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Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies

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Courtesy of C. Andrew Buchner.

Editor's note: In the image to the left, modern day construction workers uncover intact rails on East 3rd Street, Little Rock, remnants of the city's streetcar railway system, permanently shuttered about seventy-five years ago in 1948. See the fascinating article in this issue, pages 44-58, on this unique part of the city's heritage.

Contributors

John Wall Barger's poems and critical writing have appeared in American Poetry Review, Kenyon Review Online, Missouri Review, Poetry Ireland Review, and Best of the Best Canadian Poetry. His sixth book, *Smog Mother* (Palimpsest Press), came out in fall 2022. He's a contract editor for Frontenac House, and teaches Creative Writing at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

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Damon Guinn is a writer and nonprofit professional who grew up in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He spent years writing for a humanitarian organization, traveling to remote communities around the world to gather and share stories about families battling extreme poverty. He now resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota, within eyeshot of George Floyd Square, where he works with Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity to advance racial equity in housing. Samples of his work are available at damonguinn.com.

Kenneth Gulotta writes fiction and poetry. He has an MA in creative writing from the University of Texas at Austin and a PhD in English from Tulane University. A technical writer by trade, he spends his days solving puzzles that involve communication, design, and coding. Kenneth was born and raised in south Louisiana, but he has also lived in Austin, TX, Washington, DC, and Baltimore, MD. He now lives in New Orleans with his wife and stepson.

Leslie Hodge has poems published or forthcoming in journals including Pigeon Pages, South Florida Poetry Journal, Spank the Carp (where she was featured in The Mind of the Poet), and The Main Street Rag. Leslie lives in San Diego and has deep family roots in central Missouri.

Robin Kozak's writing has appeared most recently in Arkansas Review, Drunk Monkeys, Pleiades, The Rappa-hannock Review, and Sequestrum. An authority on antique and estate jewelry, she currently is at work on her second novel.

Guy Lancaster serves as the editor of the online Encyclopedia of Arkansas, a project of the Central Arkansas Library System, and is the author, co-author, or editor of several books on race and violence, including American Atrocity: The Types of Violence in Lynching (U of Arkansas P, 2021) and The Murder of Oscar Chitwood in Hot Springs, Arkansas (co-authored with Christopher Thrasher and forthcoming from The History Press).

Mary Ann Larkin is the author of That Deep and Steady

Hum and six chapbooks of poetry. Her work has appeared in many journals and in more than twenty anthologies. She was a co-founder of The Big Mama Poetry Troupe, a group of five feminist poets based in Cleveland. Larkin has taught writing at a number of colleges, most recently at Howard University, and written for NPR, NIH, Foundation News and others. She has enjoyed residencies at both Yaddo and the Jentel Foundation in Wyoming. With Patric Pepper she co-founded Pond Road Press, which published *Tough Heaven: Poems of Pittsburgh* by Jack Gilbert. Born in Pittsburgh, PA, she lives in North Truro, MA.

M J Melneck earned the MFA degree from the University of Arkansas in May 1980. His catalog includes the novel *Old Music* and many features, reviews, film scripts and short stories. He and his wife Pat and their spoiled rotten dog Max live in western Colorado where he writes about and photographs the nearby desert and mountains.

Andrew Alexander Mobbs (he/him/his), a native Arkansan, is the author of the chapbook, *Strangers and Pilgrims* (Six Gallery Press, 2013). A Pushcart Prize nominee, his poems have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*, *Frontier Poetry*, *New Delta Review*, *Ghost Ocean Magazine*, and elsewhere. He co-founded the online lit mag *Nude Bruce Review* and will soon earn his MFA at Oregon State University.

Travis C. Perusich: Travis is a PhD candidate at the University of Arkansas, studying African American soldiers in the American Revolution. He earned his Bachelor's degree at the University of the Ozarks and his Master's degree at the University of Central Arkansas. He is a former member of the United States Air Force and a former public school teacher.

Michael K. Rosenow is Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Arkansas and is the author of *Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865-1920* and articles about labor and working-class history.

Marcus Charles Tribbett is General Editor of *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies* and Associate Professor of English at Arkansas State University, where he also teaches for the interdisciplinary Heritage Studies doctoral program. He has published scholarly work on blues performers, on a nineteenth-century slave narrative, and most recently on contemporary novels by Jessmyn Ward and Tupelo Hassman.

Stan Weeber is Professor of Sociology at McNeese State University. He has written several papers about natural disasters, and wrote *Post-Rita Reflections* (2009), a professorial memoir of the Katrina-Rita era.

Melanie K. Welch was born in Little Rock in 1976 and graduated from the University of Central Arkansas in 1999, receiving a baccalaureate degree in history. In 1999, she received the Lucille Westbrook Local History Award from the Arkansas Historical Association. In 2009, she earned a PhD in modern American history from Auburn University. An independent historian, her work has appeared in *Arkansas Review*, the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, and the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*.

Ali Welky is Associate Editor of the online Encyclopedia of Arkansas, a project of the Central Arkansas Library System, as well as a freelance editor for books and magazines, including the Oxford American. She holds a BA in English from Truman State University in Kirksville, MO, and an MA in English from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway. She co-edited the Encyclopedia of Arkansas Music (Butler Center Books, 2013) and edited *A Captive Audience: Voices of Japanese American Youth in World War II Arkansas* (Butler Center Books, 2015). She lives in Conway with her husband and two children.

Laura Vogt studied literature and history in undergrad and grad school, focusing on Shakespeare, folk tales, and the History of Mentalities. She also attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop writing program in Dublin, Ireland. Her poetry is published in several journals, her prose has placed in a few contests, and her novelette *Blue Beyond the Sea* is available as a chapbook with Bottlecap Press. Her forthcoming debut novel *In the Great Quiet* is a historical fiction and fabulism blend based on her ancestor.

Reviews

Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta: Essays to Mark the Centennial of the Elaine Massacre. Edited by Michael Pierce and Calvin White Jr. (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2022. Pp. ix + 248, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, contributors, index. \$29.95, paperback)

In *Black Reconstruction*, scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois argued that emancipation produced a dramatic reversal of fortunes for African Americans: “The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again toward slavery” (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935, p. 30). Du Bois’s idea of freedpeople being pulled “back toward slavery”—the title of the penultimate chapter of his book—is more than a haunting diagnosis of the failed possibility of Reconstruction. Rather, it provides a way to understand much of Black history for the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Every time Black Americans organized, countervailing forces attempted to thwart their efforts at improvement. Such was the case in Elaine, Arkansas, when in 1919 whites murdered hundreds of Black sharecroppers who had begun to unionize, thereby temporarily crushing hope for Black freedom in the Delta. In 2019, scholars and community members commemorated the centennial of the Elaine Massacre, which resulted in *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta*. Nine essays make a convincing case that labor relations, techniques of oppression, and the incessant striving for better lives fundamentally shaped the Delta’s history. The first three essays examine aspects of labor and race relations from the 1870s to World War I, while the next three probe the interwar period with an emphasis on the 1920s. The final three essays address discrete topics that span the second half of the twentieth century. Some of the historians draw on previously published research to produce new insights related to the Elaine Massacre. From his prior examinations of nineteenth-century labor organizations in Arkansas, such as the Agricultural Wheel and the Knights of Labor, Matthew Hild finds patterns of interracial organizing and violent white backlash demonstrated in both the Cotton Pickers’ Strike of 1891 and the Elaine Massacre. Jeannie Whayne taps her extensive body of scholarship to situate the 1921 lynching of Henry Lowery within the community networks of power rooted in the plantation economy of Mississippi County. Whayne interprets Lowery’s murder as proof that whites had no tolerance for collective or individual acts that questioned their authority—whether that was organizing a union in Elaine or requesting a written statement of accounts from a planter as Lowery did. Greta de Jong offers wisdom collected from aspects of her three previous books on struggles for social justice in the South, par-

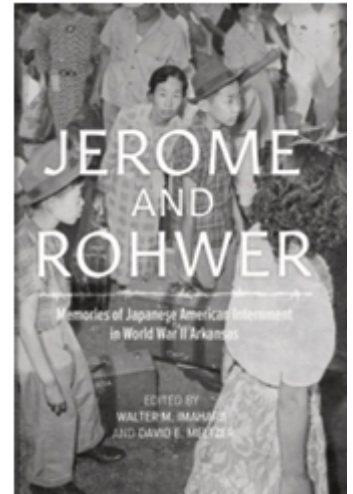


ticularly after 1965. She shows that old and new forms of violence continued to impact Black lives during the late twentieth century. Other contributors offer new insights and point toward future areas of research. Cherisse Jones-Branch challenges readers to rethink white-produced narratives of Black women's criminality after World War I and instead interpret their actions as reflecting desire for opportunity. Michael Pierce disputes the claim made by some scholars that white landowners sought Mexican braceros after World War II due to a labor shortage. By studying the activism of Ethel Dawson, Pierce contends that Lincoln County planters hired seasonal workers to drive down wages and incentivize Blacks to leave the county to preserve white political power. John A. Kirk explores the continuities of Black activism and the discontinuities of white responses during the twentieth century. He suggests that the authority for policing the color line moved away from mob violence and toward state and local law enforcement as demonstrated by Governor Winthrop Rockefeller's mobilization of the National Guard to prevent whites from attacking Lance Watson and his fellow marchers in their 1969 walk against fear. A final group of authors consider nightriding and forced labor as unique forms of coercion. Through careful research in Arkansas newspapers, Guy Lancaster documents the pervasiveness of nightriding before and after the passage of Act 112 (a 1909 law intended to outlaw the practice). William Pruden III examines federal prosecutors' attempts to punish night riders, concluding that the Supreme Court's ruling in the 1906 Hodges case must be understood within the broader historical retreat from using Reconstruction-era measures to protect Black rights. Michael Vinson Williams investigates the forced labor camps of levee workers after the 1927 flood and how the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Federation of Labor attempted to improve labor conditions. Considered as a whole, these essays remind readers not only of the Elaine Massacre—one of the most horrific acts of racial violence in United States history—but also, crucially, of the intersections of race, labor, and violence in the Delta in the decades before and after this devastating episode. The book serves as a helpful introduction to the region's rich labor history. It is also an inspiration for others to continue investigating the events, organizations, and trends that either receive glancing treatment, such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union as mentioned in Michael Honey's epigraph, or did not appear in these pages. The authors compellingly demonstrate the focusing power of a centennial. Each essay examines strategies of oppression, and many authors find an indomitable spirit of resistance that not even the worst forms of violence could drive out of the Delta.

--Michael K. Rosenow

Jerome and Rohwer: Memories of Japanese American Internment in World War II Arkansas. Edited by Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer. (Fayetteville, Arkansas: The University of Arkansas Press, 2022. Pp. xxii + 228, foreword, preface, acknowledgments, introduction, appendix, index. \$29.95, hardcover)

The memories captured in this book are crucial ones to help us acknowledge and understand what really happened during the time of Japanese American incarceration during World War II. Every person affected went through many of the same things—being informed by authorities in California after the bombing of Pearl Harbor that they would be sent away, having to live in temporary sites such as horse stalls at racetracks, taking a train trip across the country to get to camps (including the two in Arkansas), attempting to make a home in tiny barracks— but they each experienced it in their own way. The accounts in the book are full of details, big things and small things remembered all these decades later. Taken together, they reveal the personal struggles of all the people affected—from realizing that, despite the fact that they had been told they were being held mostly to protect them from the surrounding populace, the guards’ guns were pointed at them, not away from them, to the daily humiliation of having to bathe and use the toilet without privacy. Historical accounts can paint with a broad brush, but seeing these finer brushstrokes has real value in seeing the effects of conflicts and policies on real people living their daily lives.



Living in Arkansas myself and having done my own delving into the history of the Rohwer and Jerome camps, I appreciated the vivid descriptions by these Californians. James Ichinaga’s account of Jerome is as follows: “If I were ever in charge of punishing a group of people, this is the place I would send them. The environmental elements were very hostile. It was hot and humid in the summer, freezing in winter. . . . I remember seeing those odd creatures called flying squirrels, bats, many species of birds, those wonderful insects called fireflies, and hearing the noisy croaking of the frogs at night. To this day I have never seen mosquitoes as huge as those in Arkansas” (p. 38). Captured also in the book are the diverse details of what happened to people and families after they left the camps as the war was drawing to a close. Some returned to their homes and farms in California—although not without careful forethought. As Fran Inouye Imahara said, “My father wanted us to go to Japan to live after our release and applied for Japanese citizenship. Relatives advised us there would be nothing for us there. They canceled our request and we returned to Fresno in 1946. We were very fortunate to have a place to return to since a dear family friend, a policeman with the Fresno Police Department, looked after our home” (p. 54). Many were not so lucky and had nothing to return to; they made other plans, such as the Imaharas’ move to New Orleans, where they developed a thriving landscaping business (p. xviii). A few accounts have details that astounded me. Clover Johnson said, “While [his friend] Harry [Nagata] was in the service in the Midwest or on [the] East Coast, he encountered fellow soldiers who had never seen anyone of Japanese ancestry before. Someone in command decided it would be hard for the men to fight an enemy they’d never seen. Harry Nagata was ordered to dress up in the uniform of a Japanese soldier and parade in front of the troops so they could see and hate ‘the face of the enemy.’ Needless to say, that was a horrible thing to do to a loyal American soldier and it breaks my heart every time I think about it” (p. 70). Another account, by Joh Sekiguchi, recalled a Boy Scout jamboree that included boys from Jerome and Rohwer as well as

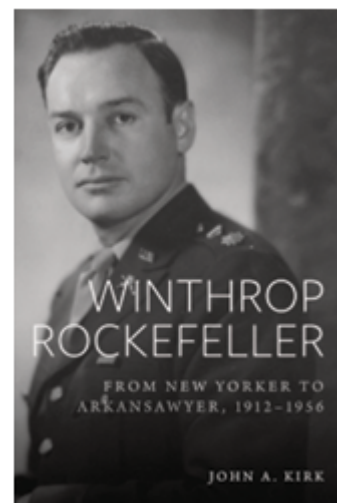
boys from nearby Arkansas City—noting the differences in the boys’ food and supplies: “The scouts from the two relocation camps . . . were loaded into the back of supply trucks and rode into town. . . . I remember one boy [from Arkansas City] climbing in with the rest of us and I noticed other boys from town in the other trucks. It must have taken a lot of courage for them to join a bunch of complete strangers—especially strangers many folks considered to be ‘the enemy.’ Some of the boys from the relocation centers had brought their scout uniforms with them when they relocated, but none of the Arkansas City boys had uniforms” (p. 130). The Arkansas City boys also ate from one big pot of beans, while the camp boys had army-ration-style food trucked in from the camps, including desert. Finally, Tim Taira recalled learning years after the fact the circumstances surrounding a visit to Jerome by a group of Hawaiian soldiers, who gave candy and cookies to the kids. He later learned that this group had been from the 100th Battalion, training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, as part of the 442nd, the much decorated Japanese American regiment. As Taira said, “The ## Nisei [second-generation Japanese Americans] from Hawaii had not been interned and were a happy-go-lucky and gregarious bunch, quite different temperamentally from the mainland Nisei. These differences were causing considerable friction during training, so their CO had an idea. He sent busloads of the Hawaiians to Jerome. . . . En route to Jerome the group was cheerful and boisterous; during the return trip there was stunned silence. They were shocked to see the families of fellow trainees imprisoned behind barbed wire. They understood the situation now, and the friction between the two Nisei groups stopped” (p. 148). Acquiring and arranging all these accounts was a huge task and one that was done carefully and well. However, it is difficult to present a collection of oral histories in a cohesive manner, and that difficulty showed a bit in this book. The accounts have many common elements that can feel repetitive when reading cover to cover. The accounts are also arranged in alphabetical order by name, rather than by theme or location or chronology, which can leave the reader a bit off balance, encountering one new voice after another without always having a sense of how each story fits into the larger picture. Even the very beginning of the book sets up this scattered format, with a foreword written by three people, a preface by one editor (but not the other), and an introduction written by two people. Co-editor Walter Imahara’s account is in alphabetical order with the others, but I would have liked to have seen his story at the beginning, framing the other accounts and lending some cohesion. Overall, the book is a valuable collection of the voices of people who will soon be lost to time—although their stories will remain—and it will be a precious document in years to come to people doing research on family members and on the camps in Arkansas.

--Ali Welky

Winthrop Rockefeller: From New Yorker to Arkansawyer, 1912-1956. By John A. Kirk. (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 2022. Pp. xi + 267, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95, hardcover)

In 1953, Winthrop “Win” Rockefeller, a

third-generation member of one of America's wealthiest and most powerful families, moved to Petit Jean Mountain in Conway County. He built a showplace Santa Gertrudis cattle-farming operation, which he named Winrock farms. In 1991's *Agenda for Reform: Winthrop Rockefeller as Governor of Arkansas, 1967-71*, historian Cathy Kunzinger Urwin analyzed his service as Arkansas's Republican governor from 1967 to 1971, but his New York life has received little scholarly attention. Until now. John A. Kirk, who is George Washington Donaghey Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), examines his formative earlier life experiences to develop a more complete and nuanced portrait of the man. Based upon the Winthrop Rockefeller Collection, which is housed at the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture, the Winthrop Rockefeller Papers at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), interviews and other sources, Kirk argues convincingly that his life in New York shaped his later career in Arkansas. Following a well-crafted introductory first chapter, the author devotes Chapters Two through Six to describing his childhood, education, and earlier career in the oil industry. Born on May 1, 1912 in Manhattan, Winthrop Rockefeller was educated at the Lincoln School, a practical learning-oriented institution, and the Loomis School, which was a traditional, college preparatory school. A poor student, he preferred the kind of "hands-on" learning, such as the lessons in cattle-raising, he engaged in at Lincoln. Notably, he and his brothers Nelson and David received diagnoses of dyslexia much later in their lives. Much to his family's disappointment, Winthrop's poor academic performance resulted in his resignation from Yale University in 1934. Kirk refutes some Rockefeller family historians' previous claims that an on-campus liaison led to his dismissal from Yale. To his family, his choice to enter the oil business helped make up for his lack of academic success. In 1934, he began learning each stage of the business by starting work as a roustabout laborer in Texas. He loved the experience—working in the field, the adventure, and the people. He inherited his family's commitment to improving race relations. During his time in Houston, Texas during the 1930s, he tried and failed to interest white leaders in establishing a community health program for African Americans. Through the experience he gained "valuable insight into the difficulties in dealing with southern race relations" (p. 80). His oil career did not quite live up to his family's expectations. Returning from the oil fields in 1937, he joined his father John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his brothers in the family's New York City offices. In 1939, he began working in the foreign trade department of Socony Vacuum, a derivative of his grandfather John D. Rockefeller Sr.'s Standard Oil Company. As someone who disliked working behind a desk, he struggled to find his place in an office. In Chapters Seven through Ten, Kirk details Winthrop's army career during World War II, including his service in Guam, Leyte, and Okinawa. He distinguished himself in the field of battle, returning from the war a decorated combat veteran. While in the army, he became friends with Frank Newell. In the early 1950s, Newell, an insurance broker from Little Rock, showed him the property that became Winrock. For this reviewer, who was less familiar with the

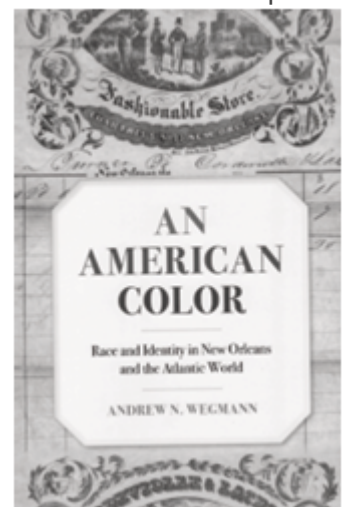


full extent of Winthrop’s military career, this section was particularly informative. The final two chapters cover his first marriage to Barbara Paul “BoBo” Sears and his move to Arkansas. At the time of their marriage in 1948, she was pregnant with his only son, Winthrop Paul Rockefeller. Within eighteen months, the couple separated and became involved in a well-publicized, nasty, and drawn-out divorce, much to the embarrassment of Winthrop and his family. Their divorce was finalized in 1954. As Kirk has shown, his life was very much shaped by the “tension between seeking . . . to fulfill the high demands of being a member of the Rockefeller family . . . and . . . striving . . . to become his own person” (p. 6). Moving to Arkansas and building Winrock allowed him to contribute to his family’s legacy—in his own way. Kirk’s book is not hagiography. His subject emerges as a socially conscious, civically engaged, adventurous, courageous, and flawed individual. More than fifty years later, his legacy lives on in his adopted state. Thoroughly researched and engagingly written, *From New Yorker to Arkansawyer* should be essential reading for scholars of Arkansas’s late twentieth century political history.

--Melanie K. Welch

An American Color: Race and Identity in New Orleans and the Atlantic World. By Andrew N. Wegmann. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2022. Pp. xvi + 238, acknowledgments, note on language, introduction, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95, paperback)

In the final chapter of his work, *An American Color: Race and Identity in New Orleans and the Atlantic World*, Andrew N. Wegmann references the prevalent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notion that American society could not be shared between white and non-white Americans. Despite this supposed incompatibility between the white and black communities, the New Orleans mixed-race Creole people forged a path and identity for themselves, embracing the ambiguous line between white and black, and in turn defining and redefining themselves as uniquely Creole within the changing American landscape. These are the people Wegman brings to the fore as he analyzes the origins and development of mixed-race middle-class Creoles in New Orleans—from their French origins in the 1730s through to their embrace of their American home in the 1860s. For Wegmann, these Creoles underwent a process of Americanization in which they carefully crafted their cultural identity over more than a century to promote economic and social uplift, as well as lay claim to a place uniquely theirs within New Orleans and greater American society. They were proud, educated, ambitious middle-class people who constantly endeavored to promote their community’s growth and claim to status in a constantly shifting Atlantic World. In doing this, they understood race, race science, and racial ambiguity—manipulating these elements to their advantage while also forming a sense of identity



and belonging in a changing American land- scape. In constructing his argument, Wegmann addresses a historiographical record that, in his own words, has “complicated and simplified a massive antebellum population” (p. 3). In particular, Wegmann identifies Ira Berlin’s *Slaves Without Masters* as a landmark title that, while a substantive account on free blacks, overlooked the complexities of the Louisianan Creole population. In particular, he suggests Berlin’s work overstated and oversimplified the level of caste-subservience experienced by all free people of color—as well as removed these Louisianan mixed-race Creoles from the historical narrative of America. Consequently, the historiography since Berlin’s 1974 work has ignored these francophone peoples in studies of the South, instead incorporating them into Caribbean studies. This is the position Wegmann argues against in *An American Color*. He asserts that these New Orleans Creoles were very much a part of the narrative of American history and the greater Atlantic World; that they developed within and because of greater worldly events; and that they shared many qualities with free mixed-race peoples in other parts of the American continent. In short, these New Orleans Creoles raised their status, forged a unique identity, and positioned themselves socially beyond the parameters of Berlin’s conclusions. Wegmann argues that these Creole people of New Orleans were just as “American” as other elements of the country—and consequently, equally deserving of consideration within the greater historical narrative and history of the Atlantic World. Wegmann’s argument is divided among five chronological chapters in which he examines the New Orleans Creole community through significant changes they experienced in the world around them and how they subsequently met those changes as a community. In chapter one, the origins of this community under French rule are explored. Significant to Wegmann’s analysis here is the fact that the Creole population of the nineteenth century had its roots in the conscious manipulation of race and power within the confines of French authority. For example, Wegmann asserts that “free women of color during the colonial period utilized sex and race to carve out [a] niche in the socioracial order” (p. 12) when they chose to have relations with prominent Frenchmen. Combined with the French language lacking a word for a free person of color until 1774, the free mixed-race community under French rule was able to lay a substantive foundation for future generations. Following the transition to Spanish rule, chapter two describes how the Creole population continued to promote its own interests through a manipulation of the race science that accompanied Spanish rule. In particular, the *Casta* system of racial hierarchy allowed middle-class Creoles to develop their identity and use their light skin and free heritage for social elevation. With the transition to United States authority, as seen in chapter three, the Creole community in New Orleans further embraced new cultural mores to further elevate its status. By embracing white culture and becoming propertied, New Orleans Creoles were able to elevate and assert themselves as uniquely different. “To New Orleans white society, [Creoles] were not colored, black, or negro. They were something else altogether . . . ” (p. 61). As the status of this Creole community climbed in the years following the War of 1812, it began imitating white American society by refining its middle class through avenues like fashion, family, and socializing. Like other free black communities across the country, in their own way, New Orleans Creoles were using class con-

sciousness and controlling the way they were perceived in society to improve their station and demand legitimacy within greater American society. Subsequently, Wegmann's final chapter explores the ways in which the Creole community reacted to the American Colonization Society and repatriation efforts during the nineteenth century. To this end, Wegmann explores the nuances that existed between various mixed-race communities in different parts of the country and their motivations to leave or stay. By the eve of the Civil War, New Orleans Creoles had undergone a process of Americanization, and saw their home not abroad in Africa, but locally, where they had grown and cultivated a uniquely American Creole culture for over a century. Through his analysis, Wegmann cogently articulates the nuanced history of New Orleans Creoles through over a century of political and social change. He situates the community within the greater narrative of United States history and the Atlantic World, and in so doing, recontextualizes important political and cultural historical developments. Wegmann has not only made a valuable contribution to the greater historiography of mixed-race communities in the United States, but also provided a social history that is applicable to a plurality of historical fields—from colonial to Antebellum America, and beyond to the greater history of the Atlantic World.

--Travis C. Perusich

Katrina: A History, 1915-2015. By Andy Horowitz. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020 Pp. 281, introduction, notes, acknowledgments, index. \$36.00, hardcover)

Whether the author of this Barcraft Award winner intended to create irrefutable justification for the paradigm shift toward prioritizing vulnerable



populations in emergency management, it appears he has done so while also adding a scandalous historical context that public officials cannot afford to ignore. Andy Horowitz illuminates the need for such drastic shifts, and their complex challenges, a century in the making with *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015*. It pulls no punches assessing Katrina's aftermath, but also brings perspective from the detrimental impacts of commercial dredging on Gulf Coast marshlands and broken promises to share the extracted wealth for a better future, all of which suffer in the name of disorganization, disaster opportunism, segregation, and outright lies. Public policymakers, historians, and students can apply these assessments of both the good, but mostly the bad, lessons

from Katrina. At times undeniably demoralizing, the writing seems designed to provoke meaningful change with an infuriating narrative that spurs its readers to action. In recounting one man's protest dating back to New Orleans' ill-begotten flood control plan of 1927, Horowitz personifies decades-long warn-

ings and bitter debates in disaster policy that seem to overlook the people most vulnerable to catastrophic change. "But four decades after the state engineers directed the Mississippi River to flood his house, the catastrophe was not yet over for him. Disasters can seem acute, his protests re- mind, but their causes are long in the making and their effects last a very long time" (p. 23). In another example, a familiar refrain, levee failure is attributed directly to cost-saving measures enacted over time by the Army Corp of Engi- neers. In a much less commonly understood parlance, however, the author goes on to pain- stakingly underscore years of indirect cause that arguably became too overwhelming for any gov- ernment agency or citizen group to overcome. Looking back over nearly a century of unfettered and unbalanced growth in the city, Horowitz un- derscores the vulnerability of certain geographic areas and populations in New Orleans from the underappreciated lens of culture and heritage. The early pages paint an intriguing picture for those unfamiliar with New Orleans' political history. Even if one knows the Big Easy inti- mately, there are throughlines to discover that public officials and the social sciences grapple with today. A century of half-measures leaves New Orleans vulnerable to storm surge, and more than two centuries of racism and segrega- tion culminates in an irreparable relationship be- tween New Orleans and many of its African American citizens. These realities illustrate the political backdrop when Hurricane Katrina makes landfall. Calls to abandon certain parts of the city in the wake of the 2005 storm are echoed throughout, but the book also reminds us that New Orleans has been sinking for a hundred years as the result of dredging for transportation, and later oil. Readers may recall pleas to save the irreplaceable culture of New Orleans against calls to finally let the city slip into the gulf after Hur- ricane Katrina. What they may not remember are warnings from scientists thirty years prior of this inevitable result, which came alongside concerns from citizens that the city did not seem to be able to protect one area without flooding another. "Despite the concerns raised at the public hear- ing, the Army Corps announced in August 1975 that it would proceed with the project as de- signed" (p. 89). The author extends both practi- cal and cultural concerns from the paved streets into the swamp itself, linking the ecosystem as in- terdependent in regard to flood protections sur- rounding the city. "But in 2005, forty years later, a plodding bureaucracy and piecemeal federal ap- propriations process had left the hurricane pro- tection system unfinished" (p. 129). The inevitable storm surge floods wealthy and poor alike in neighborhoods borne of drained marsh, only for the segregation still upheld by tradition and economics to rear its ugly head during a recovery that is ongoing to this day. Unflooded low-income housing is de- nied occupancy so that it can be razed, and dis- placed citizens are outvoted regarding the future of New Orleans before they are allowed back into the city of their heritage. The underbelly of Lou- isiana politics is again brought front and center in a 1915 reboot for the modern era, and readers are pointedly reminded of what is at stake. "People died for no other reason than lack of or- ganization" (p. 124). If the history leading to this point is a sad reminder of how far we have come, the recounting of Katrina's aftermath in this book is a gut-check for the wounds left to heal. In these pages, one sees many examples where unregulated progress and profit motive ig- nore intangible concepts like culture and tradi- tion. While it is hard to place monetary value on such things, to ignore them is to ignore the people they belong to, and, in many cases cov- ered here, to deceive them. "Public efficiency and

private profits were difficult to reconcile, because a totally efficient system of delivering public funds to individuals would have yielded no private profits at all" (p. 150). As with the flood water, the funding only seems to move from one place to another, never lifting all boats. The disregard for sustaining the culture of New Orleans, or more accurately the people who created it, is juxtaposed with not only the occurrence of disaster but our response to it. "As a process for change, tradition is the opposite of disaster, in which the present seems to arrive out of nowhere" (p. 189). The main characters in this work are those who would stifle such tradition to further their own self-interests in both 1915 and in 2005. *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015* does not let us forget this fact, and offers no glossy finish for the prejudices that often underpin such thought. Anyone wishing to effect change for disasters like Hurricane Katrina will find here the political realities, historical injustice, and all manner of obstacles they may face along the way.

