

*POMPA: Publications of the Mississippi
Philological Association*



Editor, Lorie Watkins
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Editor's Note

By Lorie Watkins

The editor's note for this, the fortieth volume of the *Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association (POMPA)* continues our rebuilding and return to in-person conferences after the COVID lock-down. Mississippi Valley State University volunteered to host the 2023 conference, despite the likelihood of a small turnout, and MPA is grateful for their hospitality.

The conference organizer Dr. John Zheng, a long-time MPA member. As usual, there were diverse panels devoted to academic, creative, and pedagogical writing. In 2024, we will host what looks to be a slightly larger conference organized by another veteran MPA member Thomas Richardson at the Mississippi University for Women through the Mississippi School for Math and Science as we continue to try to return to our post-COVID routine.





Morning Fog in Itta Bena

Mississippi Philological Association Annual Conference

Held at Mississippi Valley State University

Schedule

March 25, 2023

Industrial Tech Building (TED)

Registration: 8:00

a.m.-10:00 a.m.

Table in the TED

Hallway

8:20 a.m. - 9:30

a.m.

TED 151—

Session 1

Presenters:

- Elina Dyo, Mississippi Valley State University: “Do You PIE with the ISTE Standards in Mind?”
- Vandana Saxena, Fulbright Fellow from University of Dehli: “Developing Critical Thinking in Prospective Teachers”
- Omnia Mahmoud, Fulbright Fellow from Egypt: “Major themes in the works of Naguib Mahfouz”
- Vikas Audumbar Kadam, Fulbright Fellow from Madanapalle Institute of Technology and Science, India: “Promoting self-regulated academic writing skills among undergraduates in English as a first and second language contexts” **Moderator:** Khem K. Aryal

TED 169—Session 2

Panel 2:

Presenters:

- Darlin Neal, The University Central Florida: “Excerpt from *If You Live, Your Day Will Come*”
- Bill Hays, The University of Mississippi: “The Pinball Machine”
- Kathy R. Pitts, Jackson State University: “Margaret’s Obituary”
- James Fowler, University of Central Arkansas: “King Snake” **Moderator:** Eleanor Boudreau

TED 178—

Session 3

Presenters:

- Phillip “Pip” Gordon, University of Wisconsin-Platteville: “Contextualizing Race and the Anthropocene in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*”
- Joseph Newell, Mississippi State University: “Gender Performance and the Extent of Patriarchy in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*”
- Kate Stewart, University of Arkansas at Monticello: “Nancy Drew and Chick Mallison: Junior Detectives with Heart”
- Thomas B. Richardson, The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science: “‘The Holy Water of the American South’: Coca-Cola in Flannery O’Connor’s Short Fiction” **Moderator:** Lorie Watkins Massey

9:35 a.m. - 10:45

a.m.

TED 151—

Session 4

Presenters:

- Tracy Pitts, Mississippi University for Women: “Faerie Faire”
- Eleanor Boudreau, University of West Alabama: “A Poetry Reading from *Earnest, Earnest?*”
- John J. Han, Missouri Baptist University: “‘Following Routines’ and Other Tanka Prose”
- Jon Parrish Peede, Mississippi Valley State University: “Sign of the Times: Southern Iconography in the Photographs of William R. Ferris”

Moderator: Kathy R. Pitts

TED 169—

Session 5

Presenters:

- Mamie Osborne, Mississippi Valley State University: “History on Display: Using Jackdaws to Build Background Knowledge and Interest in Literature”
- Deb Payne Purnell, Mississippi Valley State University: “Using *The Wiz* as a companion piece to *The Alchemist* to encourage student engagement, produce better essays, and decrease writing anxiety”

- Debbie Davis, The University of West Alabama: “Gothic Villainy in Owens' *Where the Crawdad's Sing* and Cosby's *Razorblade Tears*”
- Joseph Newell, Mississippi State University: “A Room with Subjugated Views: Understanding the Role of Infantilization and Social Norms in Lucy Honeychurch’s *Freedom*” **Moderator:** Mary Stanton Knight

TED 178—

Session 6

Presenters:

- ShahavaTova Dente, Mississippi University for Women: “‘Talking Back’: Rage, Resistance, and Response in Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* and *A Deeper Love Inside: The Porsche Santiago Story*”
- Naykishia Darby, Central State University: “The Henny Got Me Sauced: Examining Performing Masculine in Young MA’s ‘Bad Bitch Anthem’”
- John Zheng, MVSU: “Sonia Sanchez’s Sonku” **Moderator:** Darlin’ Neal

**10:50 a.m. - 12:00
noon.**

TED 151—

Session 7

Presenters:

- John J. Han, Missouri Baptist University: “The Landscape of Modern War Haiku”
- Robert Harland, Mississippi State University: “La Loba: B-Movie Body Horror from South of the Border”
- Lorie Watkins Massey, William Carey University: Events in Digital Yoknapatawpha: Making Faulkner’s World Move
- Olga Ponomareva, Fulbright Fellow from Russia: “The Power of a Dream: *Scarlet Sails* by A. Green” **Moderator:** Kate Stewart

TED 169—

Session 8

Presenters:

- RaShell R. Smith-Spears, Jackson State University: “Precious Blood”
- Khem K. Aryal, Arkansas State University: “Visa for Mama”
- Joe Taylor, U of West Alabama: “Mixed form novel: Highway 28, East”
- Thomas B. Richardson, The Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science: “The Leftovers” (Poems) **Moderator:** Bill Hays

TED 178—

Session 9

Presenters:

- Tyler Smith, Mississippi State University: “Spiritual Epistemology in LeAnne Howe’s *Shell Shaker*”

- Alan Brown, University of West Alabama: “Devil Dogs in Folklore, Fiction, and Popular Culture”
- Mary Stanton Knight, University of Mississippi: “The Real Queer Men of Hubert Creekmore’s *The Welcome*”
- Lin Knutson, Mississippi Valley State University: “Adrienne Rich’s Revolution”

Moderator: ShahavaTova Dente

Creative Works

King Snake

By James Fowler

It was a white rain, a heavy heating shower. The boys milled around the open garage. They knew that these downpours came on suddenly and stopped just as quickly, leaving the air hot and sticky. For thirty or forty minutes they would take whatever cover was handy—a carport, a concrete sewer, the thin overhang at the Sunny convenience store—and plot the rest of their afternoon.

Today it was Mike’s garage, a favorite hangout. His dad’s work shelf took up a whole wall beneath a pegboard hung with all sorts of tools and stuff. They weren’t supposed to touch any of it, but they did. It was like the old bass and amp that belonged to Mike’s brother, who was always trying to get up a garage band. He would kick Mike’s butt if he caught him fooling with it. So Mike let the other guys pluck away whenever the coast was clear. For the past ten minutes Devon had been repeating the “Whole Lotta Love” riff at different speeds, while Jason and Sean watched Mike make army men with his electric mold kit.

“You know, they don’t have to all be green. You could make some red ones. They’d be the Commies.”

Some of Jason’s ideas were dumb, but this one sounded pretty good. They just had to figure out what ingredient to add to get the color right. Sean thought they should experiment; orange and blue soldiers might be neat.

The rock star had stopped gyrating and was just squirming now with an anxious expression. "I gotta whizz."

Mike gave him a knowing look. "That's the vibrations. My mom doesn't want us running in and out of the house. You can go out the side door."

Devon frowned, weighing his options. He often peed outside, but he screened his audience first.

Jason guessed the reason for his hesitation. "Yeah, Dev, hang it right out there. Maybe Pam next door will see and get a good laugh."

"Bite me, Roebuck." Devon was pacing now to relieve the pressure.

"It must be hard to hold it in with the sound of all that rain. Pretty soon we'll see a blue-jeans waterfall. No matter what, just don't laugh. Don't think of Moe tearing out Larry's hair or bopping Curly."

As the three of them broke into Stoooge antics, Devon dashed for the door to relieve himself. Once he had finished, they gave him the results. "Thirty-seven seconds. Not bad, but no record."

"Yeah, but I got good distance. Or I would've if the rain hadn't beat it down."

They noticed that it was letting up, and they still hadn't decided what to do. It would take an hour or so for the water to steam off the pavement, so a game of Horse at the courts or tennis-ball handball off the side of the middle-school gym would have to wait. If they were in a dirtier mood, they could play tackle football in the muddy lot at the end of the street. But seeing how Sean's mother skinned him whenever he came home caked, they kept mudball for special occasions.

Devon brightened. "I know. We can go shoot bottle rockets at the witch-dogs." These were the four that always rushed the chain-link fence snarling and slaving when kids passed by the property.

Mike, keeper of the arsenal, shook his head. "Old lady Biddle called my dad. He says no more firing at anything with a face." Devon tried thinking up fun targets without faces but came up blank.

Rather than admit defeat, Jason took a stab. "You wanna bounce Superballs over the house?" This involved throwing the rubber sphere so hard against the sidewalk that on the rebound it cleared the roof and wound up in the backyard. If it wasn't slammed hard enough though, it ended up thudding down the shingles or, worse, clattering like a bastard on the aluminum cover of the screened-in porch.

Again Mike had to veto the proposal. "My mom's been on the rag all day. One crash landing and she'd have me cleaning up something."

The ideas from this point only got weaker, until it became apparent that it would be every man for himself, at least until the last burst of play after dinner. So each one straggled off to amuse himself as best he could with old comic books, a dismantled dirt bike, or an ant farm divided into warring camps.

. . .

"Hey Dev, I'll give you five bucks to jump onto the scrap pile." They had all been leaping from the skeletal rafters onto the sand heap, but this dare had special meaning. The last time Devon had done it, he looked down and saw a nail poking up through his sneaker. When he lifted his foot, a piece of wood came with it. Lucky for him, the nail had gone between the big toe and the second piggy, but there was plenty of blood, and he had to get a tetanus shot, so it was still cool.

Devon calculated. “Twenty bucks.”

“No deal.”

“Devon, you’re such an idjit, you probably would. I’m not carting you home again. You can crawl like a slug trailing slime.” Devon’s older brother Dean had a way with words, especially insulting ones.

The two of them never quite got along. At best they maintained a truce that would suddenly flare into taunts or punching. Once Devon shot his brother in the leg with a BB pistol, though he swore it was an accident. In turn he had been made to eat grass, and on one explosive occasion had his face ground in dog crap. What rankled the most was that his friends witnessed it. Because they were his friends, not Dean’s, though whenever Dean decided to hang around with them, he acted like he was in charge.

On some planking above the garage Devon found a half-full can of paint: harvest gold. Something needed to be done with it, so he walked along the rafters looking for a use. Dean was checking out a trash compactor in the unfinished kitchen. Stopping above him, Devon tilted the can until paint reached its lip, then called him in a teasing, mock-threatening way. With his brotherly ESP, Dean didn’t even look up as he stated, “You do, and I’ll shellac your ass.”

Lounging in the master-bath tub, Jason quickly sized up the situation, reached for a loose tile, and let fly with deadly accuracy. The can dropped from Devon’s hands and draped a sheet of harvest gold on Dean’s head and shoulders. He sprang up and leaped for the rafters, shouting, “You’re dead, you little douchebag,” but Devon was already on the move, crying out that he hadn’t meant it. The other boys gathered to observe the high chase. It reminded them of monkeys at the zoo. Jason and Mike cheered it on; Sean just watched in concern.

In his terror, Devon was quicker than Dean, but Dean was steadily cornering him, driving him upward. Blind animal panic finally took him as far as it could and left him clinging to a rafter peak. Angry as Dean was, he was not about to risk his own neck for the sake of swift retaliation. So he cast around for things to throw at Devon, mocking him all the while, proclaiming he had reached new heights in the annals of wussdom. After a few minutes of this he started to cool down, and Sean suggested that he go wash the paint out of his hair before it dried. Dean gradually withdrew, calling up to Devon that he could stay there all night. He would pound him in his own good time.

The other guys tried to coax him down, but Devon clung to the peak like a treed cat, not mewling exactly, but whimpering. Finally, Mike took Jason to help him fetch his dad's extension ladder. Sean stayed behind and said comforting things. When the ladder was brought and set up, Mike climbed it and patiently talked Devon into loosening his twined death grip on the rafter, one limb at a time. First an arm, then a leg, then another leg shakily reached out for a rung. Once he had gotten to firm ground again, obviously embarrassed, no one teased him. Jason even offered a kind of apology.

They walked him home, on the lookout for Dean, but ambush, at that time anyway, was not part of the plan. As they returned to their own places, they agreed that this story would join their very best, the ones told and retold with great relish and embellishment.

. . .

Mike and Devon had gone over to Curt's house to watch him feed live mice to his snakes. Curt was this kid who had terrariums all around his room, in which he kept a cool assortment of snakes, lizards, turtles, and snails. Tuesday, feeding day for the snakes, meant an audience of fascinated boys from around the neighborhood. Sean didn't

especially like this sort of entertainment so pretended he had other things to do. Jason had seen the show several times already and decided to keep Sean company. He was looking forward to another chapter in the adventures of King Snake.

It had all started when Jason came back revved from his first visit to Curt's. Bubbling on about the private herpetarium, he mentioned a king snake in his detailed inventory. Sean said it should be released so it could go back to ruling its kingdom. This comment brought Jason to a dead stop. Half joking, he asked what the kingdom was like. Sean thought for a few seconds, then replied as if he had been asked a question in history class. The chronicle of King Snake had begun.

Sean did most of the telling, though Jason sometimes provided details or helped make connections. Between them they had determined that King Snake wasn't just monarch over his nonvenomous brethren, but a wise leader of all animals in the Piney Thicket. His chief enemy was Lord Coral, who had sworn to turn the thicket over to his evil sovereign, King Cobra. In this campaign Coral was assisted by the lying, troublemaking tribe of cottonmouths.

The latest installment had King Snake seeking an antidote for brave Otter, who had been bitten by Coral. Jason didn't see how this could be done, but Sean contrived a means whereby their hero tricked Coral into sinking his fangs into a fur-covered sponge. Squeezing out the venom, King Snake had it mixed with powdered mangrove root, a flamingo tear, and coconut milk, then given to Otter to drink. Within days he was in fighting form again.

Jason liked the way the tale was unfolding. It kept introducing new characters and background stories. He wondered at Sean's ability to invent this realm that somehow bordered their own. At times he thought he caught traces of Mike, Devon, each one of

themselves, in the animals of Piney Thicket. But for some reason he didn't tell those guys about the tale. Neither did Sean. It was their thing. They were building it together quietly.

• • •

“Cinnapicks for everyone.” Mike handed Devon a couple quarters. He was feeling generous after a triumphant foray into the groves, where they had been pelting one another with rotten tangerines. Jason shot him a glance that expressed how this was the least he could do. Mike grinned back. “Yeah, I sunkist your ass.”

Devon took a glass phial from his pocket. From it he drew out toothpicks saturated with oil of cinnamon. Other kids sold them too, but Devon's were the strongest. They burned your tongue if you didn't shift them around your mouth. Everything Devon did tended to go to the limits. Once he got a pair of clackers going so hard and fast that the polystyrene spheres shattered like colliding satellites. A kid was hit in the face by a shard and had to get stitches. That very day the school added clackers to the list of banned items. Devon held the record for getting things banned.

“Hey, we smell good. Cinnamon, citrus, and sweat.”

“They ought to make a deodorant like that.”

“Devon could sure use it. No, wait, Santa hasn't brought his underarm hairs yet.”

“Shut up, nimrod.”

“Make me, butt-munch.”

That one always made them laugh. They were in good spirits anyway, looking forward to one of their moonlight swims. Earlier that summer a couple of them had taken a quick dip in the community pool after hours on a dare. Now they went as a group, having gotten good at sneaking out their bedroom windows. The timing had to be right, as the cops drove by the pool every ninety minutes. There wasn't much risk of being caught

otherwise. The nearest houses were a couple hundred yards away. The developers had planned to put baseball fields in the open space between them but ran out of money. It seemed to the boys that the pool would get lonely at night. It needed its surface ruffled.

At first they stayed off the diving boards, unsure if the splashing sound might carry as far as the nearest neighbors. Gradually their activities got bolder, until only the cannonball was outlawed. Once when Dean was diving, Devon unscrewed the floodlight pointed at the deep end. The sudden darkness completely undid his jackknife. Devon got rabbit-punched in payment, but they had discovered a new level of scary fun: blind dives. So with both floods out, the night pics began. They started with the standard easy stuff—shot-in-the-chest, karate kick—then graduated to more interesting maneuvers like bicycle-built-for-two and barrel roll. The sense of free-falling through darkness toward water you only half knew to be there made each dive an undiminished thrill. Dean and Mike led the way, having the most physical courage. Devon’s reckless flops didn’t count for as much.

As this night’s swim was coming to a close, their eyes were trained on the high board. There they could just make out Dean’s lank outline kicking up into a handstand, holding it, then slicing straight downward. None of them had attempted anything so on-the-edge as that. It drew a collective gasp of astonishment and admiration. Dean let the dive speak for itself. Devon talked about it repeatedly the next few days, doing handstands on the grass in illustration.

. . .

Mike and Jason were playing tug-of-war over the creek with a rope they had found. Sand in the creek bed occupied Sean. Devon was throwing rocks at things in the water. He scored a direct hit on a log. It thrashed its tail, opened its jaws, and hissed.

“Holy shit, it’s an alligator!” Devon scrambled up the bank, startled, ecstatic.

Jason and Mike started to scoff, then saw that the log still had its jaws open. It *was* an alligator: a small one, maybe three feet long, but an alligator just the same.

“I don’t believe this.”

“You suppose it came up from the lake?”

“I hope its mother isn’t anywhere around.”

“Sean, get up here.”

The boys stood close together on the bank, speculating, sizing up their find, unsure what to do about it.

Devon had an idea. “Let’s put it in with the witch-dogs. Maybe it’ll chase ’em. They’ll freak out.”

Jason pounced. “Yeah, right. I’ll get the tail, and you grab the other end.”

Mike had a better idea. “We can make a pen and keep it here. You know, feed it and stuff.”

They immediately started talking it up, figuring how to go about it. Except for Sean, who always faded into the background when uneasy. When the other two had left to get what they needed, he confided to Jason.

“I don’t think we should do this. Let’s call someone and have it taken back where it belongs.”

Jason didn’t want to lose their catch. “Don’t worry. We’re just taking care of it until we think of something better. We can’t keep it too long. It’ll outgrow the pen.”

It took an hour for Mike and Devon to return with the building materials and tools. The lumber they scavenged from a construction site. Mike had also nabbed a roll of heavy-gauge chicken wire that his mother used in gardening. As they were lugging their load

toward the woods, they ran into Dean, who was just finishing his afternoon paper route. He thought they were exaggerating but came to supervise anyway.

Devon kept saying “I told you so” while Dean got a close-up look at the gator, which seemed undisturbed by all the attention. They soon got to work on the bank, sawing and hammering two-by-fours into a frame, which they then strung with a double layer of chicken wire.

Now came the tricky part. Devon kept the gator occupied, or thought he did, by wiggling the saw blade a few feet from its snout, while the others came up from behind with the pen. Just as they were going to drop it, the gator started moving. Devon tripped trying to retreat and fell backward into the water. It looked like the gator would be snacking on his foot, but they somehow managed to drop-toss the pen around it in time.

Everyone was soaked, muddy, and proud. They had done it. They had themselves a gator.

. . .

“This is better than anything Curt’s got.” Devon stood dangling a chicken leg at the end of a fishing rod above the gator. It seemed not to notice.

Jason and Mike were admiring its reptilian flexibility. It was slowly and quietly curling its tail beneath it.

“You’re teasing it again.”

“No I’m not. You can’t just throw chicken at it. It needs to stalk its prey.”

“It’s in a pen, doofus.”

Suddenly the gator sprang up and snapped the leg off the line.

Devon dropped the rod and cowered. “Cripes, I didn’t know gators could jump.”

In a mock-adult voice, Jason lectured, “I hope you’ve learned a lesson, young man.”

They continued messing around, talking about this and that, when Devon volunteered, “Hey Mike, tell him about Sean.”

“What about him?”

Mike frowned. “It’s nothing. Nothing happened.”

Devon couldn’t leave it at that. “Frankenstein nearly cornered Sean outside the convenience store. Luckily Mike came along and faced him down.”

Jason hated that kid. He was always picking fights, especially ones he expected to win. Once Jason had seen him and his crew surround this soft kid. Frankenstein was taunting and baiting him, then seemed to back off a little and consider. In his gut Jason knew what was coming, the blinding-fast slap that staggered the kid. His eyes filling with tears, he tried to fight back, only to be gripped in a headlock and thrown to the ground. Jason was so outraged that he felt like kicking Frankenstein in the nuts. He knew if he did, though, he would get jumped by the rest of them. So he walked away. He often wished since then that he had done something and just paid the price.

“I swear to God if Frankenstein ever does anything to Sean, I’ll go after him with a baseball bat.”

Mike tried to defuse his friend’s anger. “Sounds like you’ll be needing a caddy. I’d recommend a nine-iron. Or a hockey stick.”

Jason smiled, but he meant it. If he had to, he’d cream that son of a bitch.

. . .

Sean and Jason were sitting on the old swing set in Sean’s backyard. His parents kept it up for Sean’s younger sister Tay, who was trying to bury herself in the sandbox. It

hadn't rained that afternoon, and the sand was dry, so Sean let her do it. A soft breeze tossed the showy cannas in their bed. It was nice out, almost comfortable.

The two boys twisted on their cedar seats and plotted the latest development in the Piney Thicket. Lord Coral had sent a turkey buzzard to snatch up King Snake and carry him to his doom. Writhing in its claws, King Snake watched his horrified people giving chase and falling behind. The thicket itself became a dense, dark square in a huge quilt of land, then dropped from sight. They flew for much of the day, until beneath them rose a forbidding place of stones in fantastic, jagged shapes. Suddenly the buzzard released him, and King Snake fell far, far, far to the rocks below. He knew nothing else until roused by the jabbing, biting sensation of a beak. The buzzard had come to dine on its reward. Gathering what strength remained, King Snake lunged, wrapping himself around the buzzard's neck, tightening, tightening. A terrific struggle followed, but the desperate bird could not escape from its deadly, choking necklace. At last it sank to the ground, and its eyes went dead. King Snake slipped off his enemy and dragged himself to a shady crevice at the base of a boulder, exhausted, badly injured.

Even though things had taken a really bad turn, Jason thought it was their best episode yet.

Sean had a distant look on his face, as if he were still in the stony place.

A sudden impulse to tell Sean that his friends would always be there for him came over Jason. Instead, he swung sideways into him and gave him a brotherly look.

For a while they sat talking about disaster movies and slot cars and how they should all go to a jai alai match together. They repeated the word *fronton* until it lost its sense. It didn't take long. Then Sean asked if he was going to the pool that night. Jason thought not. He didn't want to make a minor ear infection any worse.

As they caught sight of Tay, they started to laugh. She had taken the head off one of her baby dolls and was filling it with sand.

. . .

Jason slept badly that night, bothered by the dull pain in his ear. Around four in the morning he finally drifted off, only to be awakened by the phone in the kitchen. He glanced groggily at his clock radio: 6:07. What kind of idiot made calls at that hour? He rolled over, but soon heard the muffled voices of his parents through the bedroom door. There was a pause, then a light tapping. Annoyed, he threw the covers off and stalked to the door.

He was going to deliver an aggravated “What?” but the look of concern, almost fright, on their faces stopped him.

“Jason,” his mother began in her most soothing tone, “that was Mike’s mom on the phone. Honey, there’s been an accident. Last night at the pool. It seems that your friends were swimming after hours. For some reason they turned off the lights and started diving. Apparently, Sean hit his head while doing a dive. The other boys didn’t realize at first what had happened. When someone called his name and he didn’t answer, they turned the lights back on. That’s when they saw him.”

Her voice cracked, and his father took up the story. “They got him up from the bottom and did everything they could while one of them ran for help. He’s been in intensive care all night. The doctors think he was underwater five minutes or so. If he does regain consciousness, there may well be some brain damage.”

“Jason, honey, we’re so sorry.” Together they seemed like a pair of wings poised to enfold him. They didn’t interrogate, try to find out if he too had gone on these night swims. This was just the time for sorrow.

None of it felt very real, though. Maybe this was due to his lack of sleep, or the congestion in his head. He didn't go back to bed, but zombied his way through the morning routine. More phone calls were coming, all taken by his parents. Through the haze he had the sense of some distant but iron thing bearing down on him. There was something he needed to do, but what?

Later that morning he wandered over to Devon and Dean's house. Devon was sitting in the garage, looking like a kid under permanent house arrest. Having Jason there gave him a chance to unburden himself.

"When I screwed the light back in and we saw him, Dean and Mike dove down and brought him up. Mike ran for help. Dean did all that stuff he learned in Boy Scouts to get the water out of his lungs and get him breathing again. But he couldn't get him to breathe on his own. It felt like forever before the ambulance guys got there and took over. They told Dean he did a good job, but he's locked himself in his room and won't come out. He keeps saying it's his fault. But he did everything he could."

Jason wanted to help but couldn't summon much of comfort and finally left Devon sitting on his milk crate, looking lost.

In a phone conversation with Mike, he learned that Sean was still in intensive care, and nobody except his parents could get in to see him. When Mike used the word "coma," Jason pictured his friend hooked up to all kinds of machines, without any promise of release, and shuddered.

That afternoon the sky opened and stayed open. It was more like a tropical deluge than a heating shower. The rain would slack off for a while, then pound down with renewed force. By five o'clock the gauge outside the kitchen window measured just over

four inches. Jason retreated to his room and lay on the bed wishing for an end to this day. Sometime in the early evening he fell asleep.

When he awoke early the next morning, he was lying in a rectangular patch of sunlight. After ten seconds or so he thought of Sean. Other linked memories followed, and he suddenly rose and dressed. Skipping a shower and breakfast, he quietly went to the garage and picked up a pair of wire cutters on his way out. He walked toward the woods beneath clear skies, anxious. Overnight the creek would have raged. Even a gator might drown in such a torrent. He half expected to see its carcass floating belly-up.

The creek was higher and faster moving than usual but subsiding. When Jason got to the pen, he found it empty. It had been washed some yards downstream but was still intact. With its wire cover, the gator would not have been able to float or climb out. Jason stood pondering the escape of this Houdini reptile. The only way it could have gone was down. They hadn't wired the bottom of the pen. Somewhere he had heard that gators can dig big holes and dens. It must have burrowed its way out. Maybe it only chose to stay as long as it was regularly fed; they hadn't really captured it at all.

So he wasn't needed to do the one thing Sean would have wanted. Still feeling a little unsteady on his feet, he sat down with his back against a scrub pine. The day was fresh and crisp, but he was putting all his effort into fending off misery. And the only thing he had to offer had always depended on Sean. For upwards of an hour he sat in dejection, helpless and mute. Then the very weight of his grief and something that rose from it drove him, carried him to words.

"King Snake lay badly wounded at the base of the rock. In pain he stretched toward a trickle of water coming through a crack. Then he rested again, and images of his leaderless people flickered in his head. But they were impossibly far away. He couldn't

move the first inch between them. So he lay still and drifted off to the sound of water on rock. Under his damaged skin, though, he felt something, a slight movement. And then he was looking at himself, his old self, lying dead, when a new snake slipped out of that skin and glided away. The journey was long. He had to begin.”

“Following Routines” and Other Tanka Prose

By John J. Han

Following Routines

Since childhood, I have never liked change. Familiarity makes me feel relaxed and safe. That’s why I go to the same gas station, the same grocery store, the same bank, and the same auto repair shop year-round. My commute takes the same route, so I know exactly where manholes are, where potholes are, and where police officers hide along the way. Although there were opportunities for better pay and higher positions elsewhere, I declined all of them. It makes me nervous to meet new people, learn about a new place, and find new establishments to patronize. Despite the humdrum of my life, I cherish the tranquility and peace that come from constancy.

career longevity
my colleague-friend left
years ago
now his daughter
is my colleague



The Asian Way of Doing Things

Although most Asian immigrants try hard to assimilate into mainstream American society, they retain their way of doing certain things. For instance, Asian stores have an official time to open for business, but they let customers in and shop if they arrive 10-20 minutes early. This does not happen at most “American” stores where customers wait until the opening time. Asians, at least among themselves, are flexible and accommodating. As someone who has been part of higher education—a mainstream institution in the United States—for more than three decades, I “go by the book” at work. However, I like the Asian culture that often bends the rules for the convenience of patrons.

Chinese restaurant
Asian friends fight
for the bill
while one hides
in the bathroom



Hell in Paintings

The premodern paintings of hell based on Dante's *Inferno* are inhabited by Italians, and those of hell based on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* portray sinners as Britons. In the imaginations of those artists, the sinners are Europeans. Meanwhile, the Japanese Buddhist paintings of hell portray the judges and sinners as Japanese. Those painters lived in their respective cultural spheres not knowing much about the outside world. How times have changed! These days, many East Asians know what is happening in the United States faster than those who live in this country.

a sermon on hellfire
the preacher's somber tone
continues until
he chuckles
for no reason



The Idea of Non-Self

One of the key Buddhist ideas is non-self: an individual self does not exist because reality is an illusion, nothing remains constant, and we exist by virtue of causality. The idea often makes sense, but other times, it sounds confusing. If a self is an illusion, how can we trust what our mind learns or conceives?

still trying
to figure out
the Zen challenge:
clap with
only one hand



The Pleasure of Reading Tragicomic Fiction

Graham Greene is known for novels about despair and existential crisis, such as *The Power and the Glory* and *The Third Man*. I like the way he grapples with some of the fundamental issues of life in the twentieth century. Recently, however, I discovered a new aspect of his fiction: tragicomedy. While reading the pieces in *Twenty-One Stories* (1954), I often drew smiley faces or wrote “hehe” in the margins, which are my ways of interacting with a dead author. One story, “When Greek Meets Greek,” is about a degree mill based in Oxford, England. The swindling enterprise, named “St. Ambrose’s College, Oxford,” yields something unexpected—the marriage of an instructor and the only intelligent student in her class, who decide to take over the school and grow the business. In another story, “Alas, Poor Maling,” the title character suffers from a harmless but embarrassing medical issue, tummy rumbles. One day, at a meeting, his stomach produces a loud noise, and his coworkers run to the basement, mistaking it for an air-raid siren.

nearly seventy
I give away the books
I don’t grasp,
ordering only
primers

New Year's Day

By Bill Hays

As Earnest Adams approached the Williams's house, the sun had almost dropped behind the mountains. He checked his watch to be certain he was neither early nor late. Six o'clock exactly, he observed. As he started to knock on the door, it swung open. He had to catch himself to prevent his doubled fist from falling squarely on Gwen's nose. Instantly, she jumped back and began to shadow box, throwing air punches at him.

"Gwen, I started to knock, but the door opened, and I didn't ..."

"Oh, Ernest, you're always trying to cover your ass," she said with a grin. Then she pulled him inside with one hand and closed the door with the other.

"You're late," she said

"It's six o'clock, right on the button."

"No, Ernest, you're not on my wavelength. You've been home for Christmas vacation for two weeks, and you wait until New Year's Eve to come see me. Shame on you."

Ernest began to recover from his bungled entry and

swung into the rhythm of the banter. "But Gwen, you know we always spend New Year's Eve together. It's like an old mountain tradition, like dinner on the ground or a county stir off. You knew I would be coming tonight."

"You could have at least called," she said over her shoulder as she walked down the hallway toward the den. Ernest followed her with his eyes. She was built like a boy, short, with broad shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and hips, but there was nothing ungraceful about her walk. She glided along with the poise of a ballerina trapped in a fullback's body.

"I couldn't call you. It would have spoiled your anticipation," he said, following her past some Picasso prints, the Williams's coat of arms, an antique, mahogany grandfather's clock, an heirloom that Gwen's mother insisted had come over on the Mayflower, and

through a set of swinging bar doors into the den. Gwen's father had been an outdoorsman, and after he died, Mrs. Williams preserved his memory by keeping his trophies on the walls of the den. There were the heads a moose, an antelope, two deer

and a mammoth marlin, completely intact. In the corners of the room, various species of birds stood, and in front of the hearth sprawled a massive, black bearskin rug. There was only one picture in the room, and it hung directly above the fireplace. It was a painting of eight red-coated, black-capped, breakfasting hunters preparing to run down a hapless fox. Gwen's father sat at the head of the table, appearing totally in command. He had often bragged that he paid his taxidermist and travel agent more than he paid the IRS. His bookcase was filled with as much punch as his life had been. The shelves were packed with the works of Hemingway, Jack London, Stephen Crane, and other writers who didn't notice the dirt under your fingernails. Mrs. Williams had also kept her husband's hunting dogs: Beowulf, Artemis, and Barney. Unfortunately, without their master's care, two Labrador retrievers and a beagle hound had been converted into house dogs. When the labs picked up Earnest's sent, they started barking, and Barney began to whimper and waddled toward a Second Empire love seat. "Hush, boys, it's only Earnest," Gwen said. The labs stretched out on the floor again, and Barney crawled under the love seat with only the tip of his nose visible.

"What's wrong with Barney? He seems awfully coy tonight, Gwen."

"Oh, poor Barney. He's had a hard year. I thought I told you in a letter."

"No."

"Well, he's been going through analysis, you know, and he discovered he is latently gay. You must imagine the shock when he found out. We always wondered why he never had a girlfriend or ran around the neighborhood with Wolfie, Artie and the other guys. Now, after all these years of questioning his sexual orientation, he finally discovers that he's really a bitch at heart. I'm glad Daddy can't see him now."

"Yes, poor Barney. He always did seem something of a misfit." They both laughed loudly, the way that only old friends do.

"Ernest, take your coat off, sit down, tell me about your year. Would you like a brandy before dinner? I have cognac and ..."

"No thank you," he said quickly.

"Well, then, how about a cocktail?"

"No, nothing."

"Ernest, you must have a drink. This is the cocktail hour, to refuse would be gauche."

"OK, ok. A Jack Daniels and Coke, then."

"Ernest, how high schoolish. Nobody drinks that sweet slop in Washington. You'd never fit in with my school friends," she scolded.

"Well, you know me. Old such and such."

"That's the trouble with you Ernest, you never change. Old, dependable Ernest, the Rock of Gibraltar against the storms of the ages."

While Gwen prepared the drinks, Ernest examined the bookcase. He pulled out a volume entitled *The Open Boat and Other Stories* and began to thumb through the pages. He noticed that several passages were underlined in dark red ink. The bar doors squeaked as Gwen returned to the den.

"One J.D. and sodie pop, General Lee."

"Why thank you, Miss Scarlet," Ernest said with a slight bow.

"To New Year's Eve and Wolfpin High and chivalry and slashed wrists and everything that has kept us together."

"And to Stephen Crane," Ernest added, raising the book over his head.

"Yes, and to Stephen Crane," she repeated.

Their glasses clinked, and Ernest sipped his sweet slop while Gwen gulped down her cognac. When her glass was empty, she threw it into the fireplace.

"Damn, Gwen, you've gotten even more dramatic since last year. Wasn't that a piece of your mother's family crystal?"

"Yes, and I would gladly shatter her skull against the bricks as well, just like that glass."

"Please, Gwen. She is still your mother. Calm down."

"I'm sorry, but this is New Year's Eve. It brings out the best and the worst in me. It's the night Daddy died and the night we became friends, Ernest. It's hard to celebrate our friendship without remembering his death, a premature one, one my mother drove him to."

"You keep this up, Gwen, and you're going to get us both depressed."

"Oh, say that again," she said, her tone softening.

"Say what?"

"What you just said. It's the same Ernest, the very same."

"What?"

"The night Daddy died, I stormed out of this house into a blizzard, blindly running away. I didn't care where I went.

I just wanted to get out of this house and out of this town. And somewhere out there on Lincoln Avenue, I found you."

"I was collecting from customers on my paper route. I always went out on New Year's Eve, no matter how cold, because the tips were bigger. Nothing like a little holiday cheer to loosen a rich man's purse strings."

"And I found you. Of all of the people in Wolfpin who might have helped me, it was you. I wasn't even wearing a coat, and you gave me yours. You took me to your house, and your mother fed me."

"I had never seen a girl eat so much."

"Eat and cry, cry and eat, that's all I could do." "That's when you said, 'If you don't stop crying, you are going to get us both depressed.' That's the way it started, ten years ago tonight. Daddy's death and the birth of our friendship."

Gwen gave Ernest a slight hug and returned to the kitchen to finish preparing their dinner. He reflected on the scene she had just described. He didn't remember Gwen not wearing a coat, and he didn't remember saying anything remotely clever, but if she remembered it that way, so be it.

Barney, who had just witnessed the mini psychodrama, waddled from under the love seat and into the bathroom that was adjacent to the den. Mrs. Williams left the toilet lids

raised so the dogs could drink at will. She called it one of her little laborsaving devices. Ernest could hear Barney slurping away.

"I think we're ready," Gwen said, returning to the den. I hope you like Chinese food."

"I can't say that I have ever had any, but I'm sure I will. Lead on Beatrice, I shall follow."

"Ernest, I've taught you every important thing you know," she said, after they were seated at the table. "I taught you how to dance, how to French kiss, how to roll a joint, how to dress with style, and how to eat escargot and oysters on the half shell. Now, I'm going to turn you on to Moo Goo Gai Pan."

"I think I can manage that," he said.

"We'll see," she said, holding up two pairs of finely pointed, porcelain chopsticks."

Ernest bucked up to the challenge. He grabbed his weapons and charged onto the battlefield to face legions of soy-soaked chicken chunks, regiments of rice, and battalions of marshaled mushrooms. Nobly he charged, retreated, and charged again. Fumbling and finging, but, finally, victory was his. Gwen watched in bemused admiration until Ernest had emptied his plate.

"Well done, Sir Galahad. What you couldn't pick up you stabbed. Once again, Ernest, your cherry is mine," she said with a smile. "How about some dessert?"

"No," he said quickly, "I don't think so. I'm exhausted."

"It's apple pie, your mother's recipe, so you can't refuse. I thought you might need a little reward. You've earned it." Ernest leaned back in his chair. He wondered what other surprises waited for him.

After they had finished the pie, they returned to the den. Ernest sat on the couch sipping some holiday spiced tea, while Gwen put another log on the fire. She would have made a good pioneer woman, he thought. She had a strong back and an iron will, but, of course, she would never have survived the beatings. Somehow that deleterious mountain trait of "honor thy husband no matter what he does" had been weeded out of her. The first time her husband had slapped her because the biscuits were cold, or the babies were crying, or the jug was dry, or because he couldn't get an erection, she would have slapped him back, and that would have been the end of it. He would have shot her right there on the spot.

"What are you thinking about?" she said, turning from the hearth.

"Oh, nothing. I was just staring into the flames."

"Come now, Ernest. You're the only person I know who is always thinking about something. What is it?"

He smiled slightly. "I was thinking about fondue."

"What?"

"You know. The time we tried to make fondue for our annual celebration."

"Yes, another one of our culinary concoctions, but that one didn't turn out so well. I had brought some gruyere cheese from Switzerland where I had been on a ski trip, and you had stolen a bottle of kirsch from the bar where you were working. I tried the formula our French housekeeper used. The result was a titanic blob of hard cheese sunken in an ocean of bubbling liqueur. Shortly after that triumph of the culinary arts, I decided to start my own cooking show." They both laughed deeply.

"You should be an actress, Gwen."

She tilted her nose slightly in the air to respond.

"No, what I should have been was a Victorian coquette.

I should have lived in an age when playing hard to get was still respected when men were satisfied with a woman's company. A time when prick teasing was fashionable. There aren't men like that anymore Ernest, except you. You, my boy, are an anachronism."

She walked to the window and gazed out. It had started to snow, covering the lawn and the street. "My French teacher is in love with me."

"Not another weekend fling, I hope. You write such depressing letters after a night in one of D.C.'s finest."

"You aren't judging me are you, Ernest? That's not like you."

"No. Only playing the devil's advocate. Practicing for moot court next semester."

“And then you graduate,” she said, turning to face him.

“Yes. And then I join the great litigating mud fight.”

“You’ll make a good lawyer, Ernest. I wish Daddy had lived. You two could have been partners. He had some coal investments, but his heart was with the people. The two of you could have fought the strip miners together, Odysseus and Telemachus. You could have ...”

"Happy New Year, everybody a deep, raspy voice called from the kitchen. "Happy New Year," Gwen’s mother said as she pushed through the bar doors and entered the den.

Gwen stared coldly at her. "Well Cinderella, you're home early. It's not even midnight."

"I thought this was a party. Happy New Year I said." Ernest stood, and with a slight bow said, "Happy New Year, Mrs. Williams."

As she entered the room, he noticed how much one year had changed her appearance. The weight gain was the most noticeable. She had put on at least twenty pounds, distributed in large mounds around her stomach, hips and biceps. Her face was thin, however, sunken and hollow, the way fence slats look after years of being battered by harsh weather. Above her upper lip, Ernest noticed barely visible patches of what may have been dried mucous. Though she had generously applied rouge to her cheeks, faint shades of gray were visible close to her eyes.

"The dance at the country club was dead, so I decided to come home and surprise y'all, but I'm the one who got surprised. Some party this is. It's like a morgue in here."

"Mother," Gwen said, as her tone grew harder. "You know Ernest and I don't celebrate New Year's Eve the way fools do. We don't get sloppy drunk, kiss everybody in sight, and slur the lyrics to 'Auld Lang Syne.' It's a more pensive time, happy but reflective."

"There's something weird about that, Gwen." Mrs. Williams said.

Before Gwen could respond, her mother dropped to her hands and knees and was crawling toward the love seat. When her nose nearly touched the carpet, she reached under with a short, plump arm and pulled Barney out of his favorite hiding place by grasping one

of his hind legs. Before he could resist, she flipped him on his back and began to tickle his belly. Then she bent over further and started kissing him on the nose and mouth. "Mama loves her Barney, yes she does," she said. The old beagle, surprised and disoriented, struggled to free himself. Suddenly, he broke wind, and the odor rapidly filled the room. Mrs. Williams, who was still holding his leg, immediately opened her hand, and Barney rolled over and tottered under the bar doors into the kitchen. Beowulf and Artemis jumped up and gave chase.

"Well, mother, you've certainly made a grand entrance. I'll bet you were the belle of the ball at the VFW club tonight. I'll bet all the drunks there wanted to dance with you, until they got a whiff of one of your farts," Gwen said.

Mrs. Williams slowly stood, spread her feet to steady herself, tilted her chin up slightly and pointed a finger at her daughter and only child. "Don't you begrudge me this evening, Gwen. It's the only night of the year I go out and have fun."

"Yes, and all other nights of the year you stay home and get soused," Gwen said.

"There's nothing wrong with taking a drink or two. Your father, the man you hold in such high esteem, liked his good old red liquor."

Ernest stepped between the women, whose voices had raised to full volume. He would try to keep them apart, as he had done before, a buffer state between two superpowers. "Why don't you ladies settle down, and give each other a big hug? Get the new year off to a fresh start.

Gwen's back stiffened and her eyes narrowed. "Ernest don't try to be the mediator, not tonight. She comes in here and spoils our special time. You know you can't reason with a drunk."

"I'm glad your father can't hear you sass me like this," Mrs. Williams said. "But he would have been too weak to discipline you."

"Bullshit. Daddy was the strongest man I have ever known. He was the granite keystone in my world that you tried to turn to rubble," Gwen said.

"Yeah right, he was strong. Strong enough to pull the trigger of his pistol before that bullet splattered his brains all over the bathroom wall," Mrs. Williams said.

Gwen charged past Ernest, her fists clenched tightly, and she began to strike her mother in the face. Ernest grabbed one of Gwen's arms, but her sweater tore loose in his

hand, and Gwen continued her onslaught. Mrs. Williams fell to her knees, and the top of her head became an anvil. Ernest wrapped his arms around Gwen from behind, and they fell to the floor with Gwen on top of him. She kicked him in the shins with the heels of her boots and tried to stab him in the ribs with her elbows. "Let me go Ernest," Gwen screamed. "Let me go or I'll kill you both."

As Gwen continued to struggle, like a fly in a spider's web, Mrs. Williams staggered to her feet. She was stunned from the beating she had just received, and the six very dirty martinis that sloshed through her body began to make her nauseous. She blinked a couple of times to get her bearings, gave a sardonic glance at what may have just as well been two mating monkeys on the floor and stumbled towards the bathroom.

Gwen managed to turn over to face Ernest, though he still held her tightly. She dug her elbows into the carpet and gradually inched her way upward until she was certain of her location, one that she knew well from more affectionate times with other men. Then her right knee shot upwards into what she called the other Achilles heel. Ernest immediately released her and balled up like a tumbleweed. Gwen sprang to her feet, ran to the fireplace, and grabbed the poker. She raised it over her head and charged through the bathroom door, an Amazon ready to finish her wounded prey.

When she looked down to try to find a spot to land the first blow, she saw that her mother's head was inside the toilet bowl, and her face was under the water. She was slumped forward, and the weight of her body held her in this position. Gwen could hear gurgling, as air bubbles rose to the surface. Sudden as a lightning strike, Gwen's anger changed to pity.

Gwen dropped the poker, grabbed one of her mother's arms and tried to lift her, but she was too heavy. This failing, she plunged her hands into the cold, murky water and tried to turn her mother's head to the side. She screamed for Ernest to help her just as he

stumbled through the doorway. Together, they lifted Mrs. Williams's head out of the water, dragged her into the den and laid her on the bearskin rug.

"She's not breathing, Ernest, she's not breathing," Gwen wailed. He straddled Mrs. William's body and with both hands began to push up and down on the center her chest. "Resuscitate her," Ernest ordered. Gwen, kneeled beside her mother, tilted her head to the side, pinched her nose, opened her mouth, and began to forcefully kiss air into her lungs. As Gwen and Ernest worked together, Mrs. Williams began to cough. In a few seconds, she opened her eyes. She was stunned but alive. Gravity had reclaimed her levitated soul. After her breathing returned to normal, Gwen reached out a hand to help her mother up, but the woman shrank back in fear. "It's all right, Mama, it's over. Let me help you upstairs."

Ernest, left alone, began to rearrange the room. He sat a walnut rocker back on its base. Then he picked up the pieces of a broken vase Gwen had kicked over, and he straightened out the legs of the bearskin rug. Then he went into the bathroom and picked up the poker. As he returned it to its place by the hearth, he looked at the painting of the breakfasting hunters. As Zachariah Cory Williams seemed to stare back at Ernest, the grandfather's clock in the hall began to strike. Once, twice, twelve times. "Happy New Year," he mumbled.

Margaret's Obituary

By Kathy Root Pitts

Dedicated to the Memory of William L. Pitts

A desk under a pile of newspapers is not physically confining. One can always climb over, under, or have room around the sides to squeeze through. It does not throw a person back into their seat. Inky headlines are only words—not even spoken ones. A woman can sit behind a demanding stack of newspapers for years and still have the strength to brush on past it to lunch.

Margaret had been in charge of the *Olympian Sun's* obituary column for coming on twenty-three years. She tackled this daily job with a vigor that rendered her subjects most certainly dead. By the time she finished her obituary notices, a reader could, without question, know who was and was not left alive in the city of Jupiter.

Margaret had no family and no friends—not even a bird nor a cat. Pets seemed messy, and she was a perfectionist. She would sit, back straightened at her high desk in the rear of the office and look over the heads of the lesser employees. She felt that she was friendly enough, but she just didn't seem to get along well with the living.

On this dismal day, when her wall clock reached 4:50, as it had every work day for her many years of employ, Margaret turned to her obituaries. No one had died in the last few days. These were from over the past weekend. She had proofed them carefully in cheery green ink and laid them face down on the editor's desk as she pulled on her multi-colored raincoat and beamed "goodbye" to the ladies in the front office. The obituary column continued to lie quietly on the editor's desk as Margaret tightened her shoulder against the door into the street.

Margaret's bus would be there when she arrived at the stop. Rain had slowed her slightly, forcing her to detour several puddles and putting her a few moments behind schedule, but apart from this inconvenience, Margaret was mischievously pleased that the rain had lasted so long. The weatherman at the *Olympian*, a tidy man who always claimed to be right, had guaranteed sunshine by the time work should end. She was tickled that he had been wrong,

but being a charitable person, she would not rub it in. Rather, she just simpered to herself and looked forward to a night of heavy cloud cover.

But, when Margaret arrived at the bus stop, there was no bus. “It must be late today,” she sided to a woman next to her under the shelter who was struggling with a toddler. She looked around the tired lady and tuned to the bunch huddling away from the downpour, “Weather like this makes most everybody slow!”

“It ain’t the rain, mam” said one grim boy in a dark coat and vest. He stood apart from the shelter and with no umbrella, facing into the rain, drenched. There was something of cold honesty in his dripping profile.

“Pardon me?” Margaret raised her voice over the rain. People seldom contradicted her.

“Comin’ down the road a ways there’s a funeral with a real long line of cars”; he balanced on the balls of his feet, peering high and forward for a better view of the approaching hearse.

“*Nooo*, you must be mistaken; there is no funeral today,” she correct the grim boy. Then definitely, “You see, I know that no funeral was arranged. The last death in Jupiter was a week ago, and that funeral was held out West, in Nevada.” Then to the lady whose child was finally quieted with a candy, “Las Vegas, Nevada” she spoke with a nod.

A few of those huddled against the rain and close enough to hear looked at Margaret, but the grim boy did not. A couple trying to hold a plastic bag over both their heads glanced at each other and chuckled. Then a countrified woman in a yellow calico dress and men’s work boots demanded of Margaret, in all seriousness, “How would you know who is are ain’t died unless you was Gawd?”

Margaret condescended to the woman with a thin smile, as if talking patiently to a tiresome child, “It’s my job. I just----”

“There it is,” the grim boy interrupted. “You can see it now, if you stand out this way, out here on the curb,” he gloated. Then, he fell back into rainy silence.

The tempest increased, and there it was, an ugly funeral procession coming down the street right towards Margaret. