

# Agnes Scott Writers' Festival 1988

## EVENTS

### Tuesday, April 12, 1988

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8:15 p.m. Reading  
Anne Rivers Siddons  
Dessert and Coffee: Wallace M. Alston  
Student Center, Chapel Lounge

### Wednesday, April 13, 1988

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10:25 a.m. - 11:10 a.m. Reading  
Student Poets Chosen for Publication  
Evans Terrace Dining Room

2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. Panel Discussion of Student Work  
Michael S. Harper  
Anne Rivers Siddons  
Memye Curtis Tucker  
Conference Room/Rebekah

8:15 p.m. Reading  
Michael S. Harper  
Winter Theatre  
Dana Fine Arts Building

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The Festival wishes to thank President Ruth Schmidt and Dr. Eleanor Hutchens for their support.



**writers' festival  
1988**

Festival '88  
1988

Spring, 1988

*Editors*  
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*Cover*  
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The Selection Committee reserves the right to perform any necessary editing. **Festival** is prepared by The Printing Store, 240 DeKalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30030.

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**Heat and Dust**

Ignorance is our best defense;  
The war of compassion  
With an alien place  
Is like your flagging heart,  
Territory claimed by one  
But owned by none.

I loved you like a stolen pride;  
Unaware of cruel valour  
Which beyond city walls  
Would bear its unkempt bloodshed,  
Reclaiming destiny beyond  
Emotion's muddy wand.

I've no faith in witchcraft;  
But charms they exist  
As surely as heroes are guided by them.  
A city like yours never dies,  
Buried lifelong underground,  
Inevitably refound.

Men pinch the same relics  
Between the sand-riddled nails,  
Devoted to antique gods  
Reproduced on street corners.  
The truly unknown  
Has passion eternally shown.

- Tim Briggs

**Last Night In Jamaica**

*I am come to kindle a fire on the earth,  
and what would I give that is already burnt.*

*Jesus*

*Luke 12:49*

Where is my lizard now, who used to sit in the kitchen all morning,  
pulling his scarlet over-night bag out of his throat? He should be  
here, lying like stone in the light of the kerosene lamp. I hear the goats bleat  
under the dripping orange trees, their necks tied to the limestone, their wet pupils  
rectangular as doors. With one forward motion the ants lined at the foot of our bed  
free a moth of her wing, gliding off with it dark  
and wide as a lake between them. What I'm trying to tell you  
is I can't live like this. I want to shed this self-  
consciousness like an old robe, break out of the cell in my head to walk  
the narrow halls, lay my lips on everyone's hands splayed through the bars. I'm alone  
though you're here behind me, touching me only where you move in and slowly  
almost out. If you said my name I'd turn, whisper about me  
and the cab driver, the one who said he had eleven children  
by ten women. You liked him trying to impress me. I laughed into the rear-view  
mirror, over the plastic blue and white flowers stuck in the vents,  
laughed into his green eyes laughing back into mine, those eyes the gold-green  
of palm leaves transformed by the sun into translucent yellow tongues. I fell  
through the back of his eyes into myself against  
the cardboard head-rest and your hand holding my thigh. I fell  
through the backseat onto the dirt many times, I was left  
on those roads we tore past the same as if I'd opened the rear door  
and firmly stepped out onto the flying earth. You'd have heard the broken stones  
grab my ankle, twisted your face to the back window, watched me shrink  
and the sky grow at a fantastic pace, all the while oblivious  
to the clouds reflected in the glass, those blue shadows  
ripping over your amazed face like so many bruises.

Though I believe there is nothing now and only nothing  
after this, believe me when I say I left myself sprawling  
in the dirt at every corner with the birds wheeling and the sun  
sliding away. I'm still waiting there,  
my shoes scraped from my feet, my punctured lung  
a deep lake in my chest, one hand in the dirt  
and the other extended to you.

- Nicole Broadhurst

**Blue Iris Restaurant**

Someone told me once  
The grass is always greener  
on the other side.  
And then I saw a movie  
where the loon's cry came through,  
And Crazy As A  
Built its own fence  
over what I knew.

Empty beer cans  
line the alley that leads to  
the neon sign that flashes  
Blue Iris.  
The fire escape  
that hasn't been used  
since November still works,  
I suppose.  
Two blocks over from Main Street  
the trash takes on  
its own shade of green,  
And I wonder if I can hide in a cliché  
That will lose its effect over time.

Who decides when the grass turns brown.  
Roll that off your tongue,  
and I guarantee  
you'll catch raised eyebrows.  
And not one will admit to hearing  
the loon's cry,  
Even when the lawns needs watering  
at midnight.

- Linda Florence

**The Art of Amateur Photography  
for my father**

On Sunday morning  
a five-year-old boy stands  
in a white suit in an ugly yard. You say, *smile*.  
Click. And all week  
I lie in the box, in the black film, waiting  
for you to descend the dark  
steps to the basement, to the room  
where the red light hangs like gauze.  
There you prepare my bath, my changes,  
pour the chemical into the cylinder and lift me out  
of darkness, out of the negative, my body  
inverted into a white drop floating in hazy sleep.  
And you cannot help but like the search, dragging  
for me in a series of pools, hunting me  
with the cold teeth of a metal clip.  
But pressed to paper I'm still too vague –  
thinking, but gathering light.  
Only when lifted back into the sink  
do my arms twitch, my legs churn –  
your hand mixing the right amount of water  
and chemical, the red light  
calling me up from the deep frame.  
First the eyes, brows, **cheekbones**, your  
cheekbones, and the **shoulders** straight across like yours.  
As you study the curve  
of a smile, my body **flails**  
against the pose. You **pull** me out. Save me from myself.

- Brent Hendricks

**In His Sleep, My Father Inspects the Work  
of the Army Corps of Engineers**

*As part of the Arkansas Project,  
Allowee, Oklahoma, was flooded in 1947*

With his arms held wide  
he dives into the black water,  
swims away from the light on the dock,  
down to the lake bottom where he was born.  
Past the gas station, the general store,  
and out the one long dirt road toward home.  
But first he must pass his best friend's white house,  
then a scarred elm which carries his name, then a tin  
mailbox with the route number worn clean,  
where bloated cows hover in his father's fields.  
So he begins wading toward the house, churning  
his arms, tries to call out for someone home  
but the thick water chokes him back.  
And when he reaches  
the gate, climbs onto the front porch,  
he has the vague feeling he's been expected,  
that his parents are only lingering in the deep fields.  
He opens the door, walks into the silent rooms,  
sits down to wait in the sunken light.

- Brent Hendricks

### Galveston Before and After Hurricanes

I.

Fourteen years ago, when I was too young to look like my mother,  
we drove four hundred flat miles across Texas,  
to spend an hour in Galveston  
before they nailed it down,  
boarding up windows with plywood saved  
for this:  
the hurricane coming.  
The month when my grandmother finally would die.

After the ferry, thirty miles out, Padre Island,  
and my grandfather crouched,  
catching pewter fish in the cups of his hands.  
Dying, he held them more carefully than he had ever held my mother.

II.

My grandparents ran to El Paso when they were seventeen, having  
met at an East Texas dance forbidden by the preacher.  
Cars parked in a circle in a cowfield,  
a Victor victrola,  
furtive and bitter bootleg gin.  
Outside the rim of light,  
my grandmother's bare feet and a dress raised.

III.

Hereditary as the cancer that killed him, the liquor that should have,  
and I remember this story of how my grandparents met  
from the Cocktail Hour that lasted for five  
on the veranda.  
I was seven and looked at New Yorker cartoons  
while my father drank  
from five to nine-thirty.

By eight I was hungry.  
My mother arranged trays.  
Vienna sausages, crackers,  
and she let me drink her wine.  
She wore a hairpiece then. It was 1970.  
And while she snuck swigs of bourbon in the pantry  
I looked at the bottles lined up in the window,  
tequila  
my grandmother's friend bootlegged from  
Mexico  
in a coffin.  
My mother spread crackers on the lacquered tray  
into a fan.

IV.

My mother took me back to Galveston last May  
telling me my grandfather had been a great musician, a famous man,  
But I could not remember the blown old man in a red windbreaker,  
just stories  
of how he told her to have another baby quick,  
before he died,  
because I was like her and would never be able to carry a tune.

- Katherine Hester



### Liquor That Will Not Fill An Empty Bottle

Before moving here,  
I stood in crowded package stores and imagined a process  
to get those pears inside the bottles of brandy,  
something like the science experiment  
in which a match, burning the oxygen inside a flask,  
creates a vacuum and sucks a hard-boiled egg  
into the narrow neck.

I never thought of this:  
tying bottles over blooms.  
Odd as it seems, pears do grow in them.  
The brittle clinking of the orchard  
keeps me awake in this bed.

Last night, the air around this house  
filled with thunder and glass  
like buildings shattering after an earthquake.  
Only jagged sleeves hang on the limbs.  
In the fall the brandy will still be ready.

Before dawn,  
I felt the damage in the dark,  
in the smell of cut white fruit,  
and ran to spread my blanket at the edge  
of the trees. When the sun came up, I could see  
yellow jackets crawling over ripe fruit.

- Leigh Kirkland

### The Need for Maps

*How I would like to believe in tenderness –  
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,  
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.*  
Sylvia Plath

I have heard stories about people who can find their way anywhere  
by looking at the stars. I have night blindness, no sense of direction.  
I also have a string of traffic violations, dented cars.  
I used to ride in taxis, wear strapless dresses, drink mimosas.  
Now I ride the MARTA train in and out of tunnels,  
listening to music through tiny headphones. I would rather be driving  
out beyond my house, past the lighted mother and child,  
the Last Day Church of God Incorporated, the neon sign  
for Spirit Candles and Soul Readings.

I know a woman who throws ashes into a fireplace and chants.  
She reads tarot cards, tells me about the lovers, the high priestess, the moon.  
Another friend of mine stood for hours in Piedmont Park,  
holding strangers' hands and waiting, with this pockets full of crystals,  
for the planets to align. Last week the man I almost married called,  
told me he has recommitted his life to Christ.  
*Belief is a choice*, he said. And how I long for faith,

even the faith between two people.  
Still, I know that I will always be the little girl  
who lay on the linoleum floor watching Mr. Do-Bee on television  
while my mother talked about her desire to drive off an overpass,  
feel the car hit the ground and burst into flames.  
I cannot forget another time: I sat in a pilgrim costume,  
waiting to tell what I was thankful for while my father carved a turkey  
and my mother poured red wine, counted reasons to die.  
I spent my childhood drawing towns on thin white wrapping paper.  
I named each street, drew houses for parents who would love each other  
like the families on t.v. Through each town a main street ran.  
One direction was the Greyhound bus ride to my grandparents' farm.  
The other way led to the death my mother longed for,  
death like an enchanted place with singing frogs  
and princes waiting to be transformed.

My mother has told me to wear pearls. Instead I wear long black gloves to smoky bars, dance as if I have something to lose. I have stood at a window during a tornado warning, watching rain blow across the parking lot, listening to Elvis Presley on the radio and imagining my friends scattering across town, unafraid of storms. I have thought about *la petite morte*, the little death, imagined my mouth doing incredible things. I am always aware of my lips, my tongue, the long tunnel of my throat, the fingers that long to reach out, touch something warm and solid in the dark. I have lain beside a man that I have known for two months, felt myself open up, spread like a landscape beneath his hands, heard him say, *I barely know your body*. What he does not know is that I have walked through melting ice to the pond beside my house, felt the wet grass soak my brown socks, combed leaves from my hair as I stood watching the half-frozen water, thinking about the distances between two people.

- Trish Rucker

## Potatoes

My older brother Keith and I joined the army together when I got out of high school. There wasn't anything else for us to do. Neither of us could find a job because of the economy and all.

Keith did real well in the army, went to O.C.S. and got commissioned. It didn't work out like that for me. I don't know why. I was the one everybody thought would do best in the army because I'd always done what I was told. But as soon as I got into basic, I couldn't do it anymore. It was like I forgot how to obey orders.

The last straw came at Fort Gordon when they put me on K.P. for two weeks and gave me a hundred pounds of potatoes to peel. When I went downstairs to the potato peeling machine, it was like something inside of me just snapped.

The potato peeling machine is sort of like a big rock tumbler that rasps all the peels off the potatoes. You don't have to do anything but dump the potatoes in, take them out of the chrome tub when they're peeled, and cut the eyes out with a paring knife. But like I said, something just snapped, and I sat there for a long time, listening to the spuds clobber the sides of the drum, and when I went back upstairs, I had what was left of a hundred pounds of potatoes in one bowl. A big bowl. But one bowl. I handed them to the mess sergeant and told him I quit. I did, too. Nothing they could do to me for quitting could be any worse than doing what they wanted me to do.

I didn't do anything else. The army shrink they sent me to ran every test he had, and finally he told them they'd be better off mustering me out, because they weren't going to be able to change a thing about me.

My brother was furious. After I quit, the army came around to him and ran the same tests and did interviews, to find out if he was going to be the same problem as his brother, me. I could have told them Keith wouldn't be, just like he told them, and just like the tests told them, but they wouldn't have believed me. Even though they should have seen that I had no reason to lie to them. He wanted to stay in, so he had a reason to lie. He didn't, but he had a reason to. He wrote me one letter telling me what I could do for trying to ruin his military career and for blackening the Richards family name. I wrote him that I hadn't meant to hurt him, but I don't think he believed that. He never wrote back for a long time.

I hadn't thought about what I was going to do when I was sitting by the potato peeler. After I was released, I just started driving east out of Augusta, and rented a farm near Watkinsville. It's a town big enough that somebody like me wouldn't attract too much attention by moving in, but small enough that you can feel like it hasn't been taken over by giants. I got a job at a mechanic shop in town to pay the rent on the farm. I didn't have any big

reason for choosing Watkinsville. It was pretty, and I liked the name. It sounded like somewhere real people would live. There were old trees and the land sort of rolled. There weren't many houses near my farm, and there was a rocky creek running to one side of my house.

I worked and saved my money all winter, and in the spring I planted a garden. All that was in my mind was that I would plant as big a garden as I had money to seed, and see what happened. I wanted to work and watch plants grow and be left alone to try to figure things out. I knew there was fat chance of that. If you stop thinking about money and being like everybody else is, people get worried about you, like if money isn't all there is, their lives are worthless or something. They'll get you thinking all there is, is money, and things that can be sold for money, and that somehow it will make your heart stop aching at night. I didn't know this when I put the potatoes in the peeling machine, or even when I took those tests for the shrink. That's probably just as well. I just knew there was something I wasn't finding in the army.

But none of this matters to the story I'm trying to tell. Even though I wanted to be left alone, I had to make enough money to pay the rent on the farm, which wasn't much, and buy seeds and fertilizer and all that. I got along all right in the shop, and I had real good luck with my garden that first year. I canned and ate as much as I could myself, and then I set up a stand by the road, like everybody around here does. I just put mine up on the weekends, and kept on working my shift in the shop too.

My neighbors put up signs that said, "Tomatoes," and "Peaches," and "Fresh Produce." Mine said "Magic Vegetables." I put it up by the road, arranged my vegetables on an old picnic table I found, and set my lawn chair by the stand. As far as I could tell it was magic. Especially when I started making enough money on the weekends to quit working in town. It didn't take much for me, and that was magic too. But mostly I thought my sign was funny - "Magic Vegetables." That was all I meant by the sign.

But every customer I had wanted to know what was magic about my tomatoes and cucumbers, potatoes and squash. These were mostly people from Atlanta and Augusta coming over to see the old houses from Civil War times, and the horse stables that some rich person had restored as a hobby, and they didn't know how wonderful it was to see things grow out of the ground. So I made up stories about the vegetables for the people who bought them. I'd point out how they were shaped like states or countries or animals, and the people would laugh and ooh and aah. Sometimes it was kind of embarrassing to me, just how little these people seemed to notice about anything. Standing by the side of the road with heat rising off the asphalt, I could see wheels turn in their heads while I talked, see them making up things about me, how I'd probably learned storytelling at my grandfather's knee. The truth about me wouldn't have pleased them as much as what they made up, which is another thing I've noticed about people. They don't like real life enough to see how wonderful it is. They'd rather believe something stupid. I don't know what anybody can do to set that straight.

As the summer wore on, my stories got more and more involved just to keep me occupied. I decided something had to change, because I was falling back into the habit of giving people whatever they wanted of me, just to

sell these vegetables I'd grown. This meant I was in the same trap as I'd come here to escape.

I closed down the stand for a few days to think about what I could tell the people who bought my vegetables and not lie to them. I took my sign down and leaned it up against the porch. I knew if I didn't, people would pull up in their cars and sit there, honking their horns till I came out. Then they'd say, "We see you're not open, but we wanted to ask about your magic vegetables."

I didn't want to change my sign. I wasn't lying to people about the shapes in my vegetables, but that wasn't enough. That was like advertising or something. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't exactly true either. It was answering the wrong question, I guess. I sat on the back porch, smelling the mint that grows by the steps and watching the fox squirrels in the water oaks by the creek. It's a hard thing to live in the world and not be a part of it. My mind kept banging against the same questions over and over. I felt like if I didn't think of something to tell the people who came by the stand, that all the skin would be beaten off my brain. But I thought there must be some way not to be a part of the lying and buying that goes on.

After about a week, I hauled my sign back out and reopened the stand. The vegetables were piling up faster than I could do anything with them. I still wasn't sure what I was going to do when somebody actually stopped. I hoped something would come to me.

The first that stopped that morning was one of those little under-powered BMW's the color of a pencil lead. The girl that got out of the passenger side had frizzy black hair and a fancy Japanese camera, and she started taking pictures of me over the top of the car. That surprised me. I'm not all that quaint, I don't wear overalls, and I'm not very old. The man driving got out after he closed the electric sunroof and ran down the electric antenna. I knew whatever I told these people better be the truth of some kind, because they'd never heard it before.

They didn't say anything to me at first, just looked over the new potatoes with dirt still drying in the eyes where I'd wiped them off this morning after I grubbed them out of the ground. The man picked them up and smelled the dirt smell that hangs onto them. They picked up some of everything, tomatoes, okra, beans, cucumbers and yellow squash. The man rubbed the cucumbers and winked at the woman real nasty. I see that one a lot. She looked over at me and I just looked back at her. She grabbed the cucumber away from him and told him to look, these weren't coated with wax like the ones from the grocery store at some mall. She took pictures of the vegetables, and the stand, and especially the sign.

All the time they were looking and taking pictures and talking to each other, I was thinking what I was going to say because I knew they'd ask about the sign. What it meant. I still didn't know. When they finally finished, I took their vegetables out of the round baskets from the stand and put them in brown paper sacks. The man was paying for them out of his eelskin wallet when the girl got around to asking. I knew she'd be the one to ask.

"Why are these vegetables magic?" she said.

I still didn't know what to say. Then something broke in me again, like it had that day on K.P. I had the feeling this was it, like I had that day. So I said

to her, "I used to tell people how the vegetables were shaped like animals or countries. Some of them are, but that doesn't make them magic, does it?"

"Not hardly," the man said, rubbing his car keys on the leg of his jeans.

"I don't know," the girl said, "I bet most people haven't noticed that."

"No, but something isn't magic just because people don't notice it," I said. This girl probably still had her books of fairy tales from when she was a kid. But I'd bet she hadn't opened them since she was ten years old unless somebody was around to see it.

So I told them how I'd quit the army, and how the vegetables were my ticket to stay here while the world turned around. I told them I didn't want to live in a world of lies, and all I could do to change it was not live in it.

They both said, "Wow, that's really amazing," and the girl took some more pictures of me and some of her boyfriend standing beside me, and they got in the Beamer and drove away. They were talking and gesturing to each other as they headed off towards Atlanta. I got kind of worried, watching them, but I couldn't have told you why.

About three days later, which made it Wednesday, the girl showed up again. This time she brought a vanload of people from the TV station where she was some kind of news producer. She said she couldn't stop thinking about what I'd told her, and she thought other people should hear about it, and they'd brought out the sky-something truck so they could show it live on the six o'clock news. She said the station people went crazy over the idea, and she was just sure I'd want to share my story with everybody who watched their news, and she just knew it would change their lives the way it had changed hers.

"Oh," she said, "my name is Florrie." Like we had shared so much, she didn't need a last name.

She didn't know what she was talking about, any more than she knew what I'd been talking about. She'd never bring all these people here if she'd known. While I was standing there looking stupid, she motioned over this young blonde man, who she said was the on-camera announcer, Bill. Bill told me he really admired what I was doing out here. He tried to explain how good the exposure would be for my business, and how everybody would come from Atlanta to my stand after they saw me on TV. I told him I didn't care if they came or not, but I knew it was no use. All he understood was money, and I didn't have that language anymore.

I wish I knew why I let them show me on TV. I think it was Florrie talking about how many people would hear what I was trying to do with my life if I talked on TV. I should have known. You can't use tools meant for selling things to talk about something that is not available for sale. It did teach me that I don't know as much as I thought I knew, which is a humiliation and a failure of my own making.

Anyway, I agreed. The technicians set up their satellite dish, and made all the adjustments to transmit my story to everybody who watched the six o'clock news. People from the station kept slapping at the gnats and stirring up the dust. I signed a release, and Florrie and Bill explained what would happen. Finally they got the signal that it was time to go on, and Bill came over and stood in front of my sign, with gnats swirling around his head, and started talking about how this sign was different from all the other vegetable

signs around here, and how they had wondered what made my vegetables magic. Then Florrie gave the signal for me to walk over to Bill. I could see the bugs were driving him crazy, but he didn't flinch. He's a good announcer. He told my name, Clifford Richards, and asked me how my vegetables came to be magic. Then he pointed the microphone at me.

So I told them. I told everybody in Atlanta about quitting the army and how Keith had stayed in. How this was the only way I knew I could live outside all their lies, that the vegetables were my key to get outside of where they had to live and make money and buy things. How all I wanted was to be left alone to watch the seasons change and not have to lie anymore. I couldn't explain to Bill exactly what I meant by not lying anymore. That was bad. I know what TV does to you when you can't explain.

Then Bill asked my brother's name and where he was stationed. I said that the last letter I got from Keith came from Fort Benning, but I hadn't heard from him in a few months, and didn't expect to hear from him again any time soon.

I got this sick feeling in my stomach like the world was coming to an end. The station signaled the crew that time was up. Bill gave the address of my stand on the air. I sat in my lawn chair and held onto the arms. They packed up their equipment and left. I walked back up to my house and beat my head on the wall beside the front door.

Next morning I woke up feeling better than I had since the day I realized I could quit my job at the mechanic shop. I loaded the Magic Vegetables sign in the back of my truck and carried it over to my neighbor's vegetable stand early, before the sun got hot. Fred Wilson was pretty surprised when I gave it to him. He'd seen my story on the news the night before, and told me I was crazy to give up that sign right before July Fourth weekend, because everybody from Atlanta who'd seen or heard about that story was going to be making tracks for my produce, and I'd be a fool to give up all that business. I told Fred I knew that, but I didn't have enough crops to handle the demand, and I could see he did. I told him I'd give him everything I had in my garden if he'd just take this sign and sell that produce for me. So he did.

I went back to my place and took down the stand and moved the picnic table back behind the house. I parked my truck way down in back so nobody would know I was home. I spent the rest of the day and part of the next one floating on my back in the creek with the cold water bumping me against the rocks, and feeling like I'd barely escaped with my life. From the creek I could hear the traffic warming up for the holiday, the tires buzzing on the asphalt.

Friday afternoon, I picked all the vegetables out of my garden and hauled them over to the Wilsons' for them to sell as magic vegetables. When Fred saw how much there was, he knew I didn't take down the sign because I didn't have anything to sell. He didn't ask questions though, probably because he wanted that sign. I was glad for that. He said he'd be over on Tuesday with my money. I told him to keep half of it as a commission. I do have to pay rent, so I wasn't going to turn down some profit — since he offered. Then I went back to the creek and let it flow under me.

I got another letter from Keith right after that. He heard about the TV

story. He was pretty hot that I'd mentioned him by name, and tried to cause trouble for him again. I guess the army thought we'd tumbled around together long enough for him to end up as bad as me, or Keith thought that's what they'd think anyway. I wrote back and said that was not my intention, but I haven't heard from him again. His wife wrote back and said everything was all right, but Keith had been afraid he wouldn't get his promotion because the story reminded everybody about me. He got it anyway, she said, so no harm done. I didn't even know he'd gotten married. It wasn't to anybody I knew, of course. Keith never wrote since then. I understand that. The army probably checks his mail, and it would look bad if he kept in touch with a subversive like me, even if we are brothers.

Since that first year, I've put up signs every summer that say "Tomatoes" or "Produce." Fred Wilson still uses the "Magic Vegetables" sign I made. The paint is blistered now. Every time I pass it on the road, I'm glad he has it and not me. Fred's daughter sits out there all summer and explains how the potatoes are shaped like Illinois or something, and Fred told me she came up with some story to explain what she was doing there in case somebody comes by that still remembers that story on the news. She's a natural salesman, Fred says, and I guess that's true. The Wilsons are a big family, and they need and want the money they get from telling people stories about magic vegetables. I don't care. I'm still growing magic vegetables these days. I'm just not selling them. Like my potatoes, I'm mainly underground.

- Leigh Kirkland

## Beyond The Life Of The Town

The dwarf Russell Borders lived with his wife Willogene in a neat, white frame house on the west side of Clarion. Russell dug graves for a living. He feared and hated the job, and believed that one day, no matter how careful he was, a grave would collapse and bury him alive. But digging was all he knew, and in a town where the old and infirm outnumbered the young and nimble, accuracy and speed were prized, at least when it came to burying the dead. And no one dug a hole better or faster than Russell.

Besides, Willogene wouldn't let him quit. She didn't take to idleness, in man or beast. Willogene, the beekeeper. Zipped up and snapped shut into her coveralls, daily witness to the industry of bees. She inherited her occupation from her mother and went about her "life's work," as she referred to it, with the vengeance of one obliged to do her Christian duty. Gray and deliberate as a battleship, Willogene was not the kind to be steered off course. Russell had never seen her smile.

Somehow, Russell had it in his head that being as close to nature as Willogene was would soften her, make her peaceful. Now he doesn't know where he got such an idea. Shoot, he knew she had no use for him, but why she was sour on their place, he couldn't figure. Perched on the brow of a low rise, the house commanded from its front side a view of the valley town - a tangle of dusty streets and ancient maples, the Union Free school, the bank, Fred Peck's glove factory, Scurbia's grocery, the paper mill, flanked by two rows of mill houses that faced each other and mirrored their brutal, inescapable, gray sameness.

From the upstairs windows, Russell could see the Champlain Locks, and beyond them, the curl and stretch of the Hudson River. He could look straight into sunrise and see, far off, the Green Mountains of Vermont, though to him, no matter the season, they were always blue. The back of the house offered a view of the cemetery, a sloped green expanse ringed with gnarled apple trees through which Willogene's bees, giddy with pollen, dove and spun all summer. A small stream ran sweet and cold at the base of the rise, and close by, Russell's vegetable garden bloomed in neat, sensible rows.

He weeded and combed the land daily, and the garden rewarded him with sweet fingers of asparagus, Blue Lake snaps firm as a young girl, mouth-reddening tomatoes he'd pick and eat while standing in a row. He could eat the tomatoes until he broke out in hives, and would, too, if Willogene didn't stop him. She canned the overflow for the dark winter months, months which seemed longer in Clarion than anywhere else on earth. At the back of his garden the bees spilled their sweet gold into hives, and Willogene collected that, too. She sold most of what she extracted and spun down to locals and summer passers-through. The comb honey she kept for herself.

Russell and Willogene never had company up at the house, and they went to town only to food shop or to do their banking. Russell didn't mind. Around people, he felt every inch of his shortness. He knew that people went out of their way to avoid him, as if they believed that God had not only delivered him shrunken into the world, but had caused him to be wrong in the head as well. But Russell would have been only half right. People avoided Russell because they pitied him, but the real object of their avoidance was Willogene. Folks old enough to remember would say that Willogene was born mean, and that she'd only gotten worse with age. Who did she think she was, they'd say. Blaming everyone but herself for her troubles. As is she had no hand in her own misery. She dug her own grave, they'd laugh.

They'd speculate, too, on what kind of a marriage the couple had. When the men who idled away their mornings in the barber shop saw Willogene steaming down Broad Street with Russell in her wake, they'd all agree with Joe Greenwood, the barber. "Somebody has to put him up to it," he said.

Willogene would just as soon go to town by herself, she told Russell, and would, too, if it weren't for the fact that Russell had to sign the bank drafts. To her eternal mortification, she told him. They'd enter the bank building and Willogene would walk to the teller's window to withdraw her monthly sum, then she'd hand Russell the papers to sign. He'd sit on the floor and sign his name, looping his L's as if he were turning a jump rope, and all the time, Willogene would tap that foot of hers right next to his face.

For days after their trip to town, Willogene would fly at Russell like an angry wasp. She should never have agreed to the contract with Russell's father, she said. Giving up her youth for a midget! Thank God, her mother wasn't alive to witness this – married to a man, if you could call him that, who didn't come up to her knees. Russell stayed out of her way as best he could by working in his garden or by fleeing to the cemetery. He'd look out across the orderly arrangement of gravestones and the green earth and conclude that, despite what the cemetery held, it was the most beautiful place he knew.

They had a telephone, although neither of them called out on it. They kept it because it was necessary to Russell's job. Sometimes, when Russell was certain that Willogene was in the honey house, he would pick up the receiver and listen to the dial tone. He loved the cold heaviness of the receiver against his mouth, and rubbed his lip against the black, certain curve of it, loved the ring which ripped into the hallway like a tornado and sucked up all the stillness, then set it down again, forever rearranged. But the phone only rang when someone in Clarion passed on. Jack Still, the undertaker, would call up Russell and tell him to get the ground ready. Russell liked Jack and always tried to ask the question he knew would put a smile on the old man's face: "How's business, Jack?"

"Dying," Jack would answer, and Russell could almost see Jack's grin light up the phone lines.

"Then I'd better bury myself in my work," said Russell.

"You kill me, Russell," said Jack.

If Willogene were around when Jack called, she paced up and down the hallway, her black, lace-up shoes punctuating the air with their sharp, disapproving steps. Russell grew serious as a preacher. Jack seemed to wait for

Russell's question, and when it did not come, Russell could hear the air go out of him and then Jack would say, "Get to it, now. I haven't got all year to wait."

Shoot, he wasn't showing disrespect for the dead, Russell argued when Willogene got on him about it. Shoot. But he wiped the smile off this face with the back of his hand, as he'd done when he was a kid and his mother told him to.

At the first signs of spring, when rain washed away the last of the snow and he felt the earth yield slightly to his weight, Russell began to worry about the graves. All of the dead stored for the winter in the vault near the cemetery's entrance had to be buried. He had to honeycomb the land with graves, and he prayed that he wouldn't end up in one before his time. Once he tried to tell the Old Queen, as he secretly named Willogene, of his fear of a cave-in. Couldn't happen soon enough, she'd said.

It seems strange to him now that he hadn't stood up to his pa when he arranged for Russell's marriage to Willogene, but not until Russell realized that his father fit into the same size hole as does everyone who departs this world, did he begin to understand how foolish he'd been. On their wedding night when Willogene lay stiff and unmoving in the bed, her nightgown laced up to her neck, Russell hooked his foot around a chairleg and hoisted himself up beside her. He wanted to say, "It's better to have loved a short man than never to have loved a tall," but he knew she wouldn't get it. Willogene called him a fool and told him to get out of the bed before she killed him. She would have, too.

His sister Egypt had more sense. When her father tried to marry her off to Leighton Phillips, she took a bus to Albany, and from there, though Russell didn't know how, she made her way to Brazil. Russell only heard from her once:

Dear Russ –

Well I finally got out of Albany and am here in Brazil and have found myself the perfect man he sells coco nuts but oh Russ you would love him as he has a monkey like the one we saw in the circus that time and Bernie sends the monkey up into the palms and it throws down coco nuts to him and then Bernie gives it a cigarette you would love it here but I suppose your content in your life and I'm sorry I left you in the lurch but I couldn't marry that old fool and I know you understand –

XXXOOO  
Egypt

P.S. His real name is Bernardo

He kept the letter in his bedroom tucked under his mattress. The ink was worn and faded in the creases, but he knew Egypt's breathless words by heart. He supposed she was long dead now. He hadn't forgotten what she looked like, but he kept the letter to remind himself that he wasn't dreaming



Egypt. And he sure would have loved to see that monkey.

He never told Willogene about the letter. She'd only have said that his whole family was infested with idiots and gone back to reading her beekeeping manuals. Shoot, she wasn't any bargain, either. He'd heard the talk. People didn't realize what all he heard.

"So I'm short, so what?" he shouted to the sky as he lifted a shovelful of dirt from yet another grave.

He'd dug down about three feet when he heard the violin. At first he thought its music was the wind, but he heard it again, then once more. He peeked over the edge of the grave and scanned the rows of headstones until he saw the woman. She sat with her back to him at the side of a small, flat marker. An enormous woman with flesh that trembled as she ran the bow across a violin that seemed to disappear into the pockets of flesh at her neck. He didn't recognize the tune. She stopped playing and stood atop the gravestone.

"I'm keeping my promise. Darlin', you wanted me to dance on your grave, and I'm doing it. There ain't a truer girl in this world, Danny," she laughed.

Her laughter moved through her like a giant wave, and Russell, neck-deep in the earth, envied her. He turned away, charged with the beauty of it. He could feel the red rising to his face. Whatever she was doing, it was none of his business.

"And just what are you up to?" he heard her ask. "You, with the shovel." Russell turned slowly to look up at her. "Nothing."

"That what you do all day, nothing?"

"Burying the winter dead." Russell climbed up the ladder, out of the grave.

"By yourself? Tough job."

"It's not so bad. Folks don't complain. They're dying to get in here." She had the biggest mouth Russell had ever seen. Dark and warm as a cave.

She bent toward him and held out her hand. "Name's Martha Louise Hicks, but I go by Paris."

"Russell Borders," he said, and when he saw she was waiting for more, "Just plain Russell."

"I'm glad to meet you, Just Plain Russell."

"Same here." And the truth was, thought Russell, he was glad.

"I've been trying to find my friend's grave for some time. Been to Hell and back, but at last I found him."

"Good. I mean - well, good."

"Yes. A girl needs to keep her promises. But you go on, now. I don't mean to keep you from your work."

"That's all right. I was about to go home for lunch. I live over there." He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Alone?"

"Yes. I mean, no. There's a wife. She keeps bees."

"Sounds sweet to me," she said. "Well, Russell, see you again, will I?"

"Sure. I'm here all the time. I keep the place up." His face itched and he thought his throat was going to close like it did that first time he'd been stung by one of Willogene's bees, when the world had grown fuzzy and he'd believed he would pop like a balloon.

"I figured that," said Paris. "See you around. See you."

When he came into the kitchen, Willogene was at the sink washing lettuce. She didn't turn around, but lifted her shoulders, and Russell knew she was about to light into him. She said he could have laid to rest half the people in the county, as long as he'd been gone, and that he was nothing but a fool, understand? A fool burying other fools. Her shiny, hairless arms, big as fresh hams, swung through the air. She looked to Russell like Bill Spivey, the preacher who worked himself into a heart attack and pitched over in his pulpit one Sunday. He'd buried him, too.

"How is it," said Russell, "how is it that everyone is a fool except you? How?" And he turned and walked out the door.

He stumbled his way back to the cemetery. What possessed him to talk to her like that he'd never know. There'd be hell to pay. Shoot, he couldn't imagine what she'd do to him. Something big, he could count on that.

"I really am an old fool," he thought, digging Stewart Potter's grave. Stewart had been the principal of Union Free for some thirty years, and Russell had never known him to have a decent word for anybody. He took some satisfaction in making Stewart's grave slightly narrower than the others. He could see Bill and Tom, Stewart's sons, trying to lower their old man into this slit of earth. The coffin wouldn't be able to lie flat. Served Stewart right. He'd lie tipped up forever, his dead weight pushing him into the coffin's hard edge.

"Do you always mumble to yourself when you work?" Paris stood above Russell. Clumps of soft dirt spilled into the grave, and for a moment Russell thought that Paris' weight would send the earth crashing down on him.

He scrambled up his rickety old ladder. "I guess I do. Yes. Hello again." It seemed to Russell as if he hadn't seen her in years.

"Hello, Russ. At least you get good answers that way." Her voice was husky and soft, and Russell wished he could pick it up, hold it close to his ear.

"I do it all the time," she said. "You should hear the arguments I have with myself."

Russell shoved his hands into the pockets of his overalls. "Me, too."

"Tell me, do you have problems because of your size?"

"The ladder helps," he said.

"No, I mean generally. Because you're a dwarf. You know, people say all kinds of things in front of me that they'd never say in front of anyone else. Because I'm fat, they think I'm deaf, or stupid. So I hear a lot. Well, do you?"

He moved away from the grave's edge. No one except Willogene had ever called him a dwarf to his face before. "I never thought about it," he said.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just figured you might know what I was talking about. But then, a sweet man like you probably has lots of friends, and a sweet wife, too. That makes up for things."

"Well—"

"She probably spoons that honey of hers right into your mouth. I know I would."

Russell worked some dirt off the shovel's handle with his thumb. "Where are you from?" he asked, looking across to the apple trees.

"From all over. I came to pay my respects to Danny. We were in business

together a long time ago. Had a little traveling show. He sang and I danced and played a little violin. We were quite a team, Macmillan and Paris. Hit every one-horse town between here and Lake Placid. Not a bad life, either. I told fortunes, too. Mostly palms. You can tell a lot about a person from his hands. Danny had wonderful hands, but his life line was too short. I never could bring myself to tell him, but I think he knew."

Russell stared at Paris across the open mouth of the earth. "Ever been to Brazil?"

"Can't say as I have. Why?"

"I just wondered." He fought off the urge to fly across the grave and kiss Paris on the mouth. He remembered the time, mistaking the patterns of his days with Willogene for her acceptance of him, that he reached out to touch her face. Willogene's fist caught him across the bridge of his nose, breaking it and his glasses. She would have continued to beat him except that a tourist in search of Willogene's honey rang the doorbell.

"I've got to be going," he said. "There's work to do at the house." He looked at his feet, as if by looking at them hard enough he could make himself invisible.

"Sure. Don't mind me. I get carried away. But if you get the urge to talk, I'll be here."

"Fool!" Russell thought. Bad enough that one woman wanted to kill him. What did he need more trouble for? Willogene was right, and Stewart Potter had been right, too. Russell would never learn. As he walked toward the house, he could see Willogene lifting her trays out of one of the hives. He'd never tasted any of her honey. Sweet wife, shoot.

He pulled off his work boots at the back door, then turned to watch Willogene, her face covered in net, her body snapped into white coveralls, her hands packed into the thick gloves. She hadn't noticed his return. He opened the screen door and slipped inside. He nudged his footstool to the sink and poured himself a glass of water. Above him and to his right was a shelf that held a small blue box, and in it was the key to the honey house. Russell grabbed hold of the faucet and pulled himself up into the sink. He stretched his full height toward the shelf. He extended his right hand toward the box, located the key, and squirreled it into his palm. He managed to lower himself back onto the footstool and to slip the key into his pocket just seconds before Willogene entered the kitchen. "She's going to nail me," he thought. He turned on the water and stuck his head under its ice cold jet. The water squirted off his scalp, over the counter, and onto the floor. Russell stood there, head down, waiting to be executed, but Willogene steamed past him, saying she trusted that his disposition had improved. She had a splitting headache, she said, and was going upstairs to lie down. She'd kill him if he disturbed her.

He waited until he heard her heavy footsteps on the stairs before he turned off the water. Then he sat in the bright, empty air of the kitchen until he could breathe, until he was sure.

He'd walk toward the garden. Yes. If she saw him, he could always say he had weeding to do, and that would be the end of it. But he reached the garden and then the honey house, and when he looked around to see if she'd caught onto him yet, Willogene was nowhere in sight. He stood on top of

two cinder blocks and turned the key in the lock. He hadn't really expected the door to open, and he hadn't imagined there would be so many honey jars. Stacked floor to ceiling, they dazzled his eyes, but he took only one, the one with the biggest comb.

He chose the grave farthest from the house. Giddy, out of breath, he half-fell, half-slid into the hole. The grave held. He cradled the honey jar to his chest. Its lip was cold and smooth against his mouth. He tipped the glass up to the sky and let the honey, which tasted slightly of apples, fall slowly into his mouth. The overflow trickled down his chin and neck and slid under his blue shirt.

"Is this a private party or can anyone join in?" Paris looked down at him from the edge of the grave.

Russell stared at her, but didn't speak.

"Look, I understand, I didn't mean to bother you."

"No," Russell managed. "It's all right. Come on."

"Are you sure? God, Russell, I don't know. You'll have to help me down."

"You'll have to slide. I don't know where my ladder went to."

"Okay. Here goes. I thought I'd done about everything in my life, but this is a new one. Grab onto me when I get close."

Russell closed his eyes. He could hear chunks of earth falling into the grave. His eyes snapped open. He grabbed at Paris' legs with both hands and pushed all of his weight against her to slow her down. She brought some of the earth with her, but not all of it, and Russell realized there were worse things that could happen than being buried alive with Paris. "You made it," he said.

"This is something," she laughed. "I never thought I'd live to see the day." She cocked her head and showed all her teeth and poked Russell's stomach. "What are you drinking?"

Russell held out the half-empty honey jar.

"I'll be damned!"

"I stole it. Took it right from under the Old Queen's nose." He strutted the length of the pit, then sank into its corner. "She's going to kill me when she finds out. I mean it, She'll flat out kill me. I never had it before."

"Oh, Russell."

"Never wanted it. Never was even tempted."

"You know what they say. There's a first time for everything."

"I never took anything that didn't belong to me."

"You had the right." She sat down beside him. "Can I taste?"

Russell's hand shook as he handed her the jar. "I am a fool," he thought. "A silly, honey-eating fool."

"It's awfully thick. How did --"

"Tilt your head back." He cradled her head in the crook of his arm, then put his hand over hers and guided the jar to her mouth. "Now, drink."

"Oh, my." She licked the lip of the jar with her tongue.

Russell took the jar from Paris. He wanted to kiss her. "Paris, I want to -- I don't know how. I don't know."

"But you do know, Russell. I promise you, you do know."

She leaned toward him and he kissed her. She parted his lips with her tongue, and he tasted its sweetness, her sweetness. She showed him how to



undress her, how to touch her, how, she said, to make her sing. And finally, she helped him to move on top of her, then into her, and almost out, again and again, until he was lost in her, the shape of her being the shape of his need, the enormity of it, and he thought he might die, and then he didn't care if he did, as long as he could die inside her, letting go of everything as he was letting go, letting go, now.

And then he spent all his words as well. It seemed to him that in his entire life he hadn't spoken so many. If he added up every conversation he'd ever had, their words still wouldn't equal all he'd used with Paris. He couldn't understand why she was so patient with him, because she already seemed to know everything he was going to say, but he was thankful that she listened.

"This dirt is stuck to me," she said finally. "I must look a sight."

"You look beautiful to me," Russell said.

"Thank you, Russell. That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me."

"And I'll never forget your smile," he said, his voice thick, and suddenly, solemn. "I'll carry it to my grave."

"Oh, Russell." She shook her head slowly, as if in the swing and sweep of her hair she were gathering in, collecting, the light that was left to them.

She held out her hand and he took it, and they lay there and closed their eyes, and listened to the easy in and out of each other's breathing, and it might have been the wind, or the sweet pull of music across a violin.

She helped him out of the grave. She crouched down and he mounted her shoulders. She stood up then, and he pulled himself up over the grave's edge, onto solid ground.

"Wait," he said. "I'm going to find a ladder." He took off across the darkening green, running as fast as his heart and his bowlegs would allow.

"You have a very long life line, Just Plain Russell," she shouted from the bottom of the earth.

The grave was empty when he returned. Russell sat looking into the dark hole. Some part of him knew she'd be gone, and although he searched the entire cemetery, and called out to her, she did not appear. He placed the ladder in the grave and climbed down. He walked the perimeter to the rectangle. Had he dreamed Paris? Then he noticed the honey jar, empty except for the comb. He removed the honeycomb and wrapped it in his hankerchief.

"I won't need much else," he said to a heaven now thick with stars. "I can always get a job. Anywhere. There's a grave need for people like me."

Russell walked toward the cemetery gates. He started to whistle. He saw the world begin to open to him like a flower, sweet and full of mystery. He liked that. Shoot, he did. Maybe he'd find her again, maybe not. Maybe he'd board a ship and sail around the world. Shoot, why not? Maybe he'd even stop over in Brazil.

- Dorothy Sussman

## PARTICIPANTS

Michael S. Harper, poet, teacher, editor. His volumes of poetry are *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970), *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* (1971), *History as an Apple Tree* (1972), *Song: I Want a Witness* (1972), *Debridement* (1973), *Nightmare Begins Responsibility* (1975), *Images of Kin* (1977), and *Healing Song for the Inner Ear* (1985). He co-edited the anthology *Chant of Saints* (1979) and an issue of *Carleton Miscellany* devoted to Ralph Ellison (1980), and he has written a critical study of Robert Hayden. In 1977 he lived and traveled in Africa under the auspices of the American Specialist Program. He has received numerous other honors, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Melville-Cane Award. He has taught at Lewis and Clark, Reed, Harvard, Yale, Carleton, Cincinnati, and Colgate, and, since 1970, at Brown, where he is I.J. Kapstein Professor of English.

Anne Rivers Siddons, novelist and essayist. Her first book, *John Chancellor Makes Me Cry* (1975), is a collection of essays. Her novels include *Heartbreak Hotel* (1976), *The House Next Door* (1978), *Fox's Earth* (1980), and the much-acclaimed *Homeplace* (1987). Her next novel - *Peachtree Road* - is slated for publication in October, 1988. *Heartbreak Hotel* is currently being filmed by Orion Studios for probable December release. She has made numerous contributions to various magazines, and she's served on writers' panels-festivals around the country.

Memye Curtis Tucker, poet and teacher. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Southern Poetry Review*, *Negative Capability*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Poem*, *Concerning Poetry*, and *Confrontation*. She has taught at Adelphi University, Emory University, and Agnes Scott College. She is the recipient of *The Chattahoochee Review's* Prize for Poetry and a 1988 Artist-Initiated Grant from the Georgia Council for the Arts. This spring, a chapbook of her poems will be published by the Poetry Atlanta Press.