--Jon Carvell

The Continuing Storm: Learning from Katrina. By Kai Erikson and Lori Peek. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2022. Pp. xv + 142, prelude, postlude, acknowledgments, notes, index. \$32.14, paperback)

Sociologist Kai T. Erickson observed in 2014 that Hurricane Katrina would be the most telling storm of our era, not just because of the damage it inflicted upon people and property, but because of what it revealed about our culture and ourselves. Social scientists were eager to learn more about the human costs of the disaster and went to work soon after the storm passed, sifting through reams of data, striving to make sense of it. Among this group were some of America's best disaster researchers, their colleagues, and students who lent support. The best of this work appeared on The Katrina Bookshelf, the most comprehensive social science coverage of a disaster found anywhere in the literature. *The Continuing Storm* is the capstone of this series. This book is a somber reflection, thoughtful, with a measured academic tone. Yet, simultaneously, it is a brutally honest story of the abuse suffered by some of New Orleans' most vulnerable citizens. It is a short, powerful read, essential for those who want to deeply understand what happened before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. At the center of the narrative are the poor, mostly Black residents of New Orleans, some elderly, handicapped, and medicine-dependent, stuck in Katrina's path and unable to escape the storm's wrath. They died in floodwaters that reached as high as their attics; they died swimming through toxic sludge, trying to find something to hold on to as the water inched higher; they died on bridges and overpasses, waiting for help that was late in coming; some died in the filthy squalor of the Superdome and the Convention Center, dehydrated, hungry and without medication. Those that survived were hastily loaded on buses or planes, headed for unknown destinations, separated from some of their family, and after a while living in a new place, feeling like utter outcasts in their new environment. For these souls, the hurricane is not over; it is a continuing trauma. Wherever these survivors go, so goes Katrina. The book succeeds in reorienting our perceptions of time and space as it relates to the hurricane. As humans, we like to corral nature into

specific, often short, timeframes. For example, as a meteorological event, Katrina was short-lived; it began on August 25 near south-east Florida and ended on August 29 over east Mississippi. The storm surge abated. The floodwaters in the geographic bowl that is central New Orleans eventually receded. But human suffering will last a lifetime. Coastal towns like Venice, Buras, and Waveland were completely destroyed, having to build back from scratch. Memories of what was lost and the grief about those things have no official time stamp or expiration date. Regarding space, we like clear geographic boundaries that we can identify and point to on the map to remember those who suffered in that part of New Orleans, such as the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish. But in the travels of those displaced from those places, Katrina lives on. Wrenched from their homes and made to feel unwelcome to return, Katrina followed them wherever their diaspora took them. Meanwhile, among New Orleans' elite business crowd, there was jubilation as they witnessed the storm's devastation. As affluent people living on higher ground, they suffered less damage and had the resources to get out of town as the storm passed. Surveying the flooding in the poorer, primarily Black district of New Orleans, some expressed thanks to God for the "gift." The storm did what they always wanted to do but could not. Their town's "criminal element" had just boarded buses and was now gone. The city would gentrify and do all possible to make it nearly impossible for the displaced to return. Possibly this slight was the lowest depth of humiliation for those in the diaspora, to be unwanted by their city. They were uprooted from their homes, treated like garbage, shuttled away, and barred from returning. The New Orleans business crowd wanted a smaller, taller, and whiter post-Katrina city, and they got all that. It may be true that no one reads Herbert Spencer anymore, as Talcott Parsons once wrote. But these business types wore their Social Darwinism on the sleeves of their freshly pressed suits. The "unfit" of their town had just been expelled. We learned from Katrina that Social Darwinism was stitched into the fabric of New Orleans and much of white America, which stood by silently watching. *The Continuing Storm* reveals the limits of a neo-liberal democratic state in the current age to protect its citizens after a disaster. In this pro-free market, pro-business way of governing, the responsibility for disaster preparedness lies squarely on the shoulders of the individual family unit and local communities. Individual responsibility rules the day. The fittest will survive and the rest will fail. The federal government and state governments can help with infrastructure projects or resiliency initiatives and some limited forms of aid. Still, it is not their job to replace your home or to make you whole again. The political system insists that to receive substantial assistance, your local representatives must continually approach the halls of Congress, hat in hand, to beg for more relief money and prove that your district needs it—an exhausting, years-long process. Louisiana now encourages families to have an action plan before the next storm arrives in the Gulf. That plan involves adequate insurance, savings, a roadworthy car, a "go" kit to save time, and a place to meet family members during an evacuation. Unfortunately, many of the vulnerable poor in New Orleans lack access to these resources today just as they did in 2005.

--Stan Weeber



Car Lot Cowboy

by Addison Griffis

Marcel Vickers stared at a bullet hole in the hood of his pearl Mercedes parked in Magnolia Motors' used car lot. As he gazed and sipped scorched coffee from a Styrofoam cup, the speck of blackness seemed to spread across metal luster. His navy Western shirt, adorned with a rose patch on each sleeve, clung to his skin in the Mississippi humidity. He scowled at the task of convincing a prospect to pay top dollar for the damaged Mercedes on the final day of the dealership's Fourth of July sale extravaganza. Vickers placed his cup on the ruined hood. He snatched open the diamond snap-button of his chest pocket, shook out a cigarette from the carton. The cigarette bobbed in his mouth as he cursed the Mercedes and texted the parts manager for a quote on a replacement. Gonna be at least 1400. Vickers lit his cigarette. I'm getting fucked without being kissed for that price. Vickers blew out smoke, lifted his white Stetson cowboy hat, and ran his fingers through his blonde hair, tucking stray strands behind his ears. Stephen, a salesman on the lot, snuck up behind Vickers and slapped his back, knocking the cigarette from the sales manager's mouth. "Aye, ole Buddy, I got a trade I need you to step up in." "All this bullshit on my last day at work." Vickers popped another cigarette into his mouth. "I'm damn near broke from the divorce, and now I have to replace the hood or find a fucking prospect who doesn't give a damn." "Yeah, I saw that shit earlier this morning when I was walking the lot." Stephen held out a form with the info for a prospect's trade-in. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you that somebody drove by last night and shot the hell out this fucker." "Naw, the hole is too wide for a straight-on shot." Vickers shook his head as he took the form and shoved it in his back pocket. "That bullet tumbled from the sky. Those hoodlums across town started firing their fucking Glocks off into the air when everybody was shooting fireworks last night and hit the car. That's fucking odds for ya." "Dude, just check this out." Stephen reached into his pocket and dropped a mushroomed .45 hollow point onto Vickers' palm. "Somebody shot the shit out of your car with a big ass bullet. I found it up against the engine block." Stephen tucked his gold chain and crucifix beneath his red polo shirt. "Still runs good, I grabbed your spare key from the showroom box." Customers on the way back from a test drive wheeled a silver diesel dually into a parking spot at the front of the dealership, and Stephen headed toward them. "I bet you'll find your customer before the day's over." Vickers' phone buzzed. A text from a number not stored in his contacts flashed across the screen. You are a coward, not a cowboy. Vickers' fingers coiled over the bullet. I think you got the wrong number. A picture of Vickers's business card pinched by a man's hand appeared on the screen. Black spade tattooed on the thumb. I ain't got time for games. Say that shit to my face. Vickers shoved his phone into his pocket and scanned the lot. As customers browsed like cattle through rows of shiny metal, a tall thin man wearing a tropical print tank top and cut-off jean shorts emerged from a maroon-colored mobile firework stand in the barren dirt lot across from the dealership. Chrome aviators flashed in the sunlight. The man's long black curls rippled in

the wind as he stood clutching a three-foot sleeve of firecrackers. The crushed bullet felt hot in Vickers' hand. The firecracker man adjusted his shades. He waved an arm riddled with flash art and motioned Vickers to come over. Vickers threw his cigarette on the ground and stamped it out with his alligator boots. He downed the rest of his coffee. "Fucking fruit cake." Vickers shoved the bullet in his pocket. He made his way back inside the dealership, where desk phones rang like summer solstice wedding bells. Cool air chilled the sweat on his forehead as his boot heels kept a steady cadence against large, sand-colored tiles. Vickers entered his glass-wall office set in the middle of the showroom. He hung his cowboy hat on a brass hook of an old wooden hat rack in the corner of the office and then eased down in his brown leather chair. Vickers removed a bottle of Woodford Reserve from the bottom drawer of his metal desk. He filled the Styrofoam cup and watched salesmen hold gross and close customers. Vickers flipped through his Rolodex and called everyone he knew about buying the Mercedeses. And when the high mileage and asking price became a quick deterrent to all prospects, he'd slam down his phone, take a sip of whiskey and flip to the next card. The front door of the dealership let out a shrill squeak. Vickers looked up from his Rolodex and saw a white girl with rainbow-colored dreads walking toward his office. Flip flops smacked her heels. Her cotton-white romper became cheeky mid-stride. She clutched a brown leather purse. Tangerine nail polish. Vickers rose from his chair. He placed his knuckles on the cool pane of glass that covered his desk to steady himself from the whiskey buzz. "Can I help you?" The girl stopped at the threshold of the office. "I want to speak to your Finance Manager. I need to get approved." "Our finance guy works every other Saturday. But I'm sales manager here. I can help. You have any credit?" "No." Rainbow dreads brushed the girl's jawline as she shook her head. "It ain't looking too good for you, sweetheart." Vickers rapped his knuckles against the glass top. "But I have a car that I'm ready to move. Take a seat and let's take a look at your credit just to see what we are working with." He sat in his chair. Removed a silver pen from his pocket and clicked it. "Most folks don't know shit about what kind of credit they have." The girl sat down in one of the black leather chairs in the office. Vickers took her information and learned her name was Tessa, nearly twenty years his junior. He added three years to her job time at the glove factory, promoted her to shift manager, and gave her a two thousand dollar raise to round things out. Vickers slid the credit app across to Tessa. She looked him in the eye as she signed and pushed the pen and paper across the desk. He transferred her information to the computer and pulled her credit. Tessa rubbed an esoteric geometrical design tattooed on the left side of her neck as if wishing the Kosmos for good luck. Seven hundred Equifax. Six eighty TransUnion. Holy hell. Two lines of credit. Four thousand dollar high. ## Fuck. A short-term loan with twelve percent interest from the piece of shit credit union downtown and a Victoria Secret credit card paid perfect. Vickers pushed the spring-loaded end of his pen down on the desk. The pen shot up, and he caught it. "Your score's low and file a little thin. That seafoam green sled of a Chrysler what you drove up in?" "Yeah that's my trade, got the title in my purse." "I'm going to give you what my wholesaler will give me. Two-fifty. You got any down payment?" Vickers wrote numbers on a buyer's

order. A salesman without a customer at his desk scowled at him through the glass for not turning the girl over. "No." Tessa propped her elbows on the desk and crossed her arms. "Is that going to keep me from buying a car?" Vickers stopped writing. The tip of his pen waivered his grip. "You're going to have to bring something to the table, my dear." "How much?" Vickers clicked his pen. "Three thousand." "I don't have anywhere close to that." "How much?" "None." "The banks won't like that." Vickers leaned back in his chair. "Especially since your credit score is below five hundred." "I think we can work something out." Tessa crossed her arms. "You gonna co-sign with me?" "Your rainbow-colored ass ain't fucking up my credit." Tessa smiled, shook her head. "Well I don't have any extra money." Vickers took a sip of whiskey. "I heard you the first time." He refilled the Styrofoam cup with Woodford and pushed it across the desk. "You got something worth three thousand dol- lars." She looked down at the offering then up at him. "I ain't a whore." "And I ain't a pimp, but you better bring something to the table or you ain't gonna ride." "I don't even know what I'm buying or for what price." "You're buying a Mercedes. High mileage, but runs like the day I bought'er. Just one small blemish on the hood." Tessa's green eyes widened. "I can't afford that." "That just depends on the interest rate and how long we stretch it out." Tessa took the cup and downed the liquid. "You aren't into any weird shit, are you?" "Weird shit?" Vickers took a sip from the whiskey bottle. "You talking like butt stuff? No darlin, I just fuck." "You get high?" Tessa brushed a violet lock from her face. Vickers stood and removed a room card from his snakeskin wallet. "That Western Motel just across the street." He handed the card to her. "Room thirty-eight. It's on the end there out by the canal. Just go on in and make yourself at home. It's almost quitting time." Tessa left the dealership with the room key and cup of whiskey in hand. Vickers strolled out his office into a show- room without a customer. "I don't know about the rest of y'all." He snatched eight cups from the water cooler dispenser. "This summer dust got my throat a little scratchy. How about one last drink with your sales manager? Because after today, I don't ever—" "Want to see your cheap ass again." Stephen jumped up from his chair and rallied the rest of the salesmen. They locked the front door, cut off most of the lights, and crammed into Vickers' of- fice. Vickers removed an unmarked bottle full of jade tequila from his drawer. "This Mexican Chernobyl shit been simmering in my office all goddamn summer." Vickers shook the bottle. Medallion slices of jalapeno swirled. The sales team passed the wretched tequila around while they drank and boasted and bragged with burning tongues about the head- knockers they'd thrown to smiling customers, and other men's wives that they had fucked in the backseat during test drives. They cursed every rich bastard who showed no quarter when hag- gling over trades that they still scooped and re- sold for small fortunes. Stephen raised his glass. "To Marcel T. Vickers, the best damn sales manager in the tri- county area . . . and the last cowboy of the car lot." Everyone cheered and chugged what liquor remained in their cups. "Aye, aye, ole buddy." Vickers grasped

Stephen by his shoulder. "Y'all are all cowboys." He gazed around the room. "All goddamn cowboys. Hell, you got to be in this fucking business." He grabbed the tequila and strolled into the showroom. "Now all of y'all have a good night." Vickers adjusted his crotch and knocked the bottle against the turquoise stone inlay of his belt buckle. "I have one last down payment to collect." Howls echoed through the halls of the dealership. Vickers left through the side door of the showroom. He journeyed past the used cars, and his phone buzzed when he got to the road. Traffic sped by as Vickers stood and watched a surveillance video of his Mercedes pulling up to the garage door of another man's house. The timestamp jumped forward a couple of days, and the garage door opened, revealing a mobile fire-work stand painted maroon. All I can say is that your wife invited me over. Vickers crossed the road and made his way through tall weeds growing in cracks of the motel parking lot. Shards of brown beer bottle glass crunched under his feet as he traveled along the iron fence that circled an empty concrete pool. Vickers drummed his knuckles against the door as he entered his room. The lamp on the nightstand illuminated wallpaper covered in pictures of succulents, casting light across Tessa laid up against the bed's backboard. Tessa shot the rest of her whiskey. "You're talking about that pearl Mercedes on the lot, right?" "Yep." Vickers slid the chain lock into place. "I could definitely ride around in that." She rummaged through her purse. "How long you been living here?" Vickers laid his cowboy hat on his suitcase and stood by the side of the bed. "Long enough to plan my next move." "What's that?" Tessa removed a zip-lock bag filled with crimson gummy-shaped stars the size of quarters. "Take a train out west to Colorado or Wyoming. I don't care. I'll find work." He eyed crimson stars and placed the tequila beside a potted cactus on the nightstand. "What the hell are those?" "You want to get high, don't you?" Tessa shook the plastic bag. "These are death stars. They'll fuck you six ways to Sunday." She extended the bag to Vickers, and he took one. "I'd only eat half a star if you've never tried edibles before." Vickers ate a star. "I ain't scared of your hip-pie-ass snacks." He grabbed two more from the bag before Tessa could pull it away. "So why you living here?" Tessa put a single star on her tongue and shoved the bag into her purse. "Cheap weekly rates." He tossed a gummy in his mouth. "Short walk to work." He popped another. "Wife kicked me out my own goddamn house about six months ago." "Why?" "Shit that happened in this room. Shit that might get me killed one day." "So you gonna take your boots off before you get in bed?" "I do things the outlaw way." "This is the weird shit I was talking about." Tessa winced and arched her back. Vickers lit a cigarette and sat down on the bed with his back to her. The haze of smoke grew thicker in the room with each puff. Tessa put her hand on Vickers shoulder, and he shrugged her off. "You work at the glove factory." Vickers knocked the ashes of his cigarette across the potted cactus on the nightstand. "You know ## Drew?" "Drew from shipping and receiving? Yeah, I know him, always riding around on the forklift, loading and unloading." Tessa squinted at Vickers. "Are you like his dad or uncle?" "Father." Tessa clutched her face and shook her head. "Jesus Christ, will the next safety meeting be awkward."

"You know he could do so much more than that." "What's wrong with driving a tow-motor?" "I never pictured my son barely making ten dollars an hour." Vickers turned and shook his cigarette at her. "You know he couldn't buy a single unit off the new lot? Even with good credit? That's what's fucking wrong." "If you think he could make his life better, I think you need to tell him that yourself." Vickers shook his head. "We haven't talked in forever. Doesn't even know where I stay." "I'd give anything to talk to my father again. It just ain't right that y'all don't talk." "Maybe we just need space as big as the god-damn horizon." His long exhale swirled smoke. "I think you got a bad batch of them marijuana gummy bears." He snuffed the cigarette out in the dirt of the cactus pot. "I'm sober as Saint Peter. Time to put your sweet ass in a new ride." A grin remained on Tessa's face as she grabbed her purse. Vickers open the door just enough to check if anyone would see them leave. He took Tessa by the hand and led her down the sidewalk, passing fancy cars with tags from neighboring counties. The edge of darkness washed away the color of fire in the sky as they traveled to the dealership. The two crossed into the lot, and when they got to the Mercedes, Vickers hit the keys in his pocket to make the horn chirp at Tessa, who skipped in delight. They hopped inside the car. Vickers barked the tires and sped to the front of the dealership, where he used his key to enter, keeping the lights off in the showroom as he led Tessa to his office. Vickers sat down in his chair, pulled Tessa onto his lap. He banged the keys on the mouse. The computer screen flashed on. Ivory glow flooded the office. "I'm about to show you how a deal is done, darlin. Can you handle a three-fifty payment?" "How'd you know?" "Cause a three-fifty payment is what every-body wants. Five-thousand dollar sled. Son of a bitch wants three-fifty. Sixty-thousand dollar truck. Three-fifty." Vickers chuckled. "It's fucking crazy." Vickers arranged the figures in his computer and power booked the unit, adding additional safety features and a sport package not found on the Mercedes. Vickers submitted the deal to four banks, and four pending notification boxes popped up next to Tessa's name on the screen. Her heart-beat pulsed against the palm of his hand. Three red turndown arrows popped up. "Fuck." Vickers banged the keyboard. Tessa huffed and pulled away from Vickers. "Why did I get turned down when I brought something to the table?" "Thin file." "You're not understanding what I'm fucking telling you. Why the fuck did I get turned down when I brought something to the table?" "We still in the game, darlin. One bank is still simmering on it." A green acceptance arrow appeared by her name. "Well fuck me sideways." Vickers slapped his desk. "What does that mean?" Vickers pushed Tessa off him. "It means you got approved." He clicked into the deal. Proof of income required. "Deal has a little hair around it, but we'll make it happen. Hand me your paystub." Vickers dialed his finance manager. "Aye ole buddy, I know it's late, but I have a favor for you, young stud." He snapped at Tessa to hurry up. "I need you to give this pretty girl in front of me a nice fat figure on her year to date. Make it match what I sent in on the credit app and load that bitch up cause we're ready to sign." Tessa dumped the contents of her purse out on the table. They began signing paperwork, and within ten minutes, Tessa became the proud owner of a certified used Mercedes. Vickers faxed all the documents to the bank

as the death star high crept up his spine. "God- damn I'm feeling smooth as Velveeta." Vickers propped his boots on his desk, kicked back in his chair. Tessa racked her belongings back into her purse. "Aren't you going to show me everything on my new car?" "Yeah I'm just waiting on my favorite part." A stack of gold coins popped up by Tessa's name. Vickers jumped and clapped. "We just got funded." Vickers shut off his computer, grabbed the spare key from the key-box in the showroom, and the two walked out to the car. "Pleasure doing business." Vickers handed Tessa her papers, and a flash of green light flooded the night. A boom shook the windows and rattled Vickers' chest. He braced himself against the Mercedes as he wrestled with the cascading of ecstasy from the drugs and the after-image of Tessa's illuminated face. Streams of golden embers crackled as they fell from above. Columns of flame erupted from fire fountains in the barren lot across the street, spewing smoke clouds that rolled over the vehicles. Tessa cried out and collapsed. Blood gushed from the exit wound in her back as her body twitched on the asphalt. The storefront window behind Vickers shattered. Shards of glass broke across the concrete and reflected bursts of fire in the sky. Vickers choked on smoke as he saw the firecracker man walking toward him with a chrome .45 in hand. The firecracker man's shadow pulsed across the asphalt as he took aim. A flash of light erupted from the gun barrel. Vickers stumbled back from the blast. He touched his shoulder. Blood-stained flesh. A bullet whirred past his head, shattering another window. Vickers ripped open the Mercedes' door. He grabbed Tessa and pulled her onto the back seat. He shook her limp body and moaned her name as bullets shattered the windows of the vehicle. Leather became slick with blood, and Vickers peered through the shattered windshield to see the firecracker man dumping spent shells of his revolver. "Fuck of a fucking fuck." Vickers climbed in the front seat and shoved the keys into the ignition. Headlights flashed the chrome of the .45. Vickers stomped the gas. The Mercedes sped forward. The firecracker man belly-flopped onto the hood and took hold of a wheel well. Vickers swerved. The Mercedes crashed into an SUV displayed on the lot, pinning the firecracker man between crushed sheets of pearl and black metal. Vickers pushed open the door and fell onto asphalt. His lungs burned as he crawled to the trunk of the Mercedes. Vickers grasped the tire iron. The night sky thundered no more. Plumes of flames receded into the cones of fire fountains. The firecracker man clawed pearl metal as blood dripped from his mouth. Vickers struck the firecracker man three times across his skull. Sirens wailed in the distance, and iron clanged against asphalt. Vickers took out his cell and scrolled to a text conversation between him and his son that had been inactive for eight months. He typed Western Motel. Room 38 if you ever want to talk. The chatter of his mind grew silent as his thumb hovered over send. Vickers looked up from the screen. The dead man's arms lay sprawled across the hood as if embracing the carnage of bent metal. Vickers had observed the Mercedes countless times over the years, but this time he saw an altar of acceptance, where he could take solace for a few minutes. Blue lights flashed across the car lot. He dropped the cellphone onto the asphalt. Vickers put his hands behind his back and kneeled before his idol made manifest by the marriage of man and machine.

For Whom the Writing Goes

by Damon Guinn

It's 1:30 p.m. on the first day of a writing retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center in Piggott, Arkansas, and I'm camped out in a bathroom between the museum/house and gift shop. I'm supposed to be working on "my art," but the gastric remains of junk food, coffee, and energy drinks—fuel from a two-day road trip—have just erupted in my lower GI.

Earlier, seven attendees and I kicked off the retreat with introductions and an overview from the instructor and writer-in-residence, Mary Miller. Miller, a storyteller whose prose chronicles the tension and tedium of everyday life, has published two novels, two collections of short stories, and several pieces of flash fiction. She's shrewd with a sharp wit, and after reading her story collection, *Big World*, I was convinced that she would have something to teach me.

Arkansas State University Heritage Sites has been hosting the retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum annually since 2002. Every year, the visiting author signs a quilt square that is framed and placed on a wall in the Educational Center. The earliest square is from July 7, 2002. It's signed by author Lorian Hemingway, the daughter of Gregory Hemingway, Ernest's youngest son with Pauline. Both she and her father—who later identified as Gloria and underwent gender reassignment surgery—each have fascinating stories all their own.

Following our morning discussion and an awkward lunch, we are given an hour and a half of independent writing time. The director, Shannon Williams, tells us that we are free to write wherever we like—at the Educational Center, in the Pfeiffer house, or at the studio above the barn where Hemingway did most of his work while visiting. I decide to follow Dr. Adam Long, who is the executive director of Arkansas State University's Heritage Sites, and a sixty-something man named Bill from Kentucky.

Adam leads us to the house and gives us a cursory tour of the rooms, pointing out choice spots. I pick an open room on the second floor with conference chairs arranged around the perimeter.

Adam explains that there probably won't be any tours, but if people do come through, I can just close the door and continue working. That will be interesting, I think, imagining myself springing to my feet and slamming the door on a family who planned months in advance to visit this historic home once graced by Hemingway. He adds that he will lock the front door to the house because it tends to blow open. Then he and Bill head off to see the rest of the house.

I start working on a story about rivalry between childhood friends, something I've been playing around with for years, but I'm too unsettled to focus.

Before traveling to Piggott, I watched Ken Burns' PBS documentary on Hemingway, so I'm curious to explore the house and see remnants of the writer's experience in Arkansas. As I wander from room to room looking at the memorabilia, the downstairs door opens and closes. I hear shuffling and banging. Bill must have returned, and it sounds like he's burglarizing the place. I want to investigate, but my gut starts to rumble, and I'm forced to bolt down the stairs of the museum three at a time and make a clenched-beeline for the bathroom.

My first day and I already can't stomach it.

Fathers and Sons (with a Mother in the Mix)

My trip to Piggott had taken a surprise turn when my traveling companion, my eleven-year-

old son Oliver, and I arrived at the midway point of our drive. I had reserved a teepee on Airbnb for a stop in Kansas City, Hemingway's old stomping grounds, on the way to my parents' place in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Oliver was going to hang out with his grandparents and cousins while I attended the retreat.

At the first sight of the teepee, Oliver was thoroughly nonplussed. "Do we have to stay there tonight," he whined. He wanted AC and TV, not BS. He wanted to be back home playing Fortnite or Minecraft on his PC, not hanging out in a tee-pee with faux-Native American décor, listening to his old man snore.

"It'll be an adventure!" I enthused.

"Yeah, right," was his dejected reply.

Situated off a deteriorating highway flanked by abandoned storefronts, our teepee was tucked in the backyard of a modest suburban home and right next to a murky pond that belched with bull frogs. I went to "test" the outhouse and told Oliver we would have the distinct privilege of pooping in a sawdust-filled five-gallon bucket. He dropped his head in defeat and sulked to the teepee.

It was muggy outside, and Oliver complained that he felt sticky and gross, so he stripped off his shirt and settled in to watch YouTube videos on his phone. That's when the bull frogs kicked up their croaks a notch and started doing call-and-response with a chorus of crickets.

"How am I supposed to sleep tonight with all this noise?!" Oliver demanded, storming over to a chair and announcing that he would be listening to Yo-Yo Ma until he fell asleep.

"Good call," I replied, returning to my place in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. A short chapter later, I glanced over my shoulder to see Oliver soundly sleeping while the frogs and crickets competed for swamp cred.

The teepee was illuminated inside by solar-powered patio lights that were brighter than a single table lamp but dim enough to be ignored by heavy sleepers. Oliver always slept with a lamp on; I customarily slept in darkness that rivaled Vantablack. By 2:00 a.m., Oliver's phone was dead, and I was wide awake. Oliver started to toss and turn while I thought through the logistics of Plan B. I would simply book a hotel the next day, and we could spend the afternoon in Kansas City with friends before driving to Jonesboro on Sunday.

Plan B changed to Plan C the moment Oliver woke up.

Bolting upright, he screamed, "I can't sleep!" before springing to his feet and frantically pacing back and forth in the teepee.

"Do you want to pack up and drive to Jonesboro?" I asked him, hoping he would say no to the six-and-a-half-hour overnight drive.

“Oh, Dada, I know!” he beamed. “We can get some gum and energy drinks and listen to loud music to stay awake! You can get a coffee and an energy drink, so you’ll have a back-up after you finish the first.”

We were back on the highway in less than 15 minutes. At 2:30 in the morning.

By the time we made it to Jonesboro, the car, my son, and I were all cruising on fumes. Oliver slept soundly for hours after our arrival, while I struggled to catch any rest whatsoever.

My eyes eventually dimmed as I reread lines from Hemingway’s story, “Fathers and Sons”:

Like all men with a faculty that surpasses human requirements, his father was very nervous. Then, too, he was sentimental, and, like most sentimental people, he was both cruel and abused. Also, he had much bad luck, and it was not all of it his own. I, too, had been cursed with much bad luck, bad luck that had left me feeling suicidal at times. Fortunately, I had a loving son to accompany me on my journey.

When Monday morning rolled around, I packed the car for the short drive northeast from Jonesboro to Piggott. I’m nearly fifty, but my mom nevertheless insisted on loading me up with a pantry’s worth of snacks before taking my picture in front of the car. I felt like an overgrown kid heading to summer camp.

The drive through rural Arkansas, through towns named Marmaduke and Rector, made me

lonely—the flat farmland and small, sometimes desolate, towns reminded me of how empty and quiet our country can be, so far removed from the cacophony and occasional chaos of cities like my current place of residence, Minneapolis.

I decided to attend the retreat based on my favorable impression of Miller's writing and my mom's recommendation. My mom has been attending the retreat for years, reading occasional poems about the childhood exploits of my brothers and me . . . like setting fire to the kudzu in the ravine behind our old home, "running away from home" to a fort in said ravine, and stealing money from an envelope reserved for church tithing.

Recalling her descriptions of past retreats, I had serious doubts about attending. I envisioned a writing group at a retirement home—a bunch of old biddies and geezers sharing stories about their grandkids and sciatica. I had never attended a writing retreat, and I didn't relish the idea of having my writing critiqued by a group of geriatric strangers. And, honestly, I'm not even a big Hemingway fan; I enjoy his writing, but I wasn't convinced it was worth the thirteen-hour drive to visit the place he occasionally visited while writing *A Farewell to Arms*.

Despite all of that, my mom somehow convinced me that I would benefit from the collegial atmosphere and discussions about craft. Plus, it was a good excuse to visit my parents and try something different after a grueling year of COVID quarantine. That and I was unemployed after a year and a half of job rejections.

When I finally pulled into the drive of the Pfeiffer home, I took a moment to sit in my car and examine the large but plain Victorian façade. It wasn't as stately as I anticipated. It didn't look grandiose enough to temporarily house Hemingway's larger-than-life persona or the fortunes of his in-laws' pharmaceutical empire, even as it dwarfed the '70s-style brick rambler that served as the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Educational Center, where our writing classes would be held.

As I entered the center and angled my way toward a seat, an older woman at the conference table blurted out, "I bet I know who you are! You're Fay's son." She introduced herself as Charlotte. Another woman in the room chimed in, "Oh, yeah. Fay with no E. She's a regular." That was Talya, the only published novelist in the group besides the instructor.

Oh, great, I thought. Every expletive and lurid phrase I read aloud is going to find its way back to my mom.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

We kick off the first class with a great conversation about the humor and wisdom of Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, a book all novice writers are encouraged to read, and then dive into a reading of Joe Brainard's *I Remember*. Miller, our instructor, reading the crowd, skims over Brainard's more titillating memories about his sexual experiences.

We break for independent writing time after lunch. That's when I wind up alone in the Pfeiffer house. Returning to the Educational Center, Karen, an assistant with ASU Heritage Sites, announces to the room, in what could easily be confused as a conspiratorial tone, that I selected Max's room. Max was the Pfeiffer's fourth child who died from the 1918 flu epidemic at age eleven. I had chosen the dead kid's room, who died from the flu no less!

Once the entire group reconvenes, two attendees volunteer to share what they wrote during the break. Tonia, a retired attorney from Little Rock, details her discovery that the man she adored as her maternal grandfather wasn't her real grandfather. Next, Bill, whose occupation escapes me, launches into a sprawling, borderline-metaphysical account of his life and the universe. We're dumbfounded. It's a prolix soliloquy that sounds like free verse. (The next day, Bill transforms the first chapter of prose into a poem per the group's recommendation, and we all agree that it's much better.)

With that, we're dismissed for the day, and I jump in my car and make a run for the Missouri border. Piggott is in a dry county, and I need booze to help me sleep and process my first

strange day at the retreat.

Back in my room at the Inn at Piggott, I pour myself some scotch, fire up Spotify for back- ground music, and set to work on a story. But again, I'm too distracted and it's only the first day, so I step outside my room to inventory the inn's lounge and dining room. As I do, the door clicks shut, and I immediately realize I'm locked out. Shit! My cell phone is in the room, and there's no phone in the lobby. I ring the front bell, but no one responds, so I head back to the second floor and nervously knock on the guest's door across from mine. No answer. I cross the hall and knock on another door.

"Is someone out there?" a woman yells. She peeks through the curtain in the door's window, and I recognize Charlotte's face. "Who is that?!"

"It's Damon, Charlotte. I'm sorry to bother you, but I've locked myself out of my room, and I need to call someone to let me in."

"I'm not dressed, Damon," she adds before quickly cracking open the door and thrusting her phone at me.

"I'm very sorry. This should only take a mi- nute," I reassure her.

"It's okay," she tells me. "I'm your mother's friend."

Sleep comes easier that evening with the help of scotch. Like the old man who stays too late drinking at a café in Hemingway's story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," I feel like the loneli- est man in the world, the drink in hand my only companion. But I am settling in. I don't even mind the rumble of trains outside the inn.

A Way You'll Never Be

We open the conversation on the second day with a discussion about Jo Ann Beard's essay "Now," which I love for the vivid description of Alaska, the author's channeling of her father's World War II experience, and references to Neil Young and Denis Johnson. There is dissent over the essay's value. Some of us like the imagery and the free-form style; others are frustrated by the lack of structure and focus.

We learn that the piece was originally a speech Beard presented and later printed in AGNI magazine. Beth, a writing instructor at the University of Tennessee-Martin, is not cool with this. "Do you think we could get away with some- thing like that?"

Mary adds that Beard wrote a celebrated essay for The New Yorker called "The Fourth State of Matter" about a mass shooting at the Univer- sity of Iowa that won her a loyal audience. Mary promises to hunt it down.

Next up is Cheever's story, *Reunion*. This one is about an estranged father and son on a day-drinking excursion. It promptly brings out the psychoanalysts among us. Bill, for the first of what will be many times to follow, opens the Pandora's Box of his personal life and shares an account of his time in a psychiatric hospital. As he veers farther off topic and into the murkier recesses of his mind, the rest of us, intrigued and unnerved, collectively pull back a little from the table, acknowledging that a boundary has been crossed.

Charlotte, a former school librarian, soon mollifies us with a piece about her childhood in the '50s. Then Beth shares a story about meeting William Stafford during her stint as a graduate student, recalling how she smugly treated the anthropologized poet. Her story is full of subtle references to Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark." The references are lost on our group. It's been more than twenty years since I've read the poem, and the others haven't read it at all. But it's a clever story, and a beautiful reminder to wake up every morning and get to work on what you love.

That evening after dinner, I grab some scotch, my portable speaker, and a copy of Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter" and head to the rear deck of the inn to read and scribble some thoughts. The sun sets in time with Yo-Yo Ma's cello. The deck shakes as a train blows by in the background. Birds dart by, surfing the breeze and skirting past a waxing gibbous moon that has just begun to peak around the corner of the inn's roof. A text from my wife says she'll call soon. The phone remains silent.

I look across the town from the balcony. It must have been a much different place in Hem- ington's day. I gulp down the scotch, savoring the earthy-sweet bloom of heat in my mouth. I know that I will never be the writer I want to be.

Back in my room, I pull up Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* on my laptop. The movie is Piggott's other major claim to fame. Part of the film is set in the town.

The movie had a resurgence after the 2016 election. Several political commentators noted the similarities between Donald Trump and the film's main character, Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes. Lonesome is a drifter who uses his good- ole-boy schtick to rise to celebrity status on TV before wedging his way into politics. He's even referred to as an "influencer," just like today's tech-savvy promoters. And, like Trump, he em- bellishes a populist persona to pitch false claims to "real Americans" over the airwaves.

Piggott is smack dab in Trump country. I could walk a few blocks from the main square and spot at least two or three "Trump 2020" banners and even a crudely written "Stop the Steal" yard sign.

The irony isn't lost on me, but, judging by the political placards lingering long past the elec- tion, the locals didn't get the memo.

A Day's Wait

On Wednesday morning, Mary is excited to ask us about "The Fourth State of Matter." We dig into Beard's description of the degeneration of her dog, her husband's abandonment of their marriage, and the mass shooting that kills her colleagues in the Department of Physics and As- tronomy at the University of Iowa. It's a riveting essay with an eloquence that forces us to question our abilities as writers. If it takes a topic as horri- fic as mass murder to be a noteworthy writer, what hope do we have?

"I guess I can't be a writer, then," Charlotte says. "Nothing that interesting happens to me. My life is too normal."

We take turns offering her hollow words of encouragement, but each of us seems to realize the reality of the situation. A devastatingly sad essay has left us sadder still.

Fortunately, Karen turns our thoughts and stomachs away from despair. A veteran violist with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Karen shares a short piece about a subject that is near and dear to our hearts and stomachs: pork. She strings together a comparative history of pork dishes in the Mid-South with their native dishes in Austria, Germany, and France, singing its praises by way of allusions to great composers. It's the perfect transition to lunch.

I head back to the inn for a phone interview for a job in Minneapolis then set about revising my unfinished short story. It's my turn to read my work during the afternoon session, and I'm not relishing the potential criticism.

Back in the classroom, I read the first part of my story, summoning the speed and tone of the story's insecure, adolescent narrator. Even though I emphasize words like "piss" and "dick," the overall response is positive. A couple of the attendees say they can relate to the narrator's plight. Some want to know what happens in the second part since I accidentally include a page and a half of it. I'm reworking the second part, I explain, describing some of the potential plot scenarios.

Talya reads a flash fiction story next. It's about an aging woman inspecting her garden in the morning. I can easily imagine the piece in the "Readings" section of Harper's magazine.

Before we break for the day, I invite the group to join me for dinner at the pizza place on the square and note that the deck behind the inn has a great view of the sunset. I'm in need of some company. Tonia and Talya are the only takers.

We are the only customers, too, so we ask the teenage waitress holding down the fort if it's okay to bring our own wine into the restaurant. "I don't know, but I doubt anyone will be here to- night, so I really don't care," she replies noncha- lantly before returning a few minutes later with three large Styrofoam cups. Without missing a beat, Tonia hands me the key to her room and

gives me instructions on where to find her box of Franzia. Minutes later, I retrieve it from the mini fridge, two short paces past a three-box tower of cigarette cartons. I also grab a bottle of red from my room and smuggle the stash back to the pizza joint in my book bag.

Tonia, Talya, and I wash down our pizza with glassfuls of contraband, rehashing the day's discussions and basking in the moment.

One Reader Writes

We dive into some flash fiction samples on the following day, starting with George Saunders' story "Sticks." One of my favorite living writers, Saunders captures my attention by creating absurd and surrealistic settings that are navigated by characters struggling with their humanity. "Sticks" is about Saunders' father's tradition of decorating a pole for the holidays.

The story inspires me to search for quotes from Saunders while the group reviews our other samples for the day. Saunders has a reputation for producing quotes like this: "What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly."

I will soon discover that this is the universe, via Saunders, preparing me for the afternoon session.

One o'clock rolls around, and I meet with Mary for my one-on-one review session. I had decided to share the first ten pages of a memoir I began writing during the pandemic because it felt like the most earnest writing I've done to date. The book opens with a recollection of a near-fatal night in December 2020 before shifting to the year I spent in Bulgaria after graduating from college. Mary points out that the sections about Bulgaria come across more naturally than the rest. She encourages me to keep working on the material and share the draft with her once I have two hundred pages.

I leave the review session feeling optimistic about my writing for the first time in as long as I can remember. I've always considered myself more of a reader than a writer, so the validation gives me a boost.

The confidence doesn't last long. Back in the class, I read a couple of my poems, foolishly following Beth, the real poet in the room. I first read a poem called "Old Man Winter." At the end of the first page, I freeze. I haven't printed the second page. The room is silent. Embarrassed, I quickly print copies of the second page, pass them around the table, and resume my reading. When I finish, I get an obligatory "That's nice" from someone before the others start lobbing questions and comments my way.

"What do you mean by 'latent snow'?" one woman asks.

"I was thinking of the dormant quality of a pending snowstorm," I argue. "You know, when you can feel it coming? The expectancy. The nearness."

"Maybe you should change this to a flash fiction piece," another recommends.

"Yeah, I can see that" is my lame reply.

"Do you really need the adjective 'dusty' to describe the smell of radiator heat or 'musty' for the warmth of an afghan?" the instructor asks.

"Well, younger readers might not have a clue what radiators smell like and might not even know what an afghan is." It was a weak defense, but it makes sense to me.

The next poem I read is about my daughter— her search for knowledge and answers and my fear of losing her too soon to a cruel world. I choke up as I read a stanza about wanting to shield her from pain as she grows increasingly distant. "But you're leaving me at thirteen," I read. "/ Too soon, it seems, / To fully protect you or to fully grieve."

The tears flow without warning. My strained relationship with my daughter has been lingering in the back of my mind for months now, and I'm finally processing it. I apologize and explain it's the first time I've read the poem aloud. The others smile as I finish the piece. My pathetic display is met with positive reception, and for the first time all week, I'm glad to be here.

That evening, after a catfish dinner with the

group, I let myself decompress. In a sense, I've accomplished something I wasn't expecting—I've held out my writing as a mirror image of myself, reflecting deeply seated thoughts and beliefs for others to see, while discovering another vision of who I've become and who I want to be.

The End of Something

Boobs. That's the topic that provides some much-needed levity during Friday's discussion. It's inspired by the reading of Lucille Clifton's poem, "homage to my hips." The attendees wonder if any poets have written about boobs in the same way, prompting Charlotte to search the web. She comes across a book about Asian breasts. I jokingly tell her to proceed with caution. Scrolling down a webpage, she gasps, "Oh, my!" and we all start laughing.

The conversation takes a more serious tone when we discuss the story "Envy" by Kathryn Chetkovich. It's about her relationship with Jo-nathan Franzen, and her jealousy over his success. She doesn't mention him by name in the story, but everyone looks it up.

It's an appropriate choice for one of our final readings during the retreat. Envy could be considered a central theme of Hemingway's work. His characters envy bullfighters, wild game hunters, other men's women. To an extent, Hemingway envied the writers in Paris who helped him get recognized for fiction: Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some of those writers ultimately envied him in return—or, at least, Fitzgerald did if Hemingway's own egotistical account in *A Movable Feast* is any indication.

I'm certainly envious of the other writers in the group who appear confident and at ease with their writing, something I had hoped to achieve by attending the retreat.

As the final day progresses, Talya shares a story about the deterioration of her long-vacant high school and the disappearance of time. We take turns sharing memories of our old schools, enchanted by nostalgia.

Karen captures our attention with a travelogue about visiting Key West during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. We all want to hear more about the mermaids of Weeki Wachee and Karen's mother's nucleomitophobia (a term that's new to all of us). I don't think to ask Karen if she knew about Hemingway when she was a little girl traveling through his former place of residence a year and a half after he blew his brains out in Idaho. And what would the author have made of the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis? Hemingway didn't have much interest in Castro and Guevara or their fight against Batista. He just wanted to fish and drink and salvage his reputation as a writer with *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The reading that most intrigues me is a final poem from Beth called *Trail*. She asks us to consider two possible endings. I opt for the first version but think she should stop short with the lines: "Listen to the bell ring. / It does not have to be / the devil declaring / he's come to call again."

I recognize it as a nod to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," but I don't probe Beth about the allusion, and I gloss over the possible connection to *For Whom the Bells Toll*. It's only after the retreat that I review the ending of Hemingway's highly regarded novel. The book ends with the main character, Robert Jordan, lying in a forest with a broken leg as he prepares to blow up a bridge to thwart the enemy's advance. Jordan faces a dilemma: He can carry out the mission and wait for the enemy to find him and kill him while his fellow soldiers escape, or he can try to flee with his comrades and possibly live out his days with his lover, Maria. He chooses to stay, the smell of the pine needles on the forest floor flooding him with nostalgia.

The novel reminds us of nature's maxim: All things must come to an end; we are simply part of the cycle. Life can seem futile, but does it remain so if we get to choose how to live it?

I came to the retreat with a sense of dread. I thought I would be bored, that I wouldn't have anything in common with the attendees. I would realize my efforts to write were hopeless, and it would drive me deeper into the depression that

have haunted me for years.

Instead, I left the retreat with a sense of purpose. Impressed with the insight of my fellow writers and their confidence to examine memories both beautiful and hideous. I want that. I don't want to succumb to despair and cut my life short like Hemingway.

The devil might very well come calling again, but hopefully I'll be too busy writing to pay him any attention.

Delta Sources and Resources

The Hemingway-Pfeiffer Summer Writer's Retreat
Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center
Piggott, Arkansas
by Marcus Charles Tribbett



Hemingway-Pfeiffer House.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.

Hosted annually since 2002 (as 2021 attendee Damon Guinn notes in his essay in this issue), the Summer Writer's Retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum in Piggott, Arkansas, has attracted a wealth of talent for decades—both among participants and teachers. Recent past writers-in-residence have included Matt Gallagher, author of two novels and a collection of short fiction; Mary Miller, who has two novels and two short story-collections; Hugh Martin with three book credits; C.D. Albin, journal editor, poet, and short story author; and Pat Carr with sixteen published books.

An interactive experience for aspiring and published writers alike, the retreat strives to be a place where the craft of writing is sharpened, creativity is strengthened, and camaraderie and friendships are fostered. The teachers have decades of experience among them as creative writing instructors and workshop leaders.

This year's writer-in-residence is Matthew Pitt, Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Texas Christian University. Pitt has worked in television and as an editor, has published two short-story collections, *These Are Our Demands* and *Attention Please Now*, with a third underway and a forthcoming novella, *The Be-Everything Brothers*.

Additional information about the retreat, held this year from June 19th to the 23rd, and a downloadable registration form can be found on the museum's website at hemingway.astate.edu. As the site notes, "participants come from all backgrounds and experience levels." Seize your chance to be mentored and work in a constructive and collaborative atmosphere in a beautiful, historic setting. Registration fee is \$325.



Inside Hemingway's Barn Studio.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.

Refuge

by Kenneth Gulotta

Roberta scraped her chair across the boards of the little back porch off the kitchen, moving closer to her coffee cup on the table. Back at the old house she would have had a nice ceramic ash- tray, something green and leaf-shaped, maybe, for the outdoors feel, just something small for her morning cigarette. But not here: no ashtray, be- cause no morning cigarette. That was one of the first things they put an end to when they moved her in here with them, her grandson Paulie and that wife of his, Robin. Paulie kept making jokes about her getting along with Robin because their names were so similar. Like three letters were enough for two grown women to talk about.

They had moved her to this place and sold her old house out from under her—sold it and used the money to buy the new wood paneling and carpets and plumbing and what-have-you to fix up their house. They did let her have the bigger bedroom, but she knew, just knew they were making plans for it after she died. She knew they were doing that—thinking about their To Do list for the day after.

Roberta picked up her coffee cup, took a sip, and winced: she had left it sitting there too long, and it wasn't coffee anymore. It was whatever cof- fee turned into after it stopped being hot. Dead coffee, maybe.

The screen door yawned open, its spring pro- testing.

"Getting you some sun, Grandma?" Paulie asked.

"A tolerable amount," Roberta said. "Not too much. People with sense step out in the morning when it's easy."

"I know, Grandma. That's how you always liked to do."

"Stay out in the hot sun too long, without a hat or nothing, and you'll fall out. And you two, with your beach tans, you're just crazy. Look like you're farmers, but you don't even grow any- thing."

"Well, it's just the style these days, I suppose. Anyway, I'm heading off to get boards for the windows. I get back, and put them up, and then we'll be hitting the road."

"Never had to evacuate from my house."

"Yeah, but down this way, we've got to ske- daddle for anything category two or up."

"Don't know why you'd move down here, then."

"You know why. You know. We've gone—for my work. I've got to be in New Orleans for work."

"Oh, stores can be anywhere."

"Stores can be. That's true. But galleries can't—they've got to be where people who buy art will be."

"Art. Nobody painted it. They're just camera pictures."

"I'm going, Grandma. We'll be leaving in two, three hours."

The screen door hung for a moment, inched a bit, and then plunged, slamming against the jamb. Thumps sounded and faded as Paulie walked through rooms. The house took a breath as the front door opened and huffed some air back out as it slammed.

Then the screen door creaked, creeping open. Robin came slowly into view, pressing a hand against her lower back. She stepped a foot or two outside, holding the door open with her free hand.

"Grandma, I thought you were looking forward to this," she said. "To spending some time with Carl, in his house, I mean."

Grandma.

"I am looking forward to going to Carl's house. But I can't say it makes sense to have to pick up and leave your house every time it's a threat of rain."

"I just—I wish you would take it easier on Paul. About his work and all."

"Missy, I've known him a lot longer than you, and it'll be a cold day when I have to hold my breath around him. So you'll just have to live with it. Just like I do with all the . . . improvements you've made around here."

The screen door trembled in the sunlight.

"You better shut that," Roberta said, "before you let all the skeeters in."

"There aren't—it's—"

The girl shook her head and shuffled right back in, the screen door letting out a series of little creaks as it dipped slowly shut behind her.

Roberta turned her chair an inch or two to the left, away from the little table with her cold coffee. Across the street, at the house one corner over, a woman moved about on a high porch, bringing potted plants inside one by one. A station wagon stopped in front of the house, and a bald-headed man stepped out. He stood with one foot on the road and the other inside the still-running car.

"Miss Emily, how you doing?" he called.

The woman on the porch peered at the street under her hand. "Who's that? Oh, Peter. I had a real fun time at that party."

"Did you have a good time at the party? What are you up to?"

"I did. I had a real good time. I'm just getting ready for the hurricane."

"You getting ready for the storm?"

Roberta levered herself up from her chair. "Good God," she muttered as she limped to the door to go inside. Across the street, the woman was calling, "I am. I'm getting my plants in before the weather hits."

"Going to stretch out a bit," Roberta grunted as she passed Robin, who was sitting on the sofa watching the weather station.

She slid her right foot against the polished wood floor with each step to her bedroom, refusing to wince at the creaking and twinging of her right knee. Years back, when she was twenty-two, so . . . fifty-six years back, her son Jimmy, Paulie and Carl's father, started screaming in the back yard like he was dying, and she ran to the back door and leapt down the steps and the knee just popped and crunched as she went down. It was never the same. After a time it strengthened enough that she didn't have to limp, though it sometimes let out a single pop, like a knot of pinewood exploding in a bonfire, which her left knee never did. Now, though, she seemed to have crossed over some hill in the healing process, and her knee was returning to its former state: each day she limped a bit more; each day it took her a bit longer to make sure that her leg would support her after she woke in the morning.

And after all that, Jimmy's screaming had turned out to be part of some fit because he had buried some marbles and forgotten where. Playing treasure hunt and then crying over it.

She made her way to the bed and lay on her back. The morning sun fell through one of the bedroom windows in a cluster of slanted, defective squares across the bottom half of her bed. Her knee lay under the patches of light; it warmed slowly as they crept across it.

She watched the ceiling for a while, and then she closed her eyes. The television mumbled about storm tracks and wind speeds through the closed bedroom door. A door slammed outside, and a few minutes later there were bangs and grinding on the other side of the house.

She breathed more slowly. She imagined the sunlight moving like molasses over her knee, dripping down the bed and across the floor. Then, with two muted, casual cracks, the joints of her leg seemed to release and let the blood flow through, bringing pinpricks to the sole of her foot.

The light disappeared with a thud. She opened her eyes and dimly saw the plywood across the window. The wood scuffed from side to side, and then the grinding, louder now, began again, as Paulie, outside, drove the screws to hold

the board in place.

"House looks the same," she said to Carl as he closed the front door.

"Yeah, well, I haven't been doing any remodeling, like these two," he said. He tugged on the doorknob as he twisted the deadbolt key. "How's it coming over there, anyway?" he asked as he turned into the living room.

"Pretty much done," Paulie said. "You'll have to come down and see it soon."

"Well, if I can get away. And it'd have to be during the daylight. I don't like going down there at night. Just the other night in the news they were talking about those carjackings down there?"

"Come on, Carl, it's safe. You know it is. Long as you lock your doors. It's just like any other place—you just have to use your basic sense."

"Well, I don't know." He sat in an easy chair next to the sofa; the vinyl cushions hissed.

"I wouldn't bother coming right over, anyway," Roberta snorted. "They always got something else they want to do to that house—you're liable to come and see it, and then it'll just be different a week later and you'll have to come again."

Robin put her hand on Paulie's, lacing her fingers through his and digging them into the top of his leg.

"Y'all made good time," Carl said. "I was sure it'd take you till midnight to get here."

"It would have, but Paul knows all the alternate routes," Robin said. "All the back roads and side streets and everything. From when he worked for the antique store."

"Which makes a better living?" Carl asked. "Are you making more running that gallery than you did for the antique shop?"

"Usually, yes," Paulie said. "It just depends on business. I was driving for the antique store, so I didn't make much money, but it was always the same amount. At the gallery, my pay can go up and down depending on how many prints I sell and what kind of commission I'm getting and so forth."

"It's that old story—you can go for the steady money or you can take a risk and maybe get you a bigger payday."

"What I don't know," Roberta said, "is how either of those places make any money. One place they're just selling other people's old junk. The other they're selling snapshot pictures. I mean, I had a houseful of old furniture, and I can snap a Polaroid. Seems like I should be rich."

They all stared at the spaces before them. Robin's hand tightened slightly over Paulie's.

"Anyway," Carl said. "Let me get you folks settled in your places for the night."

The power went out, and branches scrabbled as the wind whipped through the trees, but otherwise the night seemed as quiet as any other.

"This far back from the city," Carl said—he called the four-stoplight town six miles from his house a city—"a night like this can actually be kind of pleasant. The wind takes some of the heat off, and we're far enough up from the creek we don't have to worry about the water. As long as you stay out from under big tree limbs—which side of the shed did you park on?"

"This side," Paulie said.

"Well, then, we're all okay, then. All we got to do is wait for the power to come back on."

So they settled into their various beds, lying on top of the sheets in the warmish but not unbearable air—Carl had run the air conditioner at sixty for the last two hours before the power went out—and they all ended up sleeping through the night, waking to the clear skies and light breezes that follow hurricanes, as if the storms scrub the paths they lumber through.

"That didn't seem like nothing at all," Roberta said at the breakfast table. "Seems like we could've set still."

"Up here is one thing," Carl said. "Could've been a lot worse down there, down in that New Orleans bowl."

"You got a radio?" Robin asked.

"Forgot to buy batteries," Carl said.

"When we finish eating, I'll go turn on the car radio," Paulie said.

"We may as well load up and head on," Roberta said. "Listen to the radio on the way back."

"What's the hurry?" Paulie asked. "You've been saying for months you wanted to visit Carl."

"Yeah, Grandma, you sick of me already?" Carl asked.

"I just don't want us to overstay our welcome, is all."

"Anyway, it doesn't make sense to load up yet," Paulie said. "Let me listen to the radio and make sure the roads are open first."

They chewed the pastries that Paulie had bought on the way out of the city the afternoon before—two jelly doughnuts for Roberta and chocolate croissants for everyone else. The kitchen door rattled as someone rapped on the other side of it.

"Tell whoever that is to knock softer," Roberta said. "My heart pretty near stopped."

Carl got up and peeked through the window over the sink. "It's just Chick," he said. "He didn't mean nothing—that's just how he knocks." He went to the door and opened it. A roundish man with a brown beard stood on the other side.

"Y'all know about the road?" he asked.

"Which road?" Carl asked. "You mean our road to the big road?"

"Yep. Blocked. Trees're in it—damn near the whole woods, looks like. Tornadoes, they saying, Bull and Pearl and them. We're trapped. Everybody's meeting up there where it starts, just a hundred feet or so up."

Carl turned back to the table. "Paulie, you better come on with me so we can see what this old guy is talking about."

Paulie got up and walked to the door.

"Have you heard anything about the rest of the roads?" he asked as he and Carl stepped outside. "Back to New Orleans?"

"New Orleans is gone, man," Chick said as Carl closed the door. As the three men walked away, his voice came faintly through the kitchen window. "They're saying it's completely under water, or washed away. Saying different things. No one's going back, anyhow."

Gravel crunched softly into silence. Roberta wiped some jelly from her lips. Robin looked at her and then looked away. She pressed a hand against her swollen stomach and shifted slightly in her chair.

“Man’s real name is Chick—that’s what he said, anyway,” Paulie said. “And get this—his best friend is named Bull.”

“Now that can’t be his real name,” Robin said.

“That I do not know. I didn’t ask him.”

Paulie was back at the kitchen table with Robin and Roberta, telling them about the people he’d met that morning, some of Carl’s neighbors who had gathered to talk about the blocked road. Carl was still out there with them.

“There’s more,” Paulie said. “These two guys have dogs—I mean, each one has a dog—and guess what they named their dogs.” He waited while Robin lifted an eyebrow, and then he chortled, “Bull and Chick!”

“Wait . . . they named their dogs with their own names?”

“Yep.” He swiped at the sweat on his forehead, leaving a streak of dirt just below his hairline. He got up and pulled a paper towel from the roll on the kitchen counter and mopped at his face.

“Uhh,” he grunted, wadding the paper towel. He looked around, found the trashcan, and pitched the wet lump at it. Then he bent over the sink to open the kitchen window. “Cold air is all gone,” he said. “We may as well start opening these to get some breeze, at least.”

“Are you rhyming on purpose?” Robin asked.

“No. Was I? I’m worn out.” He sat back down at the table.

“So which dog belongs to who?” Robin asked. “Whom, I mean.”

“What?”

“I mean, did Bull name his dog Bull and Chick name his dog Chick, or did Bull name his dog Chick and Chick name his dog Bull?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t come up.”

“Because that seems like a big difference. Either they’re full of themselves or they truly are the best friends ever. I mean, maybe they’re

more—maybe we're talking about something else here."

Paulie and Robin laughed.

"This is all so interesting," Roberta said. "But what I want to know is what's being done to clear the road."

"Well, Grandma, we spent most of the morning digging, but we didn't make much headway with crowbars and chainsaws." He turned to Robin. "Chick, at one point, he had me use a crowbar as a lever to lift a tree and get a block under it, so could get at it with the chain-saw, and afterward the crowbar was bent."

"So you just came on in while your brother stayed out there working?" Roberta sneered. "Just like always—old Carl sticks with the hard work while Paulie hightails it inside."

Paulie turned and looked at her for a moment. Then he said:

"Let me ask you something, Grandma. Why am I always Paulie, but he's Carl? You know I want to be called Paul. Why isn't Carl ever Carlie?"

"Oh, you've always been Paulie," she said. "And Carlie isn't a man's name, even. It's no name at all!"

"What about Carly Simon?" Robin asked. "That's someone named Carly."

"A woman, though, right?"

"Yes."

"So. So that's why."

"It doesn't matter," Paul said. "What matters is I want to be called Paul. I've been wanting to be called Paul since I was thirteen, but you've always just refused. I would think you could just call me by my real name when that's what I want."

She didn't speak.

"Anyway, Grandma, Carl isn't still out there working. He and his friends are having beers on Chick's porch, and I came back here instead to check on you two." He turned again to Robin. "I told them there was no way we were digging ourselves out of here, not with the tools we've got. I started climbing through, and the fallen trees were so thick I couldn't even make it. I just hope I didn't get into any poison ivy or anything. But I bet I didn't even make it a tenth of the way through. Who knows? I maybe did hear engines, though, just at one point. So I think the town, the municipal workers or whatever, must be digging us out. The others say there's no way the town would have

anyone out here, down this back road, this quick, but, I don't know, someone was moving stuff out there."

"What about home?" Robin asked. Then, she said in a lower voice: "Was there any more about how bad it is? Like, word on which neighborhoods got it the worst?"

He shook his head. "They're saying all kinds of things. I think we just have to wait until we can get out somewhere we can get some real news, some real information, before we let ourselves get worked up about anything." He glanced over at Roberta, and then he looked back at Robin. "I didn't feel much like hanging out with those guys for beers. One of them—young guy, too, this—started going on about"—he altered his voice, injecting a twang into it, and crooked the index and middle fingers of both his hands into mid-air quotation marks—"jigaboos in the city going around looting everybody's houses."

"Really?" Robin scoffed. "Psh."

"Well, maybe they are!" Roberta glowered. "Maybe there are looters down there right now in that city, just doing whatever they want—whatever they're always wanting to do." She jabbed a finger at Paulie. "This is what you've done. You moved down into that city and you brung me with you. I would've been happy still in my own house, but you went and sold it away, and you used that money for your own place, and your own place probably just got washed away!"

"Enough!" Robin shouted, slapping the table. "Just stop it! Stop acting like we stole from you and forced you into something." She shook her head. "You asked to move in with us. You begged us. And your house was barely standing. There were rats in the walls—they were rotting, the walls were rotting and the roof, the inspector said, the roof was about to collapse in four places." She waved her hands above her head at

collapsing bits of roof. "You had to sell! And we didn't take your money from you! You offered us some money for renovations so we could give you your own room and bathroom. The rest of your money is in your bank account. We haven't touched a penny of it, and we won't, either!" She dropped her hands back to the table and pressed them together. Paulie placed one of his hands on top of both of hers.

"I don't have to just take getting yelled at," Roberta said, shoving her chair back from the table. "Not from my grandson's wife, I don't!" She pressed down on the tabletop, hauling her- self up. "I'm going to find Carl and see what he has to say about the road getting cleared."

She walked to the door, her knee ratcheting. She went out, leaving the door open behind her, and walked up the driveway. Her knee made less noise with each step; by the time she was on the dirt-and-gravel road, it was quiet and seemed to be back in some kind of working order.

She trudged around the bend in the road and came upon the wall of fallen trees. Chick had been right: it seemed like the whole forest was there, pressed all together in one clotted tan- gle. The strange thing was, the rest of the forest was still there. There was a forest's worth of trees where the road had been, but they didn't seem to have come from anywhere else in the forest— the standing trees looked just as thick as when they had driven past them the evening before.

She heard voices and laughter off to the right. She peered into the trees and bushes and saw another driveway going down from the dirt road. Carl's snorting laughter rose. The leaves seemed to shake with it. She could walk down that driveway, probably, and find him and his friends.

She looked around; there was a sawed-off sec- tion of log on the side of the road, standing up- right—someone had been using it as a stool, most likely. She trudged over to it and sat down.

She looked at the wall of fallen trees, won- dering what would happen. Who was right? Was that grumbling in the ground the township dig- ging them out, like Paulie (Paul) thought? Or were Carl's friends right? Would they have to dig their way out on their own, over days, weeks, or months, living in the meantime like pioneers back in this sopping little valley, no electricity, catching fish and drinking creek water? Living worse than pioneers, probably, because she doubted any of them had any pioneer know-how. Is that what was going to happen? Was she going to die out here in circumstances more pathetic than those of an old pioneer woman?

The grumbling in the ground grew louder and became coughing and snarling in the air. Cracks and pops began echoing in the trees. The coughing settled into a roaring that rose and fell, again and again, until the branches at the edge of the wall of fallen trees trembled and parted. A log spun slowly backward, and a pair of black metal beams pushed through the opening, fol- lowed by a set of orange metal boxes.

Some sort of backhoe worked its way through the trees and pushed into the clear por- tion of the road. A boy with blond hair was driv- ing the machine. He couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen. He looked around and saw Roberta, and then he reached down and turned the machine

off.

"Do you work for the town, young man?" she called to him.

"No, ma'am," he responded. "My grandpa and my cousins and I are trying to dig as many people as we can out today. Lots of these dirt roads have got trees down, but this is the worst, seems like." He thumped the machine's side with his heel. "This here's my grampa's Kubota." He glanced at her again, and then he twisted around, looking for other people. "Do you live back on this road, ma'am? I'm sorry, I guess I don't recognize you. Do you need help back to your house or something?"

"No," she said. She bent forward to push up from the section of log, but then she let herself fall the few inches back onto it. It had been sawed unevenly, and a ridge near the edge dug through her dress, gnawing at the underside of her leg. "No," she said again. "I don't live back here. I don't live anywhere at all."

Delta Sources and Resources

have haunted me for years.

Instead, I left the retreat with a sense of purpose. Impressed with the insight of my fellow writers and their confidence to examine memories both beautiful and hideous. I want that. I don't want to succumb to despair and cut my life short like Hemingway.

The devil might very well come calling again, but hopefully I'll be too busy writing to pay him any attention.

Delta Sources and Resources

The Hemingway-Pfeiffer Summer Writer's Retreat
Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center
Piggott, Arkansas
by Marcus Charles Tribbett



Hemingway-Pfeiffer House.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.

Hosted annually since 2002 (as 2021 attendee Damon Guinn notes in his essay in this issue), the Summer Writer's Retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum in Piggott, Arkansas, has attracted a wealth of talent for decades—both among participants and teachers. Recent past writers-in-residence have included Matt Gallagher, author of two novels and a collection of short fiction;

Mary Miller, who has two novels and two short story-collections; Hugh Martin with three book credits; C.D. Albin, journal editor, poet, and short story author; and Pat Carr with sixteen published books.

An interactive experience for aspiring and published writers alike, the retreat strives to be a place where the craft of writing is sharpened, creativity is strengthened, and camaraderie and friendships are fostered. The teachers have decades of experience among them as creative writing instructors and workshop leaders.

This year's writer-in-residence is Matthew Pitt, Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Texas Christian University. Pitt has worked in television and as an editor, has published two short-story collections, *These Are Our Demands* and *Attention Please Now*, with a third underway and a forthcoming novella, *The Be-Everything Brothers*.

Additional information about the retreat, held this year from June 19th to the 23rd, and a downloadable registration form can be found on the museum's website at hemingway.astate.edu. As the site notes, "participants come from all backgrounds and experience levels." Seize your chance to be mentored and work in a constructive and collaborative atmosphere in a beautiful, historic setting. Registration fee is \$325.



Inside Hemingway's Barn Studio.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.

We Lost Bill Harrison

by M J Melneck

I left Missoula and drove into Fayetteville on Labor Day weekend, 1969, in a 1956 Ford Crown Victoria that I'd bought from Jim Crumley for \$325 that I didn't have. Pretty much everything I owned fit in the car, including my wide carriage Olympia SM-9, a wad of bad poetry and a couple of mediocre short stories. I had that, and a dog (Spanky Benchmark) in Montana. Bill had Mer-lee, three kids, two golden retrievers, The Theolo- gian and In a Wild Sanctuary.

The workshops began, and the first thing I learned from Bill was that there are only eight colors in the Crayola box, "And f*%\$#ng 'Burnt Sienna' isn't one of them," he said one after-noon. I don't remember who tried to use that color; I was just glad it wasn't me. We were "al- lowed" two adjectives per fifty pages. Nouns and verbs, verbs and nouns. "Understatement is the particularization of art." The workshops went on; we newbies took and taught Faulkner Grammar, staying only a couple of pages ahead of the stu- dents. At a gathering one night Paul Williams's wife complained to Bill that Paul wanted to write fifteen hours a week. Bill looked her in the eye and said, "Dina, I erase fifteen hours a week."

My assistantship paid \$144 a month, and September's \$75 rent degraded to my one-fourth part of a cinderblock hovel down the hill from the student union—\$30. I was miserable, took In- completes, and drove back to Montana without looking in the rear-view mirror because I knew too well what I'd left behind.

Bill published Lessons in Paradise in '71, the Rollerball book of stories in '75, and in the summer of '76 I got married while Bill published Africana. The first paragraphs of that novel are still, to me, one of the greatest "Oh, shit, here it



Bill Harrison.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

comes" openings I've ever known. I fell in love with Val too, but of course she was too beautiful for ordinary men. I had a finished manuscript of my own *Old Music*, though it would take three agents and twenty plus years to get it published. I sent Bill fifty or so pages and he invited Pat and me to come back to finish my MFA. Hello, Fayetteville, 1978. Make up the Incompletes, teach, write, adopt three Special Needs kids, and watch Bill put out *Savannah Blue*, then *Burton and Speke*. In the midst of that came *A Shining Season*, for which he won a prize. I took the MFA in two years, got a three-year no-tenure teaching gig, then went to work for President Martin as Director of University Information. Bill was writing *Three Hunters*.

I did this; Bill published *The Buddha in Malibu*. I did that; Bill gave us *The Blood Latitudes*. I



Members of the University of Arkansas Creative Writing program: (front row) Bill Harrison, Carolyn Forche, and Jim Whitehead; (back row) Miller Williams and John Clellon Holmes. Photograph courtesy of the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, University of Arkansas.

had a “necktie life.” Bill gave us Texas Heat, and Black August, the Rollerball and Mountains of the Moon scripts.

You’ll notice that the constant in these past decades— isn’t me. It’s Bill Harrison. The writer. The guy who got it done. Again and again. He told us one day, in a workshop that hadn’t gone all that well, “You people don’t want to write— you want to have written.” The gap is something like the distance between the near side of this Universe, and the far side of another one. Bill knew the gap like none of us could, then or per- haps now.

Bill made me—makes me—a better writer, per- haps more by inspiration than by instruction. And if there’s a better angel somewhere inside me, Bill still makes me trust it and leaves me a great deal to strive toward. Our visits grew farther apart, as did our phone calls, but I’ve known no stronger bond. I lost it the day he told me he was “losing” nouns.

Bill Harrison changed me, quite for the better. And if he hasn’t changed you, you aren’t paying attention. Bill’s beacon will shine for me all of my own days, and if I can pay it forward as he did so beautifully, long past my time. Because of Bill Harrison I am blessed far beyond my de- serving.

Rest, my friend—you will always be much loved.



Bill Harrison in Africa

Photograph courtesy of the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, University of Arkansas.

Abecedarian for a Hometown Tornado

by Andrew Alexander Mobbs

Antagonized by charcoal skies, townsfolk
bowed their heads in prayer, beelined for Polaroid
cameras to document southern springtime
destruction bleeding out in the electric air.
Elementary schoolkids curled under wooden desks,
fearful of the sky tearing its seams, sirens
going off at the drop of a drugstore dime,
hallways left hollow in metallic hiss and creak.
I imagine my parents, twenty-something and
just out of college, exchange a fleeting
kiss goodbye before dad got in his gold Nova,
lead foot gunning for his folks' during
midday darkness, drifting in brick-splitting wind.
Not much back then but your family farms,
open land to gobble and shred, those five
poor souls laid flat beneath white sheets in the
quiet aftermath of pine sap sizzling.
Remember, just weeks before, several
science teachers at the local schools had
taught lessons on twisters—how spiraling
updrafts and downdrafts can waltz inside
violent velocities of daggered rain. How
when the storm cellars finally open up to a
xanthic haze of debris, each living throat
yells out their drawled grief, a soft
zephyr spreads the scent of honeysuckle.

“A Tainted House of Prayer”: Artist V. L. Cox on White Supremacy, Southern Culture, and Her Persisting Love of the Delta

by Guy Lancaster

V. L. Cox was born in Shreveport in 1962 but grew up in Arkadelphia. After working in marketing and advertising after college, she devoted herself to her art in 1997 and has not looked back. Her most well-known work is the “End Hate” installation, produced in response to a 2015 bill before the Arkansas Legislature that would have permitted discrimination against members of the LGBTQ community by reference to religious beliefs. The installation consisted of differently colored doors with labels on them such as “Colored Only” and “Whites Only” and “Veterans Only.” The last door in the series, labeled “Human Beings,” was wrapped in chains. Her work has since been featured twice at the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and at the Delta Cultural Center in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, as well as the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond and the LGBT Center in New York. Most recently, her work was on display at the Annex Gallery at the Pendleton Art Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Being a radical lesbian artist whose work touches upon the history of Jim Crow has made V. L. Cox the target of much ire in Arkansas, from both conservatives and progressives alike. In 2021, she relocated to Peekskill, New York, where she has had greater opportunities to be herself and to connect with the larger art world, even if the barbecue up there is terrible and the fried catfish nonexistent.

The interview occurred over a shared electronic document during November and December 2022 and has been lightly edited, with occasional editorial insertions placed in brackets.

Guy Lancaster: I grew up in eastern Arkan-



V. L. Cox with self-portrait *Escape Velocity*.
Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

sas, amid the flat land of the Delta, and as a consequence I was always fascinated by places that possessed “actual geography,” hills and whatnot. But you grew up in the hilly country around Arkadelphia. What attraction does the Delta have for you?

V. L. Cox: I was briefly introduced to the Delta when I moved to Memphis, Tennessee in the early '80s to sow the wild oats of my youth. I

had taken a break from college and followed extremely talented friends from Arkansas who were in the Memphis Blues, a new Drum and Bugle Corps that had formed in the historic music city only one state away. Boy what a new world Memphis was for a small-town country girl. I worked as a waitress and bartender on historic Beale Street before it became so commercialized and, after long double shifts, would often sit on the banks of the Mississippi River as the sun set and look south across the rolling water towards a strange, flat land that I felt I knew. A land with black soil and a strong, silent voice that echoed across the water beckoning me home. It wasn't until decades later during my Civil Rights journey that I started learning about the Elaine Massacre and the stories and history of the Delta that we were never taught. Every time I was back in Arkansas I began spending as much time as I could in Helena and Elaine, and as the sun sank low in the sky, I drove desolate, flat, farm roads through endless tiny ghost towns whose presence was marked only by the weathered boards of abandoned mercantile stores or empty wooden churches on the side of the road.

It was during these numerous explorations that I would stop and talk to the locals if they looked interesting. One guy was named Moonpie, and after visiting with him about his life, he politely asked if I would help him cut a tree down on his property if I was going to stick around long enough. Another was a store owner who told me gruffly an inch from my face to "get out of town before sunset or [you] could be knocked in the head by the locals" (I backed out of that place slowly towards the door). I always kept my eyes out for the Arts though, which I feel has been shunned in the Arkansas Delta and not acknowledged or explored fully due to its rural location and socioeconomic status.

On my last trip, I stopped to photograph an old church that caught my eye and, while looking down, saw a molted snakeskin laying at my feet. I picked it up, photographed it and found it rep-



Cox with the molted snakeskin.
Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

representational of my journey. The Delta is a calling. And if you answer it, you shed your outer self and become something entirely different. You never leave the same person after experiencing it. I still have that photo. It's framed in my studio to this day.

GL: What does the Delta do for you or to you as an artist? Do you find that the art you produce in response to experiencing the Delta is of a different quality or theme than your other work?

VLC: The Delta has been a life changing experience for me, yet I think it goes hand in hand as far as my Civil Rights and Social Justice work goes. The secrets and the stories that have longed to be told are finally beginning to surface in the Delta. The Art World, however, can be full of itself at times with pretentious economic exclusion, closed-door academic exclusion, and retail

dollars often taking precedence over creativity, sacrifice, and talent. I have bucked that closed system for years much to my own demise, with the Delta being my constant reminder of who I really am and the simple message my work needs to convey. Staying true to yourself through hard work, integrity and embracing the truth, good or bad and learning from it, is much more important than being accepted in a clique or a club. I am a Southern woman who has travel and an extensive group of friends and acquaintances under her belt, but my heart remains in the South. I've climbed the mountains where I was raised, I've swam naked in clear mountain streams, I've walked a million miles barefoot through the woods, and I've slept on the ground so many times I've lost count under a comforting blanket of a thousand twinkling stars. But nothing calls to me creatively like the Delta. The last painting I did in Arkansas before relocating to New York was a self-portrait standing in a Delta cottonfield, clutching a rainbow flag with my bare chest partially exposed, while looking North. It represented strength, growth, vulnerability, and a longing for change. My Guggenheim Fellowship proposal that year was to travel back from New York and follow the same path Robert Kennedy did in the 1960s, document the Delta with the looming effects of Climate Change on the horizon and highlight the ongoing struggles, resiliency, and creativity of the people there. I would then create a completely new body of work based on the photos and data in hopes of telling and preserving the stories that remain. The proposal was too broad for them, but inclusiveness is important to me, so broad is how I prefer to roll creatively. I continue to think about this project all the time, and I fully expect to complete it.

GL: There's this big region in America we call "the South," that draws together Delta flatlands, Ozark and Appalachian uplands, coastal communities, rivertowns, the staggering wealth of Miami and Atlanta, and the poverty of so many other places. Do you see anything that actually unifies all of this? And if there is some reality that unifies this Southern experience, does it then still make sense to call the Delta, as it has been popularly dubbed, "the most Southern place on earth"?

VLC: Yes. Food and Art. Those two things alone can bring about unity and world peace. Why do you think one of the first things authoritarian governments try to crush is the Arts? It's because they know the extent of its true power. The Arts are a different, yet universal language. One that cuts through the constant onslaught of blather, documents historical events and visually crosses religious, political, and socioeconomic boundaries with ease. Its unification and educational qualities are embraced yet feared by many, and in all my travels I still stand by my belief that some of the most talented people I have ever known and some of the best art I have ever seen, are from the South. And I have seen a lot of art. The South is where the magical, cherished oral history of storytelling evolves to a different level and creatively begins to take another form.

The food of the South is known worldwide, and God bless 'em, Brooklyn doesn't know real BBQ to save their life, but they're trying. I have also known of divorce proceedings being considered in the South over someone putting a cast iron skillet in the dishwasher, and I would wager that crime runs the full social economic spectrum. Art and food, especially in the South, are what I consider the most basic, cherished tools of survival and the secret to knowledge, unity, and peace. The history of the rich, fertile land, the people from old indigenous communities to now, the deadly, hidden secrets of the past that have long needed to surface so they can begin to heal, the

mysterious beauty of the swamps, the life-giving rivers, the incredible home-grown food, the art, the relentless blistering heat, the beautiful sunsets and the sounds of the cicada at dusk singing their ancestral song as they welcome the

stars. The Delta is definitely “the most Southern place on earth,” and I will die on that hill.

GL: Well, you’ll have to leave the Delta to find a hill to die on!

VLC: Ha!

GL: Thinking about the Delta as the most southern place on earth brings to mind your work “Delta Mercantile,” which strikes me as one of the most southern artworks you’ve done. If you’ve driven through the Delta, you’ve seen those long-abandoned places covered over in rusted signs. Where did you get the materials for this? It looks like you’ve converted some old shutters into the walls.

VLC: “Delta Mercantile” is created from an original old copula salvaged from the top of an old structure that had been located somewhere in the Delta. The rest are pieces I’ve collected on my travels and explorations through the South. I try to use original materials with provenance when I can find them, but these pieces are becoming as scarce as hen’s teeth as many structures of the Delta fall into disrepair or decay.

I’ve always had a special place in my heart for those old mercantile stores. I have driven by numerous skeletal remains of them in the Delta and remember the ones I frequented fondly in the hills as a child. The creaking, wooden floors, the smell of smoked bacon and lunchmeat being trimmed and sliced in the back, the cast-iron wood burning stove with mismatched chairs in the corner, the obligatory gallon jar of pickled eggs (that I never saw anyone eat) that sat not far from the cash register or the butcher counter and the rack of comic books that changed my life and turned me into a creative, fanatical book collector for over 40 years. The old Vacation Bible School bus I found myself on every summer, despite my pleas and protests, would careen on two wheels to a stop in front of Thompson’s mercantile store on Highway 8, announcing our arrival in a hot cloud of dust. The sweltering bus was



A front view of Delta Mercantile.
Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

not air conditioned, and all of us country kids, after being told by the bus driver that sweating brings you closer to God, would pour off that dilapidated oven on wheels in search of the cold, life-giving holy grail of the South. An ice-cold Coke with a bag of Tom's salted roasted peanuts poured in. Now THAT was true salvation. I felt closer to God in that old mercantile store than any rural church. Those memories flood back every time I see the remnants of one of those holy stores in the Delta, and after the "Delta Mercantile" piece, I've considered creating a small series of these stores from the photo archives of my travels.

GL: There seems to be some conscious irony whereby we think of these mercantiles as places that were so intensely local, and yet their local importance depended greatly upon their offering of products from so far away.

VLC: That's true. From food variety, to fancy bolts of fabric, pantyhose and homemaker supplies to farming supplies, pocket knives and hardware. Loyalty came with variety. My father was a staunch Case Knife man, which originated in 1889 and was sold out of the back of a wagon in upstate New York yet was found in every mercantile store throughout the South. My father loved those "northern" knives so much, he was buried with one in his pocket in a southern rural family cemetery.

The importance of these old stores had many different levels. They also served and took care of the most vulnerable in their community. One of my main memories after my grandfather passed, was when my grandmother and I went to Welch's Grocery in Arkadelphia in the late '60s early '70s. She would always hand Mr. Welch her list, and he would help gather her sundries then carry them to the car. This day, however, was different. It was during desegregation, and his store had a direct view to the courthouse in downtown Arkadelphia. As we walked through the squeak-



Corner view of Delta Mercantile.
Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

ing wooden door, hearing the little tinkling of the bell announcing our arrival, Mr. Welch met us with a look of concern on his face. He took my grandmother's list, put his hand on her shoulder and quietly told her, "Now Mrs. Hard- man, you take that grandbaby, turn right around and go on home. It's not safe here today. I'll de- liver your groceries here shortly." As we got back in the car and were leaving, I glanced across the road towards the courthouse and saw a surging white crowd in turmoil sprinkled with men in white helmets. I didn't realize the national impli- cations of desegregation due to my youth at the time, but my hometown wasn't immune to it.

GL: You've got two "self-portraits" that seem to be having a conversation with one another. The first, "Reflection," is mostly taken up with a wardrobe slightly open, showing a Confederate flag hanging up inside, with the self-portrait com-

ponent being confined to a mirror on the ward-robe, with your own image barely visible in the glare. The second, "Escape Velocity," features you in your characteristic flannel shirt (but no bra or undershirt) and torn jeans, standing at the edge of a cotton field, holding the pride flag in one hand and gazing into the cloudy sky threatening a storm. And I can't help thinking that, although it's the Rebel flag in the closet, your identity is the one being erased by its presence, in contrast with the second painting, where both you and flag are out in the open.

VLC: Those are two of the most personal pieces I have ever painted. "Reflection" is an actual moment where I caught my reflection in the mirror of an old Civil War-era wardrobe I had acquired from Tennessee. I had been storing flags inside of it for some of my future art projects (Pride, American, and Confederate), and one afternoon I heard the creaking of the wardrobe door open behind me. As I turned around, I saw that my cat had jumped on top of the wardrobe



Reflection.

Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

and jarred the door open, exposing the lone Confederate flag, which was ominously peeking out from the shadows. It sent a shiver up my spine.

I am a bonafide Southerner, but the South has not been truthful about its evil past. I was taught in public school that the war was fought over "States Rights" (bottom line, the right to own other

men), Northern Aggressors or “Yan- kees” coming down to take our rich farmlands and resources (it’s easy to flourish financially when you have free labor), and higher taxes on our cotton. I was also taught that slaves had decent, stable lives on plantations and floundered so much after being given their freedom, they were given 40 acres and a mule by the U.S. government. But as we all know, during Reconstruction almost all land allocated during the war was restored to its pre-war white owners, yet I’ve heard this bitterly mentioned by disgruntled white, male southerners my entire life, of “why they can’t get ahead?” I was never taught about the brutal, deadly depths of slavery, didn’t learn about the Elaine Massacre or Black Wall Street and the Tulsa Race Riots until I was in my 50s, and still to this day often hear the n-word fall out of ignorant mouths in south Arkansas more often than a prayer. This brief visual moment of reality when that wardrobe door opened was a stark reminder that no matter how much you try to educate yourself and pull yourself out of the ignorance, myths, and whitewashed history that you were exposed to your entire life, parts of that racist, close-minded environment will always remain in your background trying to overpower you and claim you as its own. The struggle at family reunions, the painful conversations with your elders or the youth in your family due to perpetuated disinformation of hatred and discrimination, believing in the preservation of “heritage” and “southern pride” in a twisted form of religious white supremacy, that never goes away. Acknowledging that ominous and ever-present struggle, however, is part of what has

made me who I am today. A strong, rebellious Southern woman, continually striving for the truth, who never forgets that the symbol of a white supremacy heroic fable, mixed in cruelty and injustice, continues to reach out of the shadows in hopes of claiming yet another generation. As far as "Escape Velocity" goes, I am a firm believer that there are only two emotions in life. Fear and Love. Every other emotion stems off of these. I painted this piece after leaving the South. The cotton field, a worn, vast, battleground of injustice, shows snapped antiquated telephone wires and a twisted telephone pole in the form of a cross representing the isolating lines of truth and communication in the Bible Belt that have been intentionally severed and broken over generations never meaning to be repaired. The self-portrait conveys strength, exhaustion, the raw vulnerability of feeling you have nothing left to lose (hence the open flannel shirt with no bra or undershirt), while firmly grasping and refusing to drop the colorful, beautiful, symbol in my hand of who I truly am. Gazing North, through ever-present tumultuous southern storm clouds, with hope and determination to survive and start a new life.

The historical cruelty crafted during the 2021 Arkansas Legislative Session [with the passage of anti-transgender legislation], indistinguishable from a backwoods snake-handling Tent Revival, influenced this painting and my decision to finally leave the home I've always known. Arkansas lost all the progress and anti-discriminatory ground that they gained in 2015 [when previous such legislation was voted down], and the timing during a deadly global pandemic was wickedly plotted and executed. Civil Rights were ripped away from decent, hard-working American citizens and modern-day Jim Crow bigotry rammed through by laughing lawmakers as Arkansians struggled with limited supply chains, access to food, medicine, and basic staples, not knowing which loved one would be the next taken by the mysterious angel of death to suffocate and die. This painting, despite political attempts to once again whitewash history, will continue to tell a Southern story of life, pain, hope, resilience, diversity, survival and the truth.

GL: Your mention of a snake-handling tent revival provides a nice segway to talk about the next piece, "Tent Revival." You've written online that it was inspired by a picture of a revival held by the Ku Klux Klan and that it is crafted from the robe of a Grand Wizard. I spent some time pondering the piece and wondering why you used a real Klansman's robe to make it when you could have used anything. And then I realized that, though the art piece is empty of people, should we imagine an actual revival taking place there, then all those Christians would literally be "under the hood." It speaks to how they are not only implicated in these evils but being revived spiritually in the context of evil. It speaks to that Protestant doctrine of total depravity, how every person born cannot help but to act in service to sin without the grace of God, but here the tabernacle of God's grace is constructed out of a relic of that sin. And I remember, too, how a professor of mine in Japan remarked that while snow in Western cultures is often viewed as a symbol of purity, in Buddhist traditions a white blanket of snow serves the symbolic function of that which obscures sin, smooths out the contours of sin so that you can't see it anymore. The more I thought about it, the more there was going on in this piece.

VLC: There is a lot going on in this piece, yet it's a pretty simple message. The concept originated one day after talking on the phone to an antique dealer out of Atlanta, Georgia. I had noticed on his website a tiny old vintage photograph of what I thought appeared to be a Revival Tent with a "Knights of the Ku Klux Klan" sign in front of it. Now, I have gone to (or was dragged to) plenty of church revivals in my youth under



The artist with Tent Revival.
 Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

the promise of partaking in true communion after the sermon, southern fried chicken, so it really caught my eye. After looking closer at the photograph through a magnifying glass, it was then when I noticed the "Religious Services - Sunday Evening - All Welcome" sign sitting right next to it. The Klan and the local Church were sharing the same exact tent. This tiny photo said a lot, so I acquired a unique robe the dealer had in his personal collection as well for the project. This Revival Tent is made out of an original Cyclops Klan robe that belonged to Roy Frankhouser Jr. in Pennsylvania. Boy, he was something else. [Frankhouser was a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, a member of the American Nazi Party, and later a leader in the Christian Identity movement.] And Roy had a following.

After reading the history of this robe along with historical and current events, I realize that a large population of Christians have, and continue, to congregate "under the hood." I've done extensive research of the history of the Klan, drove over 2,000 miles cross country a few years ago to be the first to see and read rare discovered doctrine and minutes of secret klavern meetings from 1922 and was shocked to see the blatant similarities from the past to today. "Are you a gentile or Jew?" "Were your parents born in the United States of America?" "What is your religious faith?" were some of the initiation questions asked. Documented images from the Library of Congress show Ku Klux Klan members marching in the street by the thousands only two generations ago under the

banners “One God, One Country, One Flag,” “Jesus Saves,” or “For God, One Country and Each Other.” (Sound familiar?) As a business owner in the past, you were expected to be a member of the Klan, and if you weren’t or you rejected their doctrine, you were shunned politically, economically and socially. It was like a bastardized version of a freak Chamber of Commerce of sorts.

Members of the Klan were warmly welcomed in church pews across the country dressed in their full regalia only recognizable by their hands or their shoes. It was, and still is, a hateful, dangerous, militarized religious cult whose ideology has been recently revived with the aggressive and violent recruitment of yet another innocent generation.

“Being revived spiritually in the context of evil” is what we are seeing take place today. I never realized until now the depths that insecure people will go to to achieve a desperate sense of belonging and how spiritually fragile, scared, and lost people are to where they will instantly sell their soul, family and friends out to embrace the first so called religious “Savior” that walks through the door, even though the Bible specifically warns us over and over against this.

I use a lot of historical relics in my work with this being constructed into a deadly symbol of a tainted house of prayer, cloaking the congregation in white supremacy deceit while promising spiritual superiority and a false hope of salvation. And the primitive wooden church pews under the cloak of white supremacy are visually worn for a reason. They continue to be heavily used. White Supremacy, ferociously claiming the white pages of the Bible as its own, brutally twists and moves the black letters around at will but the last time I checked, and I’m pretty sure I’m accurate on this, the robe Jesus wore didn’t come with a hood.

GL: Let’s wrap up with “No Vacancy.” It’s made in large part from the steeple of a Delta church, but I’ll be honest—after thinking about “Tent Revival,” I can’t see that white cone shape as anything but a Klansman’s hood. Is that somewhat intentional?

VLC: Good catch. That’s exactly what it’s supposed to represent. I try not to be too literal in my creations, but I don’t think a lot of people grasped that visual. “No Vacancy” is created from an old 9-foot-tall church steeple from the Delta after reading the story the Arkansas Times did on a young man in northern Arkansas who received a letter in the mail from his church telling him he was immediately being removed from their membership records because he was gay, and then another story about a man who had to actually move his deceased partner’s grave due to the threats in Baxter County. The worker for the monument company who was moving the tombstone was even approached and threatened by a man with a Bowie knife in a Wal-Mart parking lot, who asked “why he had that faggot’s headstone in the back of the truck.”

The neon letters on the handmade cross ominously flicker off and on like a cheap, sketchy Motel sign on the side of the road, leaving the viewer wondering if there are any vacancies or not. And if there are? Is that really a place that you would feel clean and safe and where you would spend your time and money?

While creating “No Vacancy,” I was reminiscing upon a piece I did several years ago called “30 Pieces of Silver,” which was based on an experience I had after being invited to visit a small rural country church in South Arkansas. I had briefly met and befriended a few of the younger members that attended there so I agreed to join them that next Sunday. Everything was going pretty much the way it normally does when I visit church, I was lip syncing through a few of the old hymns since

I can't carry a tune in a bucket, squirming while trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden pew since us Presbyterians are used to a little bit of cushion and padding, and wondering where to politely position myself as a guest in the potluck line afterwards.

As we finished "Onward Christian Soldiers Marching Off To War" (which I always found to be an odd song for a church), the old white haired preacher in a shaky, shrill voice stood up behind the podium and began to preach. He hadn't been three minutes into his sermon before all of a sudden, he lunged forward on the

pulpit, grasped it so hard his knuckles turned white and screamed the words that still ring in my ears to this day at the top of his lungs— “NI**ERS AND QUEERS”—in relation to an abomination he had chosen to cruelly twist out of the Bible. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up, and I nervously started visually trying to find an exit in case I needed to run. While planning my frantic escape, it was then I noticed the people in the pews. It was chilling. His actions or words didn’t faze them at all. In fact, they were all nodding their heads in agreement. After practically stumbling out of the front door into the gravel parking lot, I asked an older female congregation member what had just happened. She promptly grabbed her Bible that had been tucked under her arm like a well-oiled fire-arm, opened it up and tried to find some butchered, obscure passage that they believed proved that the mark that God placed on Cain after killing his brother Abel, was making him black. And “that” she told me “is why blacks should be shunned and treated beneath everyone else.” I stood there with my mouth open. Seriously? She was firm in her stance despite my continued questions, and I resolved myself to never visit that church again. Oh, and in case you were wondering, I didn’t stick around long enough to ask her about the queer part, nor did I partake in the potluck line.

White Supremacy and bigotry that reside under steeples know no bounds. I don’t think this is what Christ had in mind when he told people to “love thy neighbor.”

GL: Attached to this steeple is a hotel sign you’ve fashioned into a cross, with the words “No Vacancy” running the horizontal, intersected by the vertical of “Acceptance.” And I can’t help thinking how that “no vacancy” both has and hasn’t been the rule in the Delta in a long time. You probably got this church steeple because the church itself was vacant. Chances are, whatever town was there or nearest had plenty of va-



No Vacancy.

Photograph courtesy of V.L. Cox

cancies. And while a good part of this vacancy is predicated upon economic factors, there's more than enough also thanks to the very attitude of "no vacancy," no room for people who are different. The "no vacancy" axis is like the flat of the Delta horizon, but it's the "acceptance" axis that rises above.

VLC: I agree with this analogy. It's not just the Delta though. Churches everywhere are struggling with numbers. That is, except for the religious-political Mega churches who fleece their congregation to the tune of private jets, Mansions, and Ferraris in exchange for smooth-talking comradery and false superiority with "please vote for my tax break" sermons.

A little background: I am an ordained Presbyterian Elder who has spent most of my life in a pew. Calling out greed, hypocrisy, and question-

ing any type of cruelty or behavior that hurts people is our job and responsibility not only as a Christian, but as a decent human being. Also, the last time I checked; the position of God was- n't listed in the Employment Section of the Want Ads. In other words, it's not your place to EVER decide who does or does not receive the love of Christ or demean them regardless of what religion they choose to worship. Yet so many people and religious leaders arrogantly claim that elevated role for power, perks, and money with no concern or remorse from the devastating results. Yes, there are some wonderful people and caring religious organizations out there, but churches hold immense amounts of community power over the people, and cruel rigidity in a belief system that has had numerous translations, twisted interpretations and manipulative editing over thousands of years can only survive for so long without valid questions and will eventually take a generational toll. As a child, I once asked my grandmother why Native Americans often referred to "The Great Spirit" instead of a Christian God. She sweetly smiled, patted my knee and said, "God has many names honey." I have never forgotten that.

The world changes. Progress happens. We learn and become more intelligent, Economic challenges come and go, leaving the past behind while issuing a new day of efficiency, new technology, and hope. Being defiant and obstinate to "outsiders" or any type of progress, especially during extreme economic, climate, and environmental changes in these Delta River towns and farming communities, will take a heavy toll. Water is literally drying up in some river areas due to heat or geographically rising in others due to melting polar ice caps, drastically impacting populated shorelines and economies. If not addressed quickly, the reluctance towards diversity and change will leave endless communities behind, churches, and businesses abandoned and continue to create poverty and a sparse, migratory population.

GL: Much of your art is constructed from the found objects of the Delta's past. But do you think much about the future of the Delta? If so, how does that look to you?

VLC: I think about it all the time. I'm a visionary. I see the value the Delta still has. I also know as I mentioned above, that with the scarcity of water from California through the panhandle and the Midwest breadbasket predicted to shift due to environmental change, the Delta could play a major role in future food production with education and the implantation of new technology, new crops, unification and modern distribution and management despite changing water levels and flood zones. I may be naive, but with New Orleans surviving as long as they have below sea level (at least for now) with the right tools and structural ingenuity, I believe the Delta can not only survive but thrive.

These changes do not come cheap, however, and electing politicians who lazily do the backfloat in hard earned American tax dollars, while arrogantly poking their fingers toward others, intentionally stirring the dangerous division of antiquated, time-consuming culture wars, has not helped the Delta with growth. Because the truth is they really don't care. Stirring antiquated division is easy, lucrative work, but only for them. They know they are going to be just fine with all their political perks, bloated contributions, family privilege to skirt deadly discriminatory state laws if needed, and could not truly care less about the backbone of their working community, the

hardworking poor or their minority neighbors struggling down the road.

Have you seen the billions of dollars spent on political campaigns alone? Can you imagine even half of that hard-earned contribution money that politicians literally beg you for being donated back into struggling communities instead? Real change will begin when the people put vengeful, media-driven, sport voting aside

and elect sincere political leaders that will peel out of a slick suit, put on a pair of jeans and boots, roll their sleeves up, stop spending all their energy figuring out how to fearfully manipulate a “base” based on the color of political jerseys, and instead spend it on the people and the future. Leaders that are not ashamed to break a sweat and actually get to work to truly advance ALL the people, securing desperately needed funds to strengthen communities with modern technology, training, new jobs, new ideas, while aggressively recruiting an outside diverse, competitive talent pool.

Change will happen when we hold these religious community anchors accountable when they are given the opportunity to welcome new residents from different backgrounds and talented skillsets bringing fresh ideas and business into their community. Communities will flourish by encouraging these diverse communities to work together for a common goal of success and growth for the entire region instead of being suppressed and played like pawns on an antiquated chess board for cruel political folly and selfish financial and political gain.

I believe the Delta, due to its rich culture, hard-working people, and fertile resources can be one of the most influential places in the country if not the world if allowed, but only when people who have been intentionally misguided to be angry and fearful of change are encouraged to open their hearts and minds towards new people, fresh ideas, and new beginnings. Because as we all know historically, progress and change are inevitable and we only have two choices: You either learn, adapt, become a part of it, and thrive, or you shut the world out, become angry and bitter and left behind.

If the rigid religious and political obstinance which is targeted and intentional, wary of anything new due to fear of losing control, continues, then the rich, beautiful Delta will eventually become a vast ghost town with abandoned buildings and empty communities. We see this with our own eyes as we drive down the Delta back roads as a hot, life-giving sun sets over what once were fertile crops and communities. Empty, dilapidated buildings, hand-painted wooden crosses, some with angry, judgmental messages, sprinkle the landscape, complimenting arrogant political billboards that continue to spew a message of fear, division and hatred. That transition, if not reversed, is already underway.

excavation

by laura vogt

i'm no anthropologist, but if you're digging in the dirt and expecting magic you're an explorer
magic doesn't need to be defined, play
doesn't need a purpose, you don't even
know what's real

in the sunlight, the trees shimmering in the
wind, that first physical warmth of spring, i
hope for everything

i hear robins, the distant weed whackers,
and the children as they build a new
world in the forest

slate-brown bark, new green leaves, far off
the sun lighting along the edge of your body,
a line of light enclosing you, like you're
traced by liquid magic

it's like we're here, but not. sunlines reminding
me of illusion, of transference. where would i
go, but here?

what would i dig down to, flee towards? i
like it here, just fine. if only i was not too
tired to enjoy

if only i could pause, sleep a year, then come
back to today. you're so startlingly beautiful. unique
in your own way

no, i'd go nowhere but here, over and again,
once more

excavation, digging into the dirt. whatever
you are, you are your own hope. time is
lost in you

whatever this is, childhood, a
moment, i wish we could stay here
forever

