how you can surprise with that unexpected opening, how you can wrap it all up with that unexpected opening, how you can wrap it all up with a kiss for the reader. Say goodnight. Think, think, think."

Mrs. Turpin has surely never worked at Wal-Mart, never had to smile cheerfully at customers asking for K Mart's sale price on tape cassettes. For that matter, Mrs. Turpin surely didn't go home to someone like Butch either. She probably went home to a man wearing cuff links and a green and gold paisley tie, someone who fixed lettuce salads at a butcher block and whistled, yes, he would whistle violin music. Darlene loved watching Mrs. Turpin write with her left hand, seeing words form with all their grace in that slight downhill slant. It wouldn't have surprised Darlene if Mrs. Turpin arranged words from right to left, with a result that still made perfect sense.

Going to college, going to college. But what Darlene cared about most was Kelly and the boys. Darlene didn't need to be a modern woman and leave her husband to be happy. She would put up with Butch, find her own ways around him. Mrs. Turpin never had to consider such a thing; Mrs.

his truck. That's what he did all day: lifted the hood, said things, rearranged mysterious parts, all in the name of fixing things. Sometimes a neighbor brought his truck too, and they had long conversations, Butch's foot propped on the front fender. Butch would tinker around for a couple more days. If money was exchanged, Darlene never saw it. All she saw was the grime in the creases of Butch's finger. At night when he told her to come to bed, she submitted, but the pleasure was gone. She had learned long ago not to expect pleasure. Placing her body next to his was a duty, like making cornbread every day.

Back in the boys' bedroom Billy Joe was on his hands and knees, raving at a creamy mush of cockroach he had concocted. "Gaw! Look at them guts!"

*These were hard times for all the men in the community, so many mines shut down. He must miss those heavy, male machines blowing black dust over his face, digging into the earth and leaving a mess.*

Turpin had an outline for her life.

Maybe it wasn't all Butch's fault that he was as useful as an appendix around the house. These were hard times for all the men in the community, so many mines shut down. He must miss those heavy, male machines blowing black dust over his face, digging into the earth and leaving a mess. All he could manage now was to wear his toughness on his hands. The world might be changing for Darlene, but Butch's outlook stayed as stuck as his haircut. He would never lose the nickname, never part with his notions about the way things ran.

"You got some people, the ones that got the power — the mine operators, bank presidents, head honchos, that sort — and then you got the rest of us," he said. "Now the rest of us can suck ass all day or just let the rest of the world chase itself." Butch pointed his fork at Darlene and continued, "So, Darlene, what'll be for you? Huh?"

If Darlene refused to answer, he turned to each of the kids — that's what he called them — or to his momma, Maggie, who lived just a block away through a couple back yards. They all got the same treatment until he wrestled a satisfactory reply from someone. That was the only thing he bothered Kelly about; he would pursue her for an answer just like everyone else.

Kelly was Darlene's, born of the man before Butch. Darlene could admit now, the first one had been little more than a gangly boy looking for an experiment. When Butch was heavy with his need for her and badgered her with his importance, all she could say was that the details of past men needn't concern him. She made him understand that Kelly, only three years old at the time, came with the package. And Kelly was hers.

Through the years no one doubted Kelly's origins. The light brown hair kept getting darker like her mom's; the eyes played the same green and brown tricks. When she was twelve, she carried her body the way Darlene had worn her own adolescence — on straight, thin legs, lifting a flat stomach and a barely noticeable bust. Darlene remembered despairing of ever having anything to show a man, just as Kelly had wailed, "Mom, I hate it; I'm so small."

Darlene had hugged her and smiled, "Just wait, Peaches. It will come. Some day after you've had your own little ones, you wish again for slimness."

Now at sixteen Kelly was still the image of her mom. Darlene had made all the decisions for Kelly, knowing where there was enough money for gymnastics and what kind of ear rings she could wear — grateful that Butch had not interfered. Men didn't know anything about those things anyway, so Butch's disinterest didn't mean much. He never wasted time on what was unimportant; he saved his energy for crankshafts. Darlene understood his indifference as a sign that someone else's seed in the house insulted him. "Girl stuff," was all he said, but then no one looked to Butch for psychological depth.

With the boys he responded differently, taking on Pooch and Billy Joe as his children, as if they were lucky to grow up under his mark. It didn't matter that Darlene was their mom. It didn't matter that she wanted a set of World Books to help all of them do their homework. Butch only cared that his boys could

*"You got some people, the ones that got the power — the mine operators, bank presidents, head honchos, that sort — and then you got the rest of us," he said.*

change the spark plug on the lawn mower, that they went with him on Saturday nights to watch chickens — decked out in spurs — fight for money. Darlene could not bear to hear him deride the boys because of her — "Your mom thinks you should know fancy words that are too big for average folks to pronounce" — so she had handed them over to him. If some of her genes survived, the boys would have to discover that for themselves after they were out of Butch's shadow.

He had laughed when she first mentioned a night class through the community college. "Get real! You can't do that."

She hadn't honored him by bothering to ask why he thought she couldn't. But she was careful to leave her registration form on the table where he could see it. His response came quickly, "You're crazy, you know. You're really going to do it, aren't you?" She chose not to think of this as a question, folding the tuition receipt and tucking it under the unpaid bills. She was the one who earned the money.

That was back in the early days of January. Now the semester was in its third month and she was still alive. She had survived those first weeks, when Butch looked to be right. "You won't make it," he said. He kept the television volume higher than usual, so that everyone had to shout to say anything.

The words of the textbook munched up in her head, the words that marked her entry into a world beyond cleaning up after others. Mrs. Turpin stood there in black and white, telling her to find a seat up close. She had found refuge behind a large body two-thirds of the way back into the middle row.

Butch's ridicule had blown open before the boys. "Your mom wants to think she's smart, like a lady from Chestnut Estates who wears men's jackets and prances around with a briefcase in her hand. She's too good for us."

The boys had squirmed and re-read the backs of cereal boxes. Darlene kept her back turned and fried the sausages extra hard, the way Butch liked them. She took care to fix all his foods as he wished — thick fat back in the soup beans, bacon burned beyond crisp — nothing to hint that going to college affected her performance at home. She kept her brown hair, straight, long and clean, like a faithful church woman. When he went to bed, she went to bed. But she would not let him touch what was in her head.

In the last month he had stopped his mocking. Instead, there were other words, that jabbed like empty knuckles in the air, "Your kids are losing out! They don't have a mom anymore."

Or sometimes, "The boys didn't used to fight like this. Something's eating them."

Even with his brief tirades, Darlene felt strangely justified. She had proven she could write essays — "stories" as Butch insisted on calling them — and still keep them all in socks. She could show Kelly that a girl didn't need to repeat her mom's mistakes, that another world waited to be seized by people in skirts. If Butch had to rely on his momma's cream pies more of the time, let him. They were just store-bought banana cream and seemed to bring Maggie a sense of accomplishment, as if supporting Sara Lee indicated entrance into the upper class. There was no need for Darlene to duplicate that. Maggie had never given up her son anyway, insisting he come for chicken and dumplings ever Sunday. And now Sara Lee was invited too.

Another thing Darlene would admit, she liked the way Butch took care of his momma. She hoped Pooch and Billy Joe could see his tenderness toward her, even if it was awkward — the way he drove his momma around in his brown Chevy S-10, waving great big to everyone, taking her to get groceries or pay her taxes at the courthouse. Back in November he spent a day putting plastic on the windows of his momma's house. Of course, he waited to wrap up their own trailer until there was snow on the ground and expected Darlene to pity his stiff fingers in the wind.

His latest tactic didn't really surprise her; fixing her children in her mind and then placing slight shadows beside them. His words echoed in her mind as she read about transition sentences. Maybe Pooch has an eating disorder. Shouldn't she take him to Dr. Nomer? And when Pooch was suspended from school two days for cracking another boy's lip: wouldn't it be better if he saw his mom go to prayer meeting on Wednesday nights, instead of seeing her sitting there flipping through that old dictionary? Didn't Darlene have any jobs for the boys? They came home from school, grabbed Twinkies, and roamed the neighborhood like young pups until dark — hard telling what they might be getting into.

And Kelly — Butch didn't mention her, but Darlene had to admit she was slipping away. Kelly rarely spent time in the kitchen anymore, unless it was to fix Butch a pudding. When Darlene asked Kelly about her home ec project, all she got were one-word answers: no, maybe, huh-uh. Darlene felt Butch's eyes on her, watching her reaction. An angry stone inside Darlene wanted to ask him why he couldn't set the table, why she always had to be the one to coax Kelly out of her room, but she knew it would be pointless. Butch knew the rules; he made them.

If she could only keep her family together for five more weeks until the semester was over, then the proof would be clear. She would have all summer to say those words to people: going to college. Last week Maggie had called, telling her about a shower for the Wheeling girl. No, Darlene had said, she couldn't make it, but she'd be sure Kelly was there. Let Maggie sniff. There was a notice of a potluck for the new Baptist minister and his family. Darlene would have to wait until summer to learn to know them. Yes, of course she believed in the resurrec-

*Darlene was rearranging her life — Mrs. Turpin liked to talk about priorities — and people could either move with her or, if they preferred, stand there clutching their corner of the blanket.*

tion, but she didn't have time to dye eggs this Easter.

Darlene was rearranging her life — Mrs. Turpin liked to talk about priorities — and people could either move with her or, if they preferred, stand there clutching their corner of the blanket. She was changing, for herself and for Kelly. The world didn't have to be the same as when Darlene grew up. Anyway, the world wasn't the same. Her own life would make a difference for Kelly; she would show them all. Butch could stay slouched on the couch; that didn't mean she had to sit there, rotting away beside him.

The woods, dry and brown around the trailer, lay heavy with last fall's leaves; underneath, the earth nursed green stems of blood root and violet. Patches of wild, blue phlox gave no thought and tossed their fragrance into the air. She could smell them; there was no holding them back. They pushed down hillsides, raised their heads along roadsides and around curves. Spring was a time for letting go, not pulling in.

Mrs. Turpin said, "You all look tired. But think what you've accomplished. This isn't the time to quit or get careless. Ask your husband to fix dinner. Only two more papers."

Dinner. Butch would wonder what that was, unless it was Sunday. But two more papers to write, that wasn't so bad. If she could just hang on, be a survivor, Darlene would deal with Kelly's withdrawal when her own pressures had eased up. She would sew her a jumpsuit of denim, like they had seen at McCarty's, and win her back. It wasn't wise to push Kelly for answers now; Darlene might say things she regretted later. Kelly would be alright. She was just backing off, like most teenage girls needed to do some time or other. She would come out of her unspoken reproach and they would laugh over Roseanne again. It had to be. Four weeks later Darlene sat at the kitchen table, using the silver tip of her ballpoint to trace the green pattern of vines on the oil cloth. She had never studied for a final exam before and the thought of all she could be asked to recall terrified her. Terms about writing, ideas about organizing principles and methods that were dark secrets four months ago skittered through her mind. She thought she had a definition memorized and then it rolled away. She had risked the security of life with Butch, only to come to this. He offered her little — a dumpy trailer, scuzzy television heroes — but at least the end product was predictable with him. Some days it was unmistak-



ably clear to Darlene: she had come this far, only to fail. Her finished papers mocked her, the B's and A's were all mistakes; somehow Mrs. Turpin had not detected the sham in her work.

Yet for tonight, she would not give up. She would keep herself calm and not allow any interruptions. If there was a disturbance, she would send Billy Joe and Pooch to their room. She had worked so hard — too hard perhaps — she might as well endure a little longer. She would take the test, see where she stood. Mrs. Turpin was so sweet — might even be disappointed if Darlene quit — said to think about trillium, not dandelions. If Darlene could finish 101, there would be another writing course to take, tougher of course, but if she could get into Mrs. Turpin's section, another miracle might happen. By then, she could believe and Butch would have to shut up. Or go live with his momma. Darlene understood the principle of a stone rolling downhill. There would be no moss on her by the time she was finished.

A couple hours later she laid her head down on top of her arms, folded like a small fort on the table in front of her. She rubbed oil off her forehead; her lips moved dryly over the hair on her chapped skin. All the words of the semester bunched themselves together into a sphere and crowded together, leaping out of her brain, off her arms, off the table, down to the floor and out the door, pushing and rolling past the dogwood, around and down the curve into the still murky river bed. She heard a round plop against the rocks, saw dirty water briefly slosh.

Butch was shaking her elbow. "Hey! Darlene! Kelly needs you; she's back in her room, crying like a goon. You...here...sleeping...didn't even hear her."

Darlene tried to make sense of the look on Butch's face. He was the parent; she was the child. He kept poking her with his greasy fingers. What had he done that made him look like he had stolen up on triumph? She could hear Kelly crying, helpless in her crib, wanting her mother.

Darlene got up from the table and bumped against the wall, then walked down the hallway as she had seen people lurch on moving trains in the movies. At the last bedroom, Kelly's door was closed, but the short whimpers continued. How long had she been like this? How could a teenager pretend to know grief?

Heat still hung in the trailer, a hint of the clammy summer to come. A street light shone through the torn screen door, casting strange swirls over the cheap wood of Kelly's door.

"Hey Kel!" Butch called. "Open up. Your mom's here. She woke up. Might as well get it over with."

Darlene's mind fixed on the word "Kel". Butch called her "Kel". When had that started? She had never heard that before.

Darlene leaned against the wall, her arms folded in front of her, supporting her sagging breasts. The trailer swayed a bit; then righted itself. She crossed one leg in front of the other. Whatever it was, she could handle it. Her final exam was in two days and she had an eight-hour shift tomorrow.

"Come on, baby," Butch called. "Don't make me break the door down. You know how your daddy gets when he's mad."

Darlene could see the sphere rise out of the water, swing cra-

*Darlene tried to make sense of the look on Butch's face. He was the parent; she was the child.*

zily against the curve, gather speed and size as it rolled up the driveway and stopped outside the trailer. It had become a stone at the tomb again.

She didn't need to look at Kelly, didn't need to glance at her once childlike shape. Darlene knew, could see the softening and rounding, the hint of broader curves. It was all there and Darlene had missed it. Supplies untouched in the bathroom. Leaving for school without breakfast. The silence. Where had Darlene been and for what reason?

Darlene slowly lowered her body to the floor, her knees scrunched under her chin. It might be awhile before Kelly answered.

Once more Butch yelled, "Come on, Kel. Your mom doesn't have all night; she has things to learn."

Darlene looked up and caught the light on the half of his face that glanced down over her, the half that ended in a long, slow wink.

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# Writing with

An interview with Denise Giardina

By Jordan Green

# Class

Photo by Jim Mairs



Denise Giardina has earned her reputation as one of the most honest and moving writers about the southern working class. Ten years ago, her novel *Storming Heaven* — which traces the lives of four people in a West Virginia coal town, up to a final drama between the community and the bosses — was quickly recognized as a classic portrait of life and struggle in the mines.

Now she has finished her latest novel *Saints and Villains* (due out from W.W. Norton this February). Unlike *Storming Heaven* and *Unquiet Earth* [see review, Fall 93, p. 61] — both set in the familiar hills of her native West Virginia — *Saints* takes place in Nazi Germany and is a gripping historical narrative about resistance to evil and heroism underground. Yet Giardina still brings it all home, weaving in an appearance by mountain organizing legend Myles Horton, and events such as the West Virginia Hawks Tunnel disaster — an early 20th-century industrial accident that took the lives of

dozens of African American workers.

When I called to talk to her, Denise had just gotten a Border Collie puppy who was busy chewing on the cord to her computer, so she had to take frequent breaks.

**Storming Heaven and Unquiet Earth focus on about 100 years of history in one small community. What is it about locality that really catches your imagination?**

I grew up in southern West Virginia. I think the landscape and its history is really haunting and the ruggedness makes it such a hard place to live.

**A lot of writers focus on exotic places. Do you think it's important to write about the places you know intimately?**

I think that's important. Even when I write about other places, it's really informed by where I come from. My first novel was set in Medieval England, but the ruggedness about southern West Virginia helped me capture the ruggedness of Medieval England and Wales. I think when you grow up in southern West Virginia, you don't grow up protected from life. I think that helps when writing about a place like Nazi Germany.

**What kinds of experiences in your life do you think are elemental to understanding and writing about basic issues of humanity?**

My family was pretty middle class for the area because my dad was the book keeper for the coal company; he wasn't a miner. We were more privileged than most of our neighbors, but we also lived right among our neighbors. I lived in a coal camp of about 10 houses. There was only one other family that was middle class, everybody else were coal miners. This was a time when the mines weren't working steadily, so people only had one or two days of work a week.

Our houses were right close together so you couldn't avoid seeing what people were going through. The other kids next door didn't have enough to eat and their clothes were just kind of patched together. Their father was killed in the mines just a few years after we moved away. Even my uncle and cousins were

struggling the same way. I saw that and it was also a time when people were losing jobs and moving away. Eventually, we had to pack up and move when I was 13.

**You got a really keen sense of the power relations in a company town from that age?**

Yeah. Even as a child I pretty much knew that nobody had any power over anything. One thing about the coal companies is unlike a lot of industries that use media, they never tried to hide that they were running things. It was like an iron fist.

**I wondered if your father being a book-keeper gave you more of an insight into how the coal industry really works because he was management. Or was everything just out in the open?**

It was pretty much out in the open. I do think, from his point of view, I heard the company position. He was always trying to do his job. And I would say, "Don't you feel bad doing this? And he would say, "Yeah, but what can I do about it?" He later had a job — I don't know what you would call it, but when miners got hurt, the company had people who would present their case and try to keep them from getting worker's compensation. We disagreed over that.

He would say, "Well, we won a case." "Well, did the guy deserve compensation?"

He'd say, "Yeah, but it's the company's money."

**One of incidents in Storming Heaven that stands out is where the U.S. Air Force is testing its new technology and bombs a coal camp to put down a strike. I'd heard that story from someone who was a VISTA volunteer in eastern Kentucky in the 1960s. So I wondered if that book was based on real events.**

Yeah, that actually happened. The Army didn't actually drop any bombs. They flew out of Charleston and got lost in fog. They didn't have navigational equipment and one of the planes crashed. They went back.

The coal operators had also been making bombs. I've seen the building in Logan where they actually made them. They just went up in some private planes and dropped their bombs. That's who actually did the bombing, but certainly the Army Air Force was going to if they could have.

General Billy Mitchell, who is considered to be the founder of the Air Force — he was really into it. There had been some aerial bombardment in World War I from dirigibles. So they wanted to know how to do it with airplanes, too.

**There's a lot of history about communist and radical organizing in the mountains. In what ways do you think the historical record of Appalachia has been distorted over time?**

I think it's terribly distorted. I think most people's perception of Appalachia is isolated, backward people totally cut off from civilization, and nothing could be further from the truth. Sure, there are a lot of places that are hard to get to, but the area's always been connected with the rest of the country and with world events. The coal fields, at that time, were right at the center of things. Certainly trains were just as good as anywhere else.

People were connected with what was going on. A lot of miners were socialists. There was a socialist newspaper in Huntington, West Virginia, for example, that had a circulation of thousands just in the Kanawha County coal fields. People voted for Eugene Debs.

**I also wanted to ask you about the diversity of the area, from your perspective growing up.**

The county where I grew up was just as ethnically diverse as New York City. This woman did a history of the county, which isn't so much a history as much as a biography of everybody she knew growing up in the county. You literally can find any ethnic group, from Chinese to Syrian to Hungarian to Russian to African American to Polish to Italians. There were lots of Italians. You know, I'm half Sicilian.

There were Orthodox churches. There



# The coal operators had also been making bombs. I've seen the just went up in some private planes and dropped their bombs

was a synagogue in Welch.

I grew up in a little coal camp called Black Wolf that was very small, but when you went up a holler there was just one coal camp after another. Our coal camp was very small, but we were just two miles from the next.

***So the county was pretty dense at that time?***

At that time there were around 130,000 people in the county. Now there were 35,000. They used to have theaters in every town and Duke Ellington used to go play in Welch. It's like a ghost town now.

***Has that area of southern West Virginia lost a lot of its diversity because of the coal not being as plentiful?***

I think so. Although there's still a larger African-American presence there than a lot of parts of West Virginia, it's definitely not as large as it used to be. When miners were laid off, they laid off black miners first. A lot of Italians were only first or second generation when things fell apart so they tended to leave and go to big cities. I think most of the Jewish families probably left.

***The two books I've read are concerned with the relationship between corporate power and ordinary community people. Do you think of that as a real basic struggle of human existence?***

I think it's not just in West Virginia that it's the case. I think everywhere. The economic power has become so global that there aren't many communities anymore that have a locally-based economy, in terms of who controls it. When I was writing *Unquiet Earth*, I felt like I was writing something that was about what's happened to the United States rather than what's happened to West Virginia.

The corporate mentality has no regard for local cultures. . . . People talk about

family values and the loss of the family. I think one of the biggest contributors to that is the way the economy forces people away from their homes when they don't want to go.

***I was talking to a housekeeper at Antioch College (in Yellow Springs, Ohio) about how low morale is and how young people my age have really low morale and not a lot of hope. I was wondering if you see that in the labor struggle in West Virginia?***

In some ways things are getting worse in terms of people not having outlets or options. You don't have a strong labor movement now for various reasons although it seems like it's making a little bit of a rebound.

***What do you think is going on in the larger sense that causes that?***

It's a disconnection of control over peoples' own lives. I don't think it's just a working class issue, but also a middle class issue. With anybody who works for somebody else, there's a sense of not being able to control your life. You might get downsized or you might lose your job. Or you're working hours where you don't have any choice whether you work over-time. The economy's supposed to be booming and jobs are getting better, but they tend to be lower-level jobs.

***A lot of your work is about relationships between men and women where a conventional marriage really isn't possible. Is this something that results from the interference of corporate power in our lives?***

No, I think that's just something I'm personally interested in. I find relationships that you really have to work for and struggle to make right more interesting.

***My mom read *Storming Heaven* to her adult education class and she said they really liked the steamy***

***parts although they related to the politics of it too.***

In high schools in West Virginia, *Storming Heaven* is a popular book with students, although I'm waiting for somebody to object over the sex. I'm surprised it hasn't happened.

***I have to tell you that I actually quit going to church after I read *Storming Heaven* . . .***

Oh no!

***. . . because I noticed the contrast between two characters. One was a preacher who became a labor preacher — because those were the circumstances — and the other guy in the story was an organizer. I felt the organizer was more direct in going about the work and the preacher was just kind of catching up. My experience was that the church I was in was grappling with human suffering and hurt in a way that was so symbolic that there was no under-pinning of reality. I wondered if that reflected some of your instincts.***

I actually quit going to church while I was writing that book — and when I wrote *Unquiet Earth*, too. I wondered if I was going to drop out of the church while I was writing this new book, but it didn't happen. It's really important to me now because it's such a strong source of community. Maybe that's just because I'm 45. I think you go through different phases in your spirituality. Right now, I really like to have that community, but I haven't always.

But I think the organizer was really spiritual in that he had a call. You don't have to go to church to be a spiritual person.

***What is the importance of the Church to organizing for social justice?***

Well, I think spirituality can temper people and remind them of their human-

building in Logan where they actually made them. They [on the striking coal camps].

Photo by Earl Dotter



ity. A lot of social justice movements can get extreme. Even though they have a just cause, they become violent and cause suffering to others. The church tends to make you think about how you can make things better for yourself rather than pushing you towards taking away from others. I think that's true of the civil rights movement in the South.

*In the mountains, in real rural areas, the church could be a liberated zone where people could organize.*

And the church can really give you courage to engage in social change and sustain you through hard times. During the Pittston strike in Virginia, I went with a group of Episcopal clergy and got arrested on the picket line. At a certain

point during the strike, there were mass arrests and they were running out of local people to get arrested, so people would come in from outside the community to help out. So here came all these Episcopal clergy with their robes on getting arrested. It gave the miners the feeling that they might be going up against the multinational corporation, but at least they had God. I remember the miners going up to the security people, and joking like, "Don't mess with God."

*Mountain people have dealt with exploitation and environmental devastation for the past hundred years. What do you think it is that keeps them so strongly rooted against the devastation of the coal industry?*

Mountain people have a really strong sense of family and a connection to the land, although that is less strong these days. I think the experience of going outside of the region and being made to feel uncomfortable reinforces that this is a place to come home to. It's just really comfortable — people take you for what you are. It doesn't matter what kind of clothes you wear or what kind of car you drive. People are more accepting of eccentricity here.

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# Change in a Closed Little Town

*by Sarah White*

What everybody knows about me is that I'm a catfish worker and a union organizer. Ever since the 1990 strike at Delta Pride Catfish, I have traveled to other parts of the country to tell the story of our struggles in the Mississippi Delta. But our story isn't just about how we won that strike, the largest strike in the history of the state of Mississippi. Even more, it's more about how to make a change in the mind, in how workers think about themselves and what they can do. That's why Margaret Hollins and I, two Delta Pride workers, decided to write a book about what we have experienced.





I know what I want from this book. It's a picture painted for other workers in the same situation we're in, a picture for those who could play a part and change their situation. Being in a poor area, having strikes against you as a woman, or even just as a worker, a Black worker, makes you see that our struggle is to make a change. The struggle is not just to prove you can fight or defeat the company. This struggle is about cleaning up and straightening things out to make a better way for your children, to make a better way for other people's children, to make a better way for people as a whole.

We were in a situation at Delta Pride, in Indianola, Mississippi, where things seemed that they never could change. But they did change. Painting a picture of how it used to be, of what we did to change things, can give workers a sense of doing something about their own working conditions. That's why I say that our main audience for the book is the people who are down in a situation like us.

In the early 1980's we were living in a closed-in little town like so many other areas of Mississippi that closed. When I say Indianola was a closed-in little town, I mean it was a town where you didn't question whatever way the man wanted things done. Even after the civil rights movement, it was still true that the people in power had all the say; the white way was the right way when it came to your job. We were told: if you want to keep your job, you keep your mouth shut and do the work.

It seemed like they had control of our minds, that nobody really understood that there was an avenue we could go down to break through to a better place. It's what we call the "plantation mentality." To tell our story, I have to go back to that time, to my family and my own growing up in the Mississippi Delta.

### ***A Delta Childhood***

My grandmomma, my mother's mother, had come from Leflore County, from a family where everyone worked

chopping cotton, and ploughing the fields. My grandmother was 14 when she got pregnant, and had to go off on the railroad to find a job. Her baby was my mother, her only child. She went to cooking for the railroad, which led her on up to St. Louis, Missouri. There, she got married to this man who worked on the railroad. They got married and raised my momma till she was about 17, when my momma had the desire to come back home to my family that was still here in Mississippi. That's how I came to grow up in the Delta; it was my momma's choice.

My momma got pregnant at the age of 18, and got married. She had eleven of us. Two are dead now, so I have five brothers and three sisters. I was born in 1958, so I'm the fifth child. My mother settled in Inverness, Mississippi. My father worked on a farm, with only a third grade education. He's still on the farm, driving tractors, doing cotton.

When I was a little girl my momma was in a car wreck that left her in a coma for over a month. My grandmomma had to come back from St. Louis to take care of the six of us when her husband, my daddy, walked off and left her there like that. My momma never did get an education. I think she went to school till about ninth grade, though she did take a GED test later. Anyway, she didn't have any education, my daddy didn't have any education, and my grandmomma had a sixth grade education.

But my grandmomma always believed that she had rights. In St. Louis, when she worked in white people's homes, she let them know how she felt about things. She told them what time she was going to clean the house, and how she was going to clean it. They might have been her employer, but it was never just a question of what they wanted.

### ***Stormed out of Inverness***

I was in the fifth grade, 12 years old, in 1971 when the tornado struck my town. There was a popular, outgoing older guy named Peewee, a friend to my father. He

loved to party, and he was outspoken within the town. He would take people to the store. Then all of a sudden he got sick. A lot of people couldn't accept it, he was that popular. They put him in the hospital, and one day he made a statement from his hospital bed, saying "When I leave, I'm going to take a lot of these sons of bitches with me." I guess he was just trying to spook the illness that he had.

Peewee died soon after that. They buried him on a Sunday. I don't think it was an hour after they buried him that the storm hit. The tornado destroyed the whole town of Inverness. I don't know the exact count, but many people got killed. They were laying on the ground everywhere. The Red Cross, I think, came and rescued half the people. We got left behind for about two hours after they pulled the first people out. It got dark again; you couldn't see anything. Then we got a second storm, this time just a good thunderstorm. My family had to go search for one of my brothers, Curtis. We couldn't find him after the storm. For three and a half weeks we thought he was dead, but finally we found him at the Red Cross in Greenwood.

To this day, a lot of people say and believe that the tornado hit because Peewee cursed the town. I don't know if that's true, but I know there was no place for us to live in Inverness after the tornado. We had to move to another little Delta town, Moorhead.

### ***A Delta Sense of History***

When I went to Gentry High School, the public high school in Indianola, in the mid-1970's, it had already been integrated." But there were very few whites in my class when I entered high school, and less when I left. You could pick them out, maybe three or four in my graduating class. They were the few whose families couldn't pay for them to go to the Academy, the private school where all the other whites went.

We didn't learn much that prepared us

**Even after the civil rights movement, it was still true that the people in power had all the say; the white way was the right way when it came to your job.**

for the struggle at Delta Pride in that school.

We heard about Dr. Martin Luther King, and how he had a dream about all people being equal. But it was just a dream.

We heard about Harriet Tubman, the woman who brought slaves from the South to freedom, but there wasn't much stressed on it.

We heard a little more about Fannie Lou Hamer, who led the fight for voting rights right here in Sunflower County.

We knew about different people who were fighting the cause of equality for us. When they had the voter registration demonstrations in Ruleville and in Indianola, I was only five or six years old. My momma knew about them, but at my house survival was the issue. By high school, I knew some more about Black history.

But I never hooked it up to unions. Later, when I started working at Delta Pride Catfish, I got the concept of Dr. King and Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, and it helped me to know how to defeat a company like Delta. But before then, it never dawned on us that a union was the key to making a difference. All we knew was that if you spoke out like Dr. King, if you spoke out like Fannie Lou Hamer, you were just a fired turkey — or killed.

### **Skinning Catfish**

The first time I worked in a catfish plant was in 1981. I got hired on the night shift at the Con Agra plant in Isola. When I walked into the plant, they explained all their "dos" and "don'ts." They told me all the rules about being at work on time, about obeying your supervisor. I could see that all the supervisors were white, and all the workers were black, mostly women. They introduced me to my supervisor, the supervisor of the kill line, Bill. He said he was going to train me to be a skinner. I had no idea what a skinner was, but of course I had seen catfish before, so I knew it would be filthy and nasty. I always hated fishing. My aunt used to take me fishing when I was little. She would take me in a boat, and I would be terrified.

Bill took me to the kill line. There was a lot of blood everywhere. I saw people

## **If you believe in the dream you can overcome this, but it takes a struggle of the mind.**

cutting the heads off fish, people taking out the stomachs. He took me down to the last process on the kill line, the skinning, and showed me how to hold the fish. It was slippery and sharp. The skinning machine was on, and I dropped back because I was scared of it. As good as it could take the skin off a fish, it could take the skin off your hand. But I knew I had to do this job, I needed this job. So I learned to be damn good at skinning fish.

I could learn any job, but I still had a big problem in my life. I was the shyest person you would ever want to meet. It's hard to believe now, but shyness almost killed me.

Being a teenager was the worst time of my life, going to school was terrible. I didn't hate the learning, but I couldn't reach out and talk to other people. I felt like a loner. When I first started school I was so shy and self-conscious till everybody thought that I was saved, sanctified and fixin' to go to heaven. They thought I was in the Church of God in Christ because I used to wear dresses all the time. The reason I wore a dress was that my momma couldn't afford to buy me the clothes the other kids wore. But she was a seamstress, a damn good seamstress, so she would make me dresses.

Some of my negative feeling, some of what put me into shyness, came from knowing that I didn't have some things that other kids had. I didn't respond much in school. It was like sitting back, sort of in a shell.

### **A Struggle of the Mind**

I was in that shell 'till 1983, when I started working at Delta Pride and met Mary Young. I met Mary when we were working together on the skinning machine. We could talk while we worked if the supervisor wasn't right on us. One

supervisor didn't care if we talked, as long as we got the production out. Mary talked to me: "Girl..." She'd talk and talk, and I'd say, "uh hah, yeah." Mary was real wild, and over time she began to break me out of my shyness.

Two years later, when we started the drive for union recognition at Delta, the union reps came in. One of them, a guy named Bobby Moses, would talk to us, and he'd ask Mary, "Is Sarah for the union?" And she'd tell him, "Yeah, she's for the union; Sarah's just shy." When we'd sit around with all the reps, talking, I'd never contribute anything.

One day Bobby pulled Mary and me off to the side and he told me, "You're part of this committee. You and Mary are the leaders of this pack. And you're going to have to voice your opinion." I saw then that to make a change at Delta, I had no choice but to change myself. It may seem strange to people, but the truth is that organizing Delta was what ended my shyness.

I saw that Mary and I couldn't just stick together all the time; we had to spread out and work with different people to get the union in. I talked to the workers because I knew them. I had worked with the people on the kill line, I knew them. But when the reporters came in and began digging around, trying to see what was what, I wasn't so outspoken. Setting that shyness aside and talking to the community is what Bobby Moses wanted us to do. He wanted us to tell the community the truth about the conditions at Delta Pride, so that they would get involved, to tell the NAACP, so that they would get involved. I had to come out of that shyness to do it.

So in the end, I had to change myself, to change Delta. So many companies in the South today still practice that "plantation mentality" on workers. If you believe in the dream you can overcome this, but it takes a struggle of the mind. **S**

*Sarah White lives in Moorhead, Mississippi. She is currently on leave from her job as a worker at Delta Pride Catfish in Indianola, and is working as a union organizer for United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1529. Along with Margaret Hollins, another Delta Pride worker, Sarah is writing a book on their decade-long organizing struggles in the catfish industry.*



# Working Class Kitchen Manifesto

*By Laverne Zabielski*

*Louis Bickett*



LAVERNE ZABIELSKI, SHARON SHELTON AND FRANCINE REED OF WORKING CLASS KITCHEN

First, let me give you my credentials. I have no degree or Ph.D. I am a mother of five, a stepmother of four, a poet, writer and hair designer.

I write about many things. I write about money because I am bankrupt. I write about birth control because I have five children. I write about marriage because I have been married three times. I write about washing the kitchen floor because that is what I do. I write about feeling like a shitty mother because, sometimes, that's how I feel. I write about orgasms because I feel they are important, but most of





all, I write because I want to listen. I give what I want. I want to hear your stories. When you speak I learn.

It's not about getting a degree, it's about being free and pressing through the blinds of oppression of our old high school, the university too, or that big-time job we got we thought was it. I'm talking about prying through to the freedom of our voice—the I am and I want and I will.

They tell us to write, the scholars we find on bookshelves, the outspoken women we hear at lectures and conferences and in our own midst. They tell us to write, the educated, the many degreed, the women with dreamlike jobs, climbing, don't they know, endless ladders. They tell the uneducated, the nonacademic, the rural women, the poor women, the inner city women, the stay-at-home mom, they tell us to write. So we write. We write at the kitchen table and at the stop lights, between appointments and at the playground and then we read it. We read it to other mothers in the park, children interrupting. We read it in the kitchen when the kids come home from school, the telephone rings and the stage is the kitchen table.

We write and we find our hearts aching to spill it out. We find our souls wanting to scream it. We find our lives rise up

out of the pages. We find rhythm and music in our words. We find stories we've told and retold and we discover we have desires we never knew we had and we desire to write more.

We desire to be heard and we want to read it and even when we're too shy to read it, we wish we weren't and when we're ready, when we want someone to hear it, no one is listening. 'Cause there's nowhere to read it. The academic feminist is too busy making speeches and her publisher wants polished pieces written in penta something meter or in proper English and university classes take time and money we don't have.

The Working Class Kitchen created another stage, someone's home, a local restaurant, a community center. We invite six writers from different communities and they invite six friends, we have an audience of 36. The script is left wide open. Read what you want, how you want, wear what you want. And what is read is good, without a jury, without an "A," without publication because the WCK trusts the process.

At the Working Class Kitchen the world moves to the microphone. The writer's fear, when she reads her work, sometimes for the first time, gives power to her words. Her strength gives form to her voice. You see her facing her. You see

her dancing naked. You hear the sounds of her voice shaking and the vibrations resonate through you and you be still and you listen because you see the birth of life before your very eyes. You see a revolution.

Everyone has the Working Class Kitchen in them somewhere. The heritage we came from is buried deep. If you have to race your paycheck to the bank you've got it in there. The struggle to survive is the Working Class Kitchen.

The Working Class Kitchen wants to hear it in your words, in your tone, in your voice. We want to see it written the way you spell it, the way you hear it. We want to break down the walls of illusion of false education keeping us silent, the working class silent, because we don't write it their way, see it their way, dream it their way, believe it their way. Everyone has a "their way" that they want to break through and the only way out is through your own voice.

It is as George Ella Lyon says in her essay "On the Writer and the Community:" "It's not waiting for just the cream that rises to the top because there's a whole lot of cream at the bottom."

So read it at the WORKING CLASS KITCHEN!

S  
E



# My Vita

## or why I became a blue-collar writer

*By Nancy Peacock*



I still cringe when I have to write a bio. My introductions at readings are embarrassingly short. I shrink away from the guests at cocktail parties and I try to dodge the questions about my schooling. Not because I am ashamed, but because the questioner always seems dumbfounded to learn that I never attended college. The usual response is a change of facial expression, something like admiration to fear, followed by a brief recovery, a pregnant pause and a story about a friend of a friend, who knows someone, whose

daughter didn't go to college. It's a well-intentioned story, told to keep me from feeling like a freak. But I am a freak. Go ahead and say it.

If the conversation progresses, I am often asked why I didn't go to college. I suspect that the questioner is thinking that there will be an interesting story, something they can tell their kids over dinner to show them how lucky they are, something about me being the oldest of twelve children and how my parents worked second shift at the auto factory and I grew up in a tough, gritty environment but my home life was good. A sort of "I pulled myself up by the boot straps," Americana kind of story. But the truth is I hated school.

### **School Daze**

School was oppressive. School was beige walls and beige lockers, grey linoleum and concrete steps. School was the jarring ringing of bells and the smell of ammonia that the bathrooms were drenched in to keep a few errant kids from smoking there. School was teachers policing the halls and herding us to mandatory pep rallies. School was a depression that seeped through the very pores of my skin and lodged itself in my bones.

Every year I swore that it would be different. Every year I had a brand new notebook with a virginal blue cloth cover. I had new pens and pencils sharpened to a dangerous point. I was ready to excel. But I never did. I never could. All I could do was wait for the final bell to ring, wait to smell fresh air, wait to get home and change into my jeans. When I look back it seems like a jail sentence. It's a blur that lasted twelve years.

I survived school by day-dreaming. I still find myself doing it. If I feel trapped



**NANCY PEACOCK IN HER YOUNGER DAYS.**

and bored my eyes are pulled towards the nearest window and my mind takes flight. In grade school I would imagine myself leaping from the roof of one building to the roof of the next, as if I were a wild jungle child. In junior high the fantasies changed to include cute rock stars and long blonde hair.

As I entered tenth grade, high school, the official last leg of the public school journey, I found some relief. Three significant things happened. I was now allowed to wear jeans to school. I smoked marijuana for the first time. And I discovered skipping class. Soon whole days were spent away from school. Why hadn't I thought of this before?

Crossing over to the wild side of life brought me something besides free time, a more comfortable wardrobe and an en-

joyable recreational drug. Suddenly I had friends and my day-dreaming had a qualified name: "Getting high."

If it had not been for skipping and drugs I could easily say that the entire twelve years of school were the most miserable of my life. The only other things I have done for equally as long are writing and smoking dope. I kicked the pot, but not the writing.

Towards the end of high school my mother brought up the subject of college, even though my grades were hideous.

"I am not going to college," I announced. "I hate school."

I was assured that college would be different. I was assured that I would enjoy college, have more freedom, more choices. But I wasn't buying it. And why should I?

Weren't these the same people who asked us to climb under our desks in the event

of a nuclear attack? Weren't they the ones that put the boys in shop and the girls in home-economics and never the twain shall meet? Weren't they the same people who told me that being an introvert was bad? Hadn't they failed to mention Benjamin Franklin's plethora of illegitimate children or Thomas Jefferson's "alleged" slave lover? Why would I believe these people when it came to the subject of college? Why would I believe them at all, about anything?

I can't say that I was exactly eager to enter the work place but I couldn't see another four years of school. I couldn't spend four more years cramming my 5'10" frame into a too small desk. This sums it up. Nothing fit.

When my mother learned of my plans to avoid college she strongly suggested

## **School was the jarring ringing of bells and the smell of ammonia that the bathrooms were drenched in to keep a few errant kids from smoking there.**



## I personally want to see a movement, a revolution. I want to see writing returned to the masses.

that I take typing, so I could be a secretary. This was the only option that was presented to me. Trade school was never brought up. I didn't even know it existed. It was never suggested to me that I take a year off and decide later. When I said I wanted to be a writer, I was told, "You can't."

### **Blue-Collar Blues**

So, at age eighteen, I entered the blue-collar world. I entered kitchens and bars and dairy barns. I found people with weathered faces, swollen feet and rough, callused hands. I handled big jars of mayonnaise and fifty pound sacks of flour. I learned how to budget, how to wash my clothes and how to get out of bed in the mornings. The working environment was the first place that I ever felt smart.

Over the years I have worked as a waitress, a clerk in a drug store, a bartender, a milker at a dairy farm, a carpenter, a locksmith, a drum maker, a house cleaner, a house painter, a house sitter, and whatever else it has taken. Some jobs have been harder than others. Through trial and error I learned that I just wanted to go to work and come home. I didn't want to go into management. I didn't want to spend my time studying products. I didn't want to go to meetings. I didn't want to kiss ass. I just wanted to write, go to work, come home and write some more.

I am still at it. And I celebrate the innate knowledge I have always had of myself. Even at a young age, I knew that my body was resilient but my soul was not.

Soon I had another problem and it was not work or writing. The problem was what to call myself, what label could I draw up when asked to identify myself, what to say when a stranger asks, "What do you do?"

What did I do? I wasn't in school. I wasn't raising a family. I wasn't the head of anything. What exactly was I doing? What was the one thing that could be

pointed to as the justification for the air that I breathed and the food that I ate? What was my productive, well-adjusted role in society?

When faced with this question, I felt that I had one of two options. I could either say, "I sling burgers down at the drive-in," and risk being immediately thought of as stupid and boring, or I could say, "I am a writer," and risk being called a liar.

It did not matter that I was, at that time, accumulating pages in an old notebook with duct tape strapped across its binding. It did not matter that I began my days anywhere between 4:30 and 5:00 in the morning, just so I could sit at the computer for an hour before work. It did not even matter that I was well read and had a few short stories published. The book was the thing.

So day after day, page by page, sentence by sentence, I finally filled that old notebook. After a series of rejections, an offer was made. I negotiated a contract. I received a small advance. I went to a hypnotist three times so that I could deal with my fear of speaking in public and I surfed a big wave, the book tour.

### **High Society**

The book tour led me, oddly enough, to the very places I had always hated: Schools, colleges and classrooms. The walls were still beige. The linoleum was still grey and the steps were still concrete.

At cocktail party after cocktail party the questioning continued. "What is your book? Where do you teach? What school did you go to?"

I am assured over and over again, by well-meaning people, that a college degree does not matter, but if it doesn't matter then why do people keep asking? And why am I always the only non-academic on the panel? And why have I been advised to keep quiet about it?

At a conference that I recently attended, I was so nervous at being on the stage with so many accomplished writers that I decided to tell the truth about my-

self as a remedy to my fear. I stood in front of the audience and told them that I had never been to college, that I worked in a grocery store, that *Life Without Water* was my first novel and I was hard at work on my second one. Energized by my truth telling, I then proceeded to give the reading of my life.

Over drinks that evening one of the other writers, a very degreed gentleman, asked me why I had told the audience that I had not been to college.

"Because it's true," I said.

"But if you hadn't told them, they would have never known."

"That's why I told them." I answered, still not getting his point.

"What I am saying," he replied, "is that I don't think anyone is interested."

Ah, so that's the point. His education is interesting but my lack of one is not. His history is interesting and mine is not.

Well, I disagree. To suggest that I hide my past is to suggest that there is something shameful about it. It is also to suggest sure failure, because if I can't be me, then what's the point? I didn't become a writer in order to lose my voice.

His comment only proves to me that I need to keep on being belligerent. People need to know that writing belongs to all of us. They need to know that blue-collar writers exist and are not stupid and they need to know that we have important things to say, are interesting people, and that the guy who cleans the pool just might be writing an epic saga about them. Furthermore, they need to find something else to talk about at cocktail parties.

At the very beginning of my career, I would have fallen down on the floor and cried if an author had stood at the podium and said, "I have never been to college and I am a published novelist." I would have bought that author's book over anyone else's.

Because every time I attended a conference and heard an author's degrees listed before a reading, what I was really

# People need to know that blue-collar writers exist and are not stupid; that the guy who cleans the pool just might be writing an epic saga about them.

hearing is, "This is what you need to be a writer." And that was exactly what I knew I would never have. And now I feel lonely because I don't know who my peers are.

I was told, after publication that a book could get me a job, teaching fiction at a university. What the hell, I thought. Why not try? I can write and I'm sure I can give my knowledge of writing to anyone that really wants to learn. Plus I needed money. My savings were depleted from all the work I missed while out promoting my book. And a good health insurance policy would not have been a bad idea either. So I called.

"Send us your vita," the man said.

"What's a vita?" I asked.

There was that pregnant pause again. Finally he answered, "A resume. Your publications. Where you've taught. Your schooling."

I came clean with my lack of college, if he hadn't guessed it already and I suspect he had. He had not heard of my book. But that's okay. I had never heard of a vita.

"How did you learn to write if you have never been to college?" he asked.

I almost laughed. I learned how to write the same way that college students learn. I had a love of literature and I read and I wrote and I asked other writers what they thought and I listened. And I did it over and over and over again and it will never end. It's the same process that all writers go through. Some of us got through it with editors. Some of us go through it with writer's groups. Some of us do both.

Perhaps one of the other reasons I considered white collar employment was the trouble I felt on the other side of the tracks. One of the hardest things about promoting my book was the sudden juxtaposition of roles I was playing, one night being escorted in a limo and taken to a country club for dinner and the next day schlepping potato salad to Yuppies with cell phones. One day visible. The next day not.

Once visible the return to invisibility (read: blue-collar work) is especially hard. Fifteen minutes of fame is a dangerous thing.

Add to that the reaction from co-workers and customers.

"You're going to be rich."

"I've never known a famous author before."

I'm not famous and I'm not rich. Presently, I have to work for a living. But where can I find a job that is flexible enough to allow me to go trotting off to readings and workshops, pays well enough that I don't have to work full time and doesn't kill me? As a blue-collar artist, I feel myself straddling two worlds that are spreading farther and farther apart.

I know that my road to becoming a writer while living a working-class life has actually been an easy one. I grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina which has a well established writing community. I have managed to access some of these writers and to wheedle my way into workshops and classrooms and to get noticed and get help.

But how do my fellow blue-collar writers who live in less academic settings get help? Where does a steel worker go for a class on characterization or plot? How does a plumber who is bursting with stories begin if college is not a chosen option and they have not been born in a town like Chapel Hill?

And why do most educated people believe that, across the board, blue-collar workers are not articulate and that our only interests lie in beer and sports and cars? Why do most educated people believe that a degree proves something about a person's character and their ability to carry on an interesting conversation? If America was built on sweat equity, which is what I was told the few times I listened in school, then why are there so many untold stories? Why do I feel invisible the minute I put on my blue-collar hat?

I personally want to see a movement, a

revolution. I want to see writing returned to the masses. I want the working class to know that there are writers among them. To know that writing, expressing yourself, story telling is not just for the college educated, but for everyone. And I want academia to know the same thing.

I want to see panels composed of nothing but blue-collar writers. I want to see classes offered in churches and libraries and living rooms. I want there to be grants (plural - grants) available only for working class writers and I want the entries to be judged by their peers, by other blue-collar writers. Because I want to be judged on the strength of my writing, not the strength of my grant writing.

I want these things because I need them and because I'm lonely and because I'm tired of answering that string of questions, "What's your book? Where do you teach? Where did you go to school?" I'm tired of seeing the faces of my hostesses change briefly when I reveal my history.

They want proof. Proof that I deserve the label of writer. Proof that I deserve to be served stuffed mushrooms on a silver platter. Proof that I deserve a second glass of bubbly and that I won't be getting too drunk.

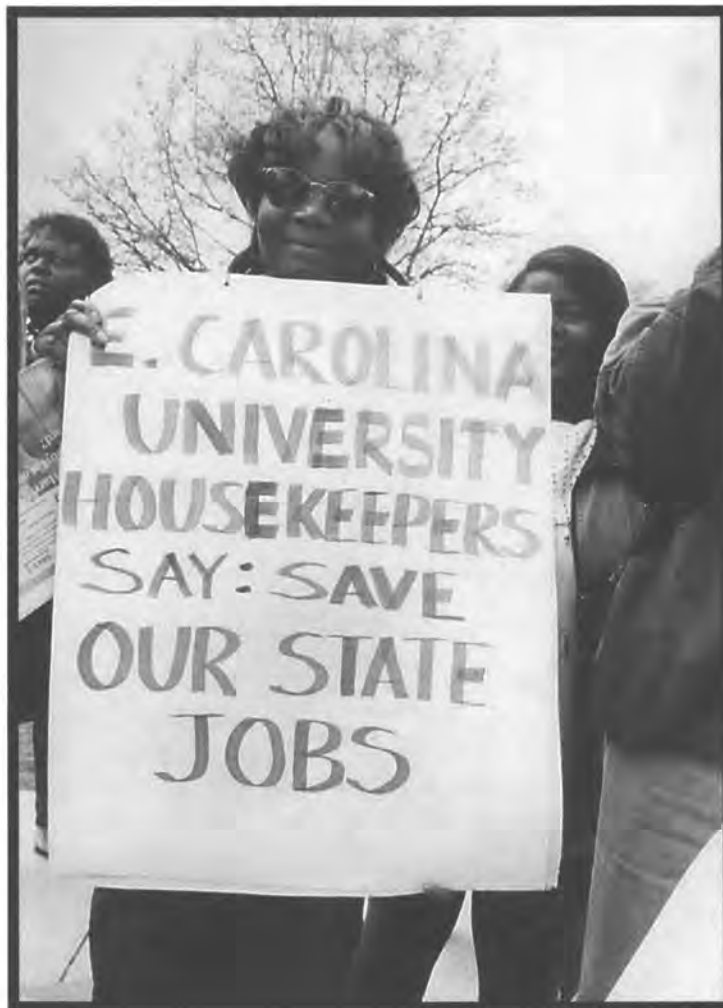
At these functions, I want to plump the pillows and pick up the abandoned paper cups. I want to restock the ice, swirl the cocktail napkins with a mixing glass, tidy up the fruit salad and move the centerpiece so that it covers the water stain on the tablecloth. I feel like escaping, slinking along the edges of the room and slipping into the kitchen to talk to the help. I feel like putting my jeans back on and getting out of the too small desk. But where do I go?

§

*Nancy Peacock's first novel, Life Without Water, was a New York Times Editor's Choice for '96 and was reviewed favorably throughout the country. Nancy has had short stories and essays published in journals such as The St. Andrew's Review, Sojourner, and The O. Henry Festival Stories. She lives and writes in Chatham County, North Carolina.*

# We Are All Housekeepers

Photo essay  
by Susan Suchman Simone  
&  
Jeff Jones



Since 1995, Susan Suchman Simone has been documenting the lives and political action of the UNC Housekeepers Association—an organization of housekeeping staff at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "We Are All Housekeepers" is a photo essay based on images selected from *The Meeting Place Project*, a photographic and oral history project that records the words and lives of African-American workers in Chapel Hill.

As Jeff Jones, a doctoral student in history at UNC, relates in his accompanying historical essay, the conditions and struggle Suchman Simone depicts in the 1990s are deeply reminiscent of the university's past. For the last 60 years, university housekeepers have faced remarkably similar affronts to dignity and justice. Yet injustice has rarely gone without challenge, and the last 60 years have also been marked by a persistence on the part of the campus' worst-treated workers to fight for a better life.





Last fall, UNC settled a seven-year-long discrimination suit filed by Marsha Tinnen for the UNC Housekeepers Association. A year later, not one of the stipulations of that agreement—including regular meetings, training and other benefits—has been fulfilled. When housekeepers and supporters rallied against the administration’s inaction on University Day in October 1997, Chancellor Michael Hooker responded, “Obviously there is something left unsettled. I’m not exactly sure what the issue is.”

As a look at the last 60 years of the housekeepers’ struggle indicates, the issue is a history of injustice and racism, reflected in the low pay and poor working conditions of the predominantly African-American and women housekeeping workers. The fight for justice has gone through ebbs and flows, but the basic underlying issues of justice and dignity have remained constant.

The first wave of resistance came with the Janitors’ Association, formed in 1930 on the heels of a 10 percent wage cut for state employees—the lowest paid of whom received only \$25 a week for more than 50 hours even before the cut. Organized by four janitors and led initially by Elliot “President George” Washington, the Janitors’ Association met regularly, paid dues, published a newsletter, held a yearly cookout and agitated for more than 10 years.

Chapel Hill N.C.  
June 11 - 1938

Mr. P.L. Burch  
Super of Building Dept.  
Chapel Hill N.C.

Dear Mr Burch  
This summer we are doing every thing in our power to keep the building as it has always been, and we realize there are know money for extra hours work but with the same spirit we do our work that the standard of cleaners may be maintain. So do the several of us will have to come early and stay late.

I am wondering if a letter could not be sent out to the head of the Department to wish these men work and make a check of the personal ability, and at the end of the first Summer School we send a short questionear to them as to the outcome of the house system to that this be keep in confident until the questionear have been return. Your criticism on this is greatly appreciated.

Yours  
Kenneth Cheek

Letter written to P.L. Burch, Superintendent of the Buildings Dept., by the head of the Janitors' Association (formed in 1930) following a second 10 percent wage cut and reduction of hours. The letter indicates that, despite the cuts, several janitors continue to work extra hours — for no extra pay — to keep buildings clean.

This summer we are doing every thing in our power to keep the building as it have all waise been, and we relisse their are know money for extry hours work but with the same spirit we do our work that the standard of cleanness may be maintain. To do this several of us will have to come early and stay late.

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Yours, Kenneth Cheek





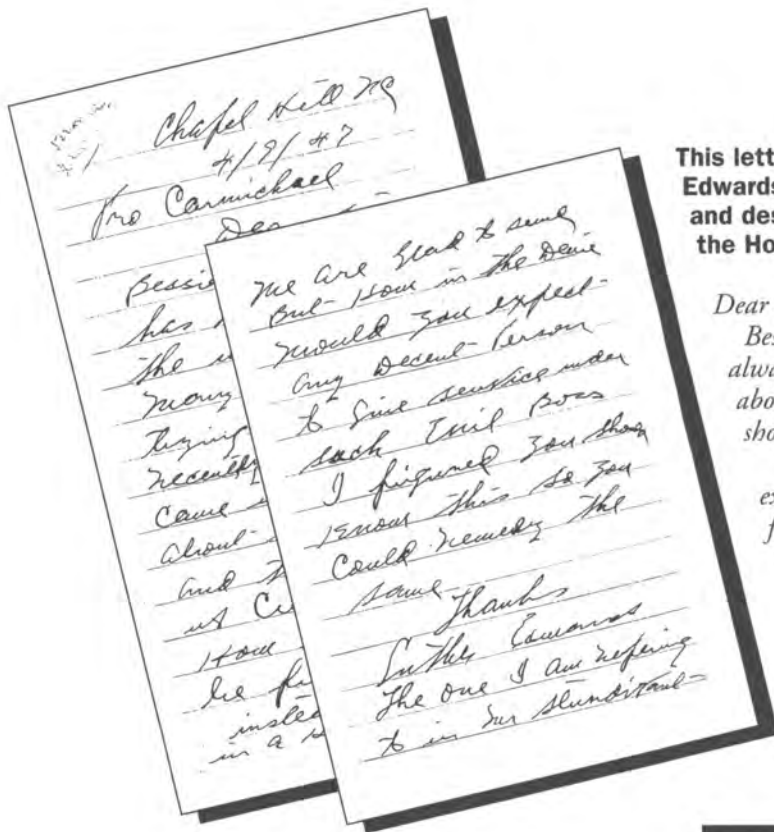
During the 1930s, UNC Chancellor Frank Porter Graham tells of attending a meeting of the Janitors' Association, during which he discussed his plan to start a financial aid fund to help students who could not afford to attend the university. The members of the Janitors' Association at the meeting immediately passed the hat and, despite their meager wages, raised \$10 as the first donation to the chancellor's new fund.

During World War II the Janitors' Association gave way to the Congress of Industrial Organizations, with student representatives of the union organizing campus workers. In the face of rapidly rising wartime living expenses, housekeepers and laundry workers pressed demands for job security, advancement opportunities, improved working conditions, and better pay through elected stewards and union officials.

Students and university employees worked together in the drive, as the 1947 "Higher Math/Lower Math" flier indicates (page 60). The university often sought to undermine their efforts. In 1944, C. I. O. Secretary-Treasurer Henry Wenning sent a letter to Graham, then serving on the National War Labor Board in Washington, D. C., complaining that university administrators were trying to turn the union's demands for working rules and regulations into contract negotiations, a "hostile act" that, Wenning points out, would allow the university to wipe out the union.

Throughout this period of union organizing, mistreatment of workers by supervisors was a common theme. In 1944, Williams noted housekeepers' objections to poor treatment by Giles F. Horney complaining that he "refuses to discuss points of disagreement," "fires men without just cause" and displays an "attitude [that] is uncooperative and generally unfriendly." A letter written three years later by housekeeper Luther Edwards (page 57) on behalf of Bessie





This letter written by Luther Edwards on behalf of Bessie Edwards in April 1947, complains about a style of supervision and describes the plantation mentality that has persisted in the Housekeeping division at the university.

Dear Sir,

Bessie Edwards has worked for the university for many years always trying to please. Recently there has cause of some complaint about the time sheet and the boss came up cursing about how they should be filled out — instead of coming in a human way.

We are glad to serve, but how in the devil would you expect any decent person to give service under such evil boss. I figured you should know this so you could remedy the same.

Thanks

Luther Edwards

The one I am referring to is Mr. Sturdivant.

Edwards describes one supervisor, Mr. Sturdivant, as an “evil boss” who “came cursing” about the time sheet instead of “coming in a human way.”

The 1950s brought a lull in campus organizing, but documentation from the period still reveals a great deal about the University’s relationship with its workers. A 1954 memo, for example, announces that the classification of jobs will begin with the lowest-paid positions, admitting that there may be “misunderstandings, suspicions and fears” among those employees. A petition circulated among campus workers several years later explains why there was apprehension, citing “the problem of the inequitable wage scale” in the University’s classifications.

With the Civil Rights Movement came a new round of organizing on campus. In 1965 the newly formed Committee of Janitors wrote university administrators to complain about low pay, poor working conditions, and unfair treatment by supervisors, indicating that the situation had not improved markedly over the years. Echo-





**FORWARD  
EVER,**

**BACKWARD  
NEVER**

ing the sentiments of campus workers, Sociology professor H. M. Blaylock complained in a letter to Chancellor Paul Sharp that one supervisor, Mr. Olive, believes “that Negroes should be completely subservient.”

The thread of discrimination and struggle did not end with the civil rights movement. In 1980 housekeepers compiled a list of “Grievances and Demands” stemming from an incident in which supervisors “wrote up” or reported housekeepers who did not drive to work during a snow storm. Among the demands are that supervisor Manzie Smith, “well-known to sexually harass women workers,” be removed from his position. Three years later a university administrator noted that “housekeepers were quite vocal about pay (or lack thereof)” in a recent meeting, adding that “there is such strong sentiment that a petition is being circulated among housekeepers.”





A state hiring freeze and budget cuts in the late 1980s sparked the formation of the Housekeepers Association, which has put forward many of the same demands presented by their predecessors. The movement quickly spread to campuses in Greenville and Greensboro. A new challenge has been university plans to privatize, which is often held as a threat against public sector organizing—and the key reason the recent settlement, even if honored, would not end the fight.

“Student support has been crucial”

HIGHER MATH

CJ's Wages

University Laundry Workers now earn:

33¢ per hour (45 hours per week) .... 14.85

First Bonus ..... 2.16

Second Bonus ..... 4.33

\$21.34

This low pay cannot keep pace with rising living costs. The workers really need the 20% increase granted by the state, effective July 1.

AND LOWER MATH

But the workers have been told that the second bonus may be cut out before the raise is given. This means they will have \$19.98 after the increase. With one hand the University is giving increases, with the other hand they are taking more back.

The union is circulating petitions in support of decent wages and working conditions.

WE ASK THE STUDENTS WHO DO NOT WANT TO SEE THE UNIV. WORKERS LIVE IN THE VERY CONDITIONS CONDEMNED IN THE CLASSROOMS, TO SIGN THESE PETITIONS.

1947



“They’re just some Niggers and wormy kids.”

— Dan Follmer, Press Secretary for Harold Brubaker, Speaker of the North Carolina General Assembly referring to UNC Housekeepers and students.

APRIL 1996





Now the struggle has taken a new form. A drive started this June, organized by the independent United Electrical Workers Union (UE), has taken the struggle statewide, organizing housekeepers and groundskeepers at all 16 campuses in the UNC system. Student support has again been crucial, with brigades at each campus talking to workers and collecting grievances.

In many ways, the conditions of UNC housekeepers have stayed very much the same. But just as injustice has been constant, so too has been the dedication of housekeepers to change the course of history.



*"I'd like Kim to have things that my parents weren't able to do for me, so I'll probably have to go back to working two jobs. But you know you're awful tired when you do that, and it affects your family."  
— Marsha Tinnen, UNC Housekeeper, 1995*

# America's BLACKEST CHILD

By *Junebug Jabbo Jones*

"A.B! Is that you? What the hell are you doing here?" I blurted out. "You supposed to be in Chicago." It was a lame cover, but I was shocked. Not just because he was 60 pounds thinner and looked like death sitting on a soda cracker. He was the last person I expected to see in the Bay Area as a "resident" of the Evergreen Hospice Care Center, where I was working as a volunteer.

I'd heard about the places they had for people to go to die, but it was my first time spending time in one. The majority of the people there were dying of the illness that they later came to call Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, AIDS.

"Always think positively," they would tell us in the volunteer training sessions. "They know they're dying. They wouldn't be here if they weren't dying. They don't need you to tell them that. Emphasize the *living*, the quality of life."

A.B. aimed a gaunt, hollow-eyed stare at me over the copy of *Fortune* magazine. Even that thin magazine seemed too heavy for his fragile fingers. His eyes rolled toward the clock and back before he said, "I don't know who you are, and you obviously don't know me. If you don't mind, I'm very busy."

There was no doubt it was him but I couldn't tell whether he was ashamed of being seen in this condition or if he really couldn't recognize me. At the time I didn't look too good myself. I'd dropped out of college in '66 aiming to work long enough to pay my way back into Howard University so I could finish my senior year, but my number came up in the draft lottery. In little or no time, I was on my way to Vietnam.

My discharge papers say I served two tours of duty during the worst part of the war. I still have nightmares about it, but all I can say for sure is that I walked right up to the gates of hell and came back with no physical injury that left a scar. I was discharged with a bunch of medals that I got only because I was too scared or

too stubborn to die. I sure didn't believe what they sent us there to fight for. Hell, I couldn't even figure out what *they* thought it was.

Most of what happened in 'Nam is still a blur of dope, alcohol, helpless whores and languages that I no longer understand. I hid out in Bangkok because I knew that I couldn't get the dope I needed by that time at home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I woke up one morning two years later in San Francisco's Chinatown feeling like I must have walked all the way from Bangkok. It was another year and a half before I could stay sober long enough to keep a job busting dishes.

I had started going to Evergreen because Joe Walker was there. I could remember that he'd been my best buddy when I got to Tan San Hut. Joe and I were the only college men in our unit. In fact, Joe had gone into service on a ROTC commission but had gotten himself busted back to buck sergeant because of repeated drug charges. He'd hoped that his record would keep him from being assigned to combat duty in the Boonies. It didn't.

Like me, Joe had survived but came back home a junkie. His family had a little money so they'd "put him away" because they didn't want anyone to know about his condition. I started visiting him because he was my buddy and because I hoped he might help me remember what had happened to me. It was already too late for Joe by the time I found him. I'd sit and talk to him, but I couldn't make sense of what he was saying. I wasn't there when he died.

Unlike Joe, A.B.'s body was running down but his mind was still strong. After I kept on coming back and talking to him he must have decided that I was so crazy myself that it didn't matter whether he talked to me or not. At least I wouldn't be laying some heavy trip on him. Hell, I couldn't tell my ass from a hole in the ground, who was I to judge? You can get really close to somebody in a situation like that.

A.B.'s real name was Martin Cohen. He'd been at Howard at the same time I was there. He was from this little town outside of D.C. Everybody used to tease

His other pet name was "ABC," "America's Blackest Child!" Martin "A.B." Cohen.

him about being Jewish because of his name but there was no way that you could mistake him for being Jewish once you saw him. His other pet name was "ABC," "America's Blackest Child!" Martin "A.B." Cohen.

He didn't mind it when you called him "A.B.," but he'd get fighting mad when you called him "The Black Jew" or anything like that. It seemed kind of crazy to me, because all the while we were in school he went out of his way to hook up with Jewish women. And they loved A.B. too. He was coal black and just as pretty as he could be.

It was embarrassing to go out with him when he was with one of them because they'd make such a big thing about his skin and his hair. They'd be touching and teasing each other no matter where they'd be, and that stuff can be dangerous in some places *now!*

A.B. was all about money. Far as that's concerned, he'd done really well with his life. He was one of a very few to have a seat on the Chicago Board of Trade at the time. He always had money when we were in school. I couldn't see where he should be making that much money so I figured it was cause he was so tight. He'd made both of his two brothers make business plans and report to him on their progress in order to get any money from him. On the other hand, the first thing he did when he could afford it, was to buy a house for his mother and set her up with a trust fund "because" he said, "she'd already worked hard enough for two or three lifetimes."

His mother had raised the family with-

out the help of a man, no more than it took for them to be conceived. She'd done it by doing housework for the white folks. The way he explained it, she was sort of like an independent contractor. She would contract for particular things, like doing the floors and windows in a house once every two weeks or cooking the weekend meals, or doing the laundry and ironing once a week, stuff like that. She had it figured that she could make more money and keep control over her own time that way. She got to the point where she worked almost exclusively for Jewish families because she found that she could get fifty cents to a dollar an hour more from the Jews.

When A.B. was growing up, her main contract was with this family that had this really beautiful daughter named Millicent, who was about A.B.'s age. He said that she was really beautiful. From the very first time he met her, he thought Millicent was the object of all his erotic fantasies. She seemed so nice whenever he'd go over to wait on his mom or to help her out if she had a really tough job to do. In the early fifties, it was quite a thing for a white woman to be nice, or simply "civil" to a black person notwithstanding the fact that they were both children at the time. It was only a couple of years earlier that they had lynched Emmitt Till in Mississippi.

Where I had dropped out of college and gotten drafted, A.B. had pled family hardship and stayed in school. He got a fellowship to the University of Chicago to work on an MBA. Who should he find there but the Magnificent Millicent from his hometown. Here she was, his childhood fantasy in the flesh, as a fellow student in the same university.

He described a ravishing woman; raven black hair, translucent ivory skin, perfectly matched teeth framed by pouty strawberry-red lips that required no lipstick for their redness, piercing hazel brown eyes and a luscious sensual body, which she inhabited with a comfortable grace that made her even more appealing.

A.B. was excited about finding Millicent again but was shocked to discover that despite his deadly reputation with women, particularly Jewish



women, Millicent, though friendly enough, seemed to have no particular interest in seducing him regardless of the lengths to which he went to make himself available.

What was even more shocking, however, was the fact that she didn't remember him. One day he baited her with the disclosure that he was from her same hometown. "Oh," she said, "I'm ashamed to admit that the only black person I knew growing up was this wonderful human being named Gertie, who was . . . well, kind of a maid for us."

"Gertie?"

"She was a really wonderful person. In some ways she did more for me than my mother did. . . . about learning how to be a woman, a complete human being, you know."

"Aunt Gertie, huh?"

"Yes! That's exactly what we used to call her! How did you know? Is that . . . like a common term of endearment among your people?"

"A 'common term of endearment?'"

"You know . . ."

"Among some people, yes. I suppose you could say so."

A.B. waited in vain for Millicent to make the connection. She never did. Even after he went on a campaign to win her affection and to make her one of his regular lovers, she never did make the connection between him and his mother.

He was surprised that it was so easy to convince her to participate in group sex with other black men. A.B. said that Millicent was the one who suggested that they experiment with bondage and whipping. In time, he said, he reached the point that he enjoyed her humiliation by others more than he enjoyed sex with her himself, but she'd always insist on completing their encounters in a solo engagement with him.

Eventually, Millicent went back to D.C. to work in an investment firm later to become the CEO for her father's bank back in Virginia. Years later, A.B. heard from his mother that the Magnificent Millicent had died at the young age of 38. She'd just wasted away, till finally she was just too weak to keep on living. The way his mother put it, "She just died for

love. When people don't have enough love in their lives they just waste away like that."

Eight years to the day after Millicent died, A.B. had gone to the doctor to find out why he was unable to stop losing weight and was tired all the time. He'd had all kinds of tests and diagnoses; from food poisoning to gastroenteritis to chronic fatigue syndrome to things never heard of before or since. After two years, it was clear that he was only getting worse, and they were beginning to understand there was more to this Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome than met the eye.

He got to where he couldn't keep up with the demands of his lifestyle or work anymore. He closed down his offices and checked himself into Evergreen. I asked

him if he'd gotten into drugs. He shook his head. "Have you told all your sex partners you might have exposed to this condition?"

"Hell, man, you might as well start with 'A' in the phone book."

A few months after I found him, A.B. died. I don't think his brothers tried to tell his mother what was happening to him. They had a little private service at the crematorium in San Francisco. I was the only one not in his blood family there. His mother just kept saying over and over, "My baby died because of the lack of love in his life. My baby died for the lack of love."

SE

*John O'Neal brings the stories of his good friend Junebug Jabbo Jones to Southern Exposure from his home in New Orleans.*



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# Lights, Camera, ACTION:

How one filmmaker uses labor documentary as an organizing tool

By Judith Helfand

“**T**he Uprising of '34,”

a documentary film released in 1995, tells the story of the General Textile Strike of 1934, which involved hundreds of thousands of workers, mainly in the South. The film combines oral history interviews with former workers and managers, newsreel and other film footage from the period, still photographs, and letters from textile workers to President Roosevelt and administration officials.

We never envisioned “Uprising” as merely a movie, to be seen passively. From the beginning, we were most concerned with what occurred “after the lights came up,” seeing the film as a vehicle to foster a critical dialogue about history and memory, class and power. Accordingly, we have adopted a grassroots approach to distribution and outreach, working closely with community groups, labor unions and schools.

When the lights come up at screenings in the southern cotton mill communities and cities where the strike took place, the first responses are consistently the same. “Why didn’t I know about the strike?” “Why didn’t my grandma tell me about this?” “I’m a high school teacher, and I didn’t know.” “How do we get a film and the stories of working people into the schools?”

Underlying all of these concerns was a larger question that rose to the surface like cream in a bottle of milk: “Whose responsibility is it to impart labor history to the next generation?” The answer was clear: the responsibility resides with a



CO-PRODUCER GEORGE STONEY SETTING UP A SHOT FOR THE “UPRISING OF ‘34”

community and cannot solely fall to a teacher in a classroom.

When showing the film in a classroom, by way of introduction I explain how we will work with “The Uprising of ‘34”:

*When the lights come up at screenings in the southern cotton mill communities and cities where the strike took place, the first responses are consistently the same. “Why didn’t I know about the strike?”*

“The ground rules for viewing the film are: if you laugh, cry, squirm or yell at the screen, than I will stop the VCR and ask, “Why? What does that person or statement make feel or think about?”

An exchange that took place in an 11th grade history class in Charlotte has informed every classroom and workshop experience since. After showing the opening three minutes of the film (montage of interior mill footage and voice-over bites about life and work in the mills from owner, management, workers, young descendants), I stopped the tape and asked, “What is different about this?” expecting a talk about the novelty of not having a narrator.

One girl offered, “Well, they are real country.”

“Well, we’re real country,” responded another.

“No, they are really country, no one in my family talks like that.”

“Well, my whole family talks like that, so I guess we are real country.”

A third girl broke into the discussion. “What’s different is that they don’t show rednecks on television anymore.”

I asked, "Why not?"

A boy sitting in the back of the room took his sweatshirt hood off his head and replied, "Because people think that they don't have anything to say that is important, and besides, they weren't the victors."

"Well, let's see what they have to say," I suggested, and turned the film back on.

We viewed the next section, a four-minute montage of retired and young cotton mill workers who speak about why the history of the '34 strike in the South is not known. I stopped the VCR again. I asked two boys (white) why they were making so much noise while the woman in the film, who was missing some front teeth, was talking.

The two boys looked at each other sheepishly and then one said between embarrassed giggles, "Because she looks

like what we were saying before—redneck. You know, white trash."

I asked him, "Well, do you remember what she said?"

They both looked taken aback when they realized they didn't know what she had said.

A girl (African American) sitting in the very front of the class spun around in her desk and said, "That's because you were too busy laughing at her, but what she said was very meaningful." Verbatim, she repeated the lines: "My daddy could talk about the war and

people being blown to bits

but he couldn't talk about his own neighbors being killed [in the strike]. And it's like somebody is trying to hide a dirty secret about their family, like they're ashamed of what happened to their families. They ought to be proud of 'em, they stood up when other people wouldn't."

I asked, "What does her statement and our discussion make you think about?"

One boy offered, "Well, she makes up in wit what she lacks in appearance."

"Well," I asked, "what does that say about history?"

The same boy in the back of the room (African American) who had spoken earlier, pulled the sweatshirt hood off his head and said, "It means that we only know the history of people that look good or are rich. And they don't ask regular people about their history, because we don't even think they have one."

At this point, we had seen just six minutes of the film.

As a way to extend this to the "regular" people who



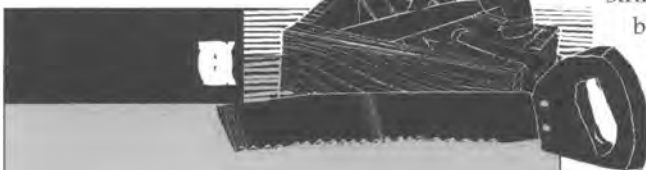
**KATHY LAMB (ABOVE) IS THE ORGANIZER OF HONEA PATH MEMORIAL ABOUT THE GREENSBORO SCREENING OF THE UPRISING OF '34. AN EXAMPLE OF THE MONUMENT IS TO HER LEFT.**

make and keep our local history, we encourage teachers, with other community leaders or organizations, to coordinate a community screening of "The Uprising of '34." Bring together parents or family members, working people, trade unionists, clergy, librarians, archivists, local historians, and retirees to view the film and talk. Interrupt the screening for discussions. Identify "hidden" labor history in your family or community, past or present—something no one talks about, but everybody knows about, something you know as a one-liner or myth, something misunderstood, something that is off-limits.

The point of this is for people to see themselves in an industrial and historical context and to make real connections between their families, home community and the story of the southern textile communities that are featured in "The Uprising of '34."

**S  
E**

*Judith Helfand is an independent film and video maker based in New York whose credits include "The Uprising of '34" and the newly released documentary "A Healthy Baby Girl." This piece was excerpted with permission from the Organization of American Historians Magazine of History, Spring 1997.*



For more information about independent film making, contact:

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# A Feast for Activists

By Andrew Pearson

When I picked up *The Activist Cookbook* I was hungry for ideas. The meal was delicious, especially the "soups to nuts" section, and I feel proud to give Andrew Boyd's work my hearty recommendation.

Entitled *The Activist Cookbook: Creative Actions for a Fair Economy*, this well-designed, easy read successfully fulfills its goal as a "hands on manual for organizers, artists and educators who want to get their message across in powerful, creative ways."

A catalogue of creative tactics and events is often the hardest thing to find, but also the most useful in sparking our creative energy. It was barely a week after I got the book that the Student Environmental Action Coalition performed a "die-in" on the main campus quad in Chapel Hill. We combined the elements of speech, silence, symbol and action to dramatize the killing of indigenous peoples for rainforest wood.

A loud chainsaw and well-designed cardboard tombstones brought rainforest destruction to the campus. A table stationed on a walkway nearby provided a "safe space" for the public audience to find out the details. And the strategic juxtaposition of chainsaw, tombstones with messages and activists dressed in black resulted in front-page newspaper coverage with photographs that told the story better than words.

*The Activist Cookbook* gave me a language and a process for thinking about creative actions like this. It serves up tastes of tactics from side-walk skits to parades to movie showings on skyscraper walls. Whether it is a limbo event that dramatizes the declining standard of living or a tongue-in-cheek demonstra-



## THE ACTIVIST COOKBOOK: Creative Actions for a Fair Economy

By Andrew Boyd  
United for a Fair Economy

tion by the "Rich People's Liberation Front" the *Cookbook* provides ingredients, preparation instructions and notes on how to serve.

There is a joy to acting easily nudged by the heartening examples sprinkled throughout the *Cookbook*. Simone Albeck, a student activist, is quoted saying that "the creativity was in me all along, and supported by a group, I felt the confidence and enough safety to bring it out."

Historian Howard Zinn credits the *Cookbook* with the power to "give the greedy money-mongers of our society, and the politicians who serve them, a bad case of indigestion." Certainly the "Rat Race" event dramatizes the widening gap between the rich and the poor. One of four complete recipes, the "Rat Race" is a spoof on sports, complete with cheerleaders, TV announcers and runners who start out at the income distribution line of

1979. After different "income groups" run backward or forward, a dramatic visual is created that shows the top 1 percent an average of \$210,000 richer and the bottom 20 percent \$2,000 poorer.

The *Cookbook* provides an essential analysis of economics in America. Today, the wealthiest 1 percent own 40 percent of all wealth, more than that of the bottom 92 percent of the U.S. population combined. A discussion of the myths that perpetuate such unequal distribution, and ways to refocus debate on the real reasons, gives the creative actions a serious edge.

The "Rat Race" and other performances based on "musical chairs" show how economic policy has been shaped by the rich to changes the rules, shifting the tax burden from corporations and the wealthy and onto middle- and working-class people. Just as importantly, they create a popular culture of community, sharing, creativity and humor that easily cuts through the dry, competitive and inhumane market system.

If you agree that "for the last 20 years, there has been an all-out class war against the economic security of working people in this country," *The Activist Cookbook* is an essential resource for change. It can be ordered from United for a Fair Economy at (617) 423-2148 or [stw@stw.org](mailto:stw@stw.org) for \$15.

A great deal, when you compare it to purchases that feed the coffers of the wealthiest 1 percent.

*Andrew Pearson is a women's history major at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he is co-chair of the Student Environmental Action Coalition.*



# Is the South Shaping the U.S.?

By Pronita Gupta

"The South has been a lightning rod of our fondest hopes and worst fears—a shadow theater for national guilt—a place to stow the bloody rags we didn't want to see; a scapegoat for our worst failings; a model of an imagined perfect past; a hypothesis or a nation redeemed or a nation damned." (p.344)

With this dramatic statement, Peter Applebome attempts to summarize his view of the Southern region and its historical and continued importance to the nation as a whole. In the beginning of *Dixie Rising*, Applebome claims that he will try to reveal the "real" South by rebuking the classical stereotypes of the South as a backward, racist, conservative, homogeneous and poor region of the country. Unfortunately, in the end, he ends up reinforcing these stereotypes to articulate his key themes.

Since the "Gingrich" revolution of 1994 and the ascendancy of two Southerners to top leadership positions in the nation, there have been numerous articles about the role of the South in shaping the current political and cultural landscape of the United States. It is true that politically the nation is more conservative, and many of the views espoused by Southern politicians—less government intervention, lower taxes and states' rights sentiments—have influenced much of the domestic policy made in the 1990s. Additionally, the region, as Applebome correctly assesses, has and continues to have an incredible impact on the literature, music and religious traditions of the nation.

As Southern Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*, Applebome has had an opportunity to travel and learn about the



## **Dixie Rising** **How the South is Shaping** **American Values, Politics and** **Culture**

by Peter Applebome  
Random House, 1996

South by meeting politicians, activists, academics and everyday people. This is well-reflected in his book and is a strength of *Dixie Rising*. It is in these more detailed histories and less-known facts about the South that *Dixie Rising* strikes gold.

His best chapter is on the past and present situation of Honea Paths, South Carolina, which epitomized the worst violence against workers and labor unions during the General Textile Strike of 1934. His interviews and reflections about a community so haunted by the past that it is still unable to support union efforts though working conditions and wages have barely improved, provides a rare insight into the psyche of a region ravaged by low-wage jobs, severe occupational hazards and a loathing for

organized labor. In this chapter, Applebome upholds the dignity of the community by portraying the very real choices and dilemmas people have to make at times of crisis.

However, most of the book is not as incisive. Applebome often takes a condescending attitude towards those he interviews, and somehow manages to continuously highlight ultra-conservative, racist rednecks as if they comprise a majority of the region.

He is often quite critical of civil rights and workers' rights activists, while taking a more lenient stance towards fundamentalists and bigots. This is exemplified in Chapter 4 where Applebome states: "... in 1995, nothing seemed so dated or irrelevant... as a bunch of aging black civil rights leaders marching fifty-four miles from Selma to Montgomery... Few historical figures of our time seemed both so flamboyantly wrong and so blindingly prophetic as George Corley Wallace—wrong enough to lose the battle, but right enough to serve as a model for how to win the war." (p. 91)

He often makes caricatures of racist Southern partisans, thus ingenuously diminishing the harm caused by their hateful rhetoric and actions. Sometimes his perspective is that of a Southern apologist—stating the problems of a region that has a history of racial strife yet downplaying these problems by highlighting the nostalgic views often espoused by members of the Southern League.

The South has often acted as a catalyst or harbinger for things to come. We need to not only highlight the problems that continue to persist but also honor the incredible organizing that has and continues to push the region towards a more just path. We also need to continue celebrating and bringing to the forefront the rich culture of the South and focus more on its contributions rather than negative hackneyed images.

§

Pronita Gupta is the Executive Director of the Institute for Southern Studies.

# The Tea Belt

By Mary Lee Kerr

Supermarket shelves are stacked high with bottled and canned ready-to-drink teas, most fast food menus feature iced tea and health food stores sell teas that claim to cure everything from the common cold to work stress and hangovers.

"Tea is in a renaissance," says Joseph Simrany, president of the Tea Council of the U.S.A., "and the South is the king of tea." As a region, the South consumes more than 40 percent of the nation's tea in pounds, and nearly 35 percent of the population drinks tea — more than in any other area of the country.

The tea-drinking trend is spreading across the country, but for centuries the South has taken the lead on tea. Tea-drinking Native Americans introduced European settlers to their yaupon brew. In the 18th century, tea was the principal drink of the British colonists, who imported Bohea tea from India via England.

England's attempts to tax the beverage sparked protest, including the famous Boston Tea Party and the less-publicized Edenton Tea Party in North Carolina. Fifty-one women in the coastal town of Edenton signed a declaration in 1774 to help the "publick good" by consuming only local products. They are reputed to have dumped their cups of Bohea tea out of the window of their hostess, Penelope Barker, and replaced it with an American-grown raspberry brew.

Today, tea is still a symbol of protest and an issue for debate in the South. In 1992, as many as 300 Floridians protested rising taxes by mailing tea bags to Gov. Lawton Chiles' office.

The debate over iced versus hot and sweet versus unsweetened may never end, but numbers show that at least 80 percent of the population is drinking it cold and much of that cold tea is sweetened. For born and bred Southerners, iced sweet tea can't be beat, and new arrivals search, often in vain, for the hot or unsweetened variety.

A new debate over the health effects of tea is also brewing. Some consumers have attributed stomach problems to tea, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have said poorly cleaned tea making equipment was probably the culprit, not the tea itself. Tea has more often been touted for helping to reduce stress, improve oral hygiene, cure cancer and enhance cardiovascular functioning. Researchers in Iowa have even explored using tea to neutralize the stink of hog manure on factory farms, a major prob-



## TEA TIME ALL THE TIME

Amount of tea consumed in U.S. per region (% of pounds)



% of population that drinks tea



Source: A.C. Nielson 8/96

lem in southern states such as North Carolina.

Most tea is still imported, but there have been efforts in the South, where the soil and temperatures are perfect for growing the leaf, to produce its own. Andre Micheaux introduced tea plants to South Carolina's Middleton Place Gardens in 1799. Charles Shepard's Pinehurst Tea Plantation in Summerville, S.C., was home to the first successful domestic tea business; its oolong tea won first prize at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. In 1963, Thomas J. Lipton, Inc. created a research station on Wadmalaw Island, S.C., with the remnants of Shepard's plants. A series of experiments cultivating the plants and the development of a mechanized harvester to cut labor costs made American-grown tea a reality.

Today, Lipton's business has been bought out and converted to American Classic Tea. While a few other domestic tea operations are trying to get going, the South Carolina business is the only one that has become commercially successful. American Classic Teas has taken off, especially in the South. "Most of our distribution is in the South and sales are rising," says the company's Sarah Fleming McLester. "The South is where you want to be to sell tea."

SE

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Combining Information Power with People Power to Build a Just Society ■

The Institute for Southern Studies puts "information power" and "people power" together to change the South.

With careful research and solid organizing, you can take on city hall or a corporate polluter — and win.

Founded in 1970 by veteran civil rights activists, the Institute has earned a national reputation for pioneering research, quality publications and effective networking. It's a unique resource center for Southerners fighting for healthy communities, civil rights, and economic justice.

Our vision for the South has involved us in projects as diverse as the region itself. Over the last three decades, the Institute has:

- ◆ Challenged corporations to help Florida citrus pickers, Kentucky miners, and Carolina textile workers win breakthrough union contracts.
- ◆ Initiated organizing among poultry

workers and poultry farmers, leading to new health centers and a strong national association of growers.

- ◆ Armed citizen activists with research skills and key data so they could keep harmful facilities out of their communities.
- ◆ Helped disabled cotton mill workers win millions of dollars in compensation and utility customers save millions from rate hikes.
- ◆ Pioneered corporate hog farm research for reformers in North Carolina and Iowa.
- ◆ Investigated right-wing politicians and groups, and helped launch regional and local anti-Klan organizations.
- ◆ Sponsored films, books, oral history projects, and community studies that profile Southern changemakers and the dynamics of social change.
- ◆ Spearheaded campaign finance reform research, advocacy, and training

for journalists.

- ◆ Documented the lessons of grassroots community economic development, convened forums, and helped leaders share positive models.
- ◆ Compiled fact-filled resources, such as *The Green index*, *Death Penalty Information Packet*, *Environmental Politics*, and *Lessons for Reform*.
- ◆ Birthed numerous groups, such as Southerners for Economic Justice, Gulf Coast Tenants Association, and the Financial Democracy Campaign.

**Become a member of the Institute for Southern Studies and help support our ongoing efforts to build a just society — and a better South — for us all.**

**JOIN** the Institute for Southern Studies and help our research, organizing, and publishing that go toward building a better South. Join now and you will receive a year of our award-winning quarterly, *Southern Exposure* AND a FREE copy of the 20th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE.

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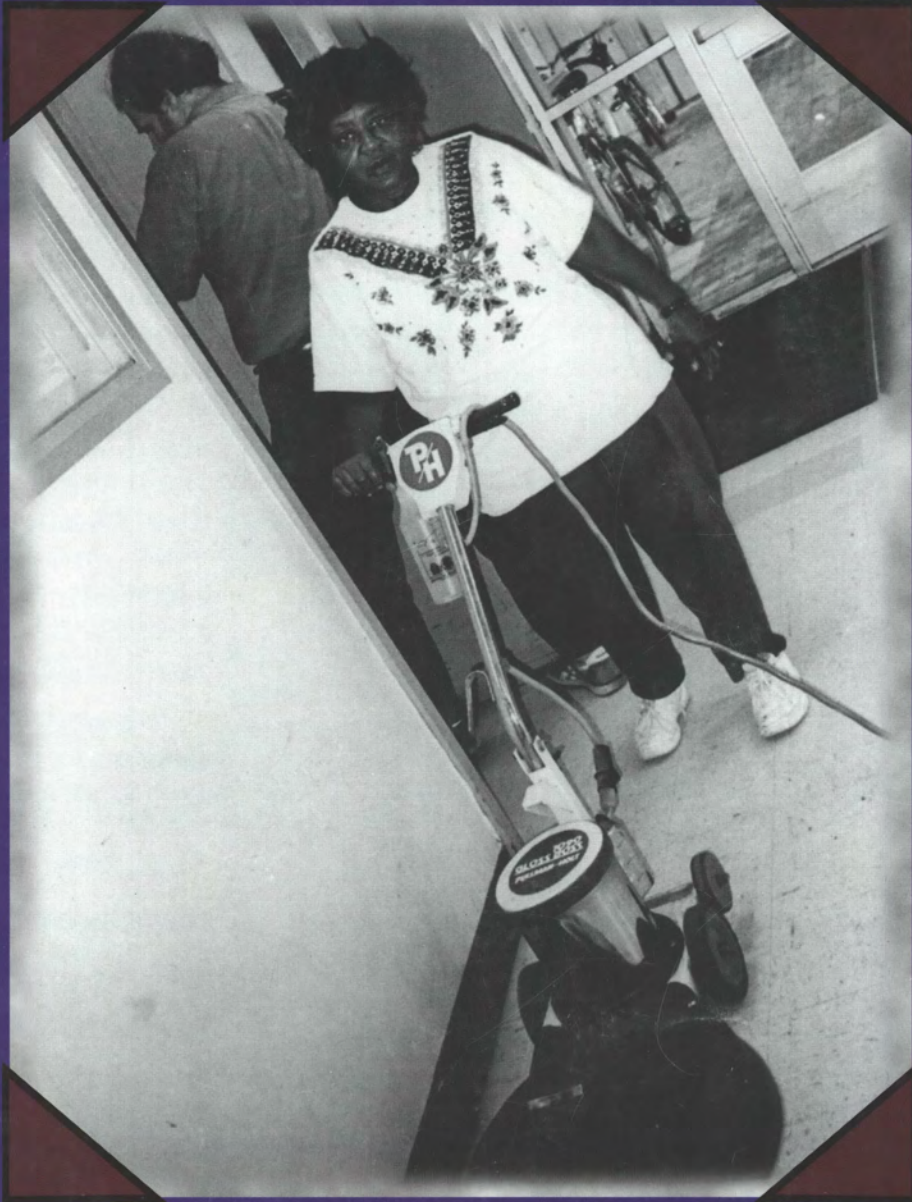
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SOUTHERN  
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*From the photo exhibit "We Are All Housekeepers"  
by Susan Suchman Simone, featured inside.*

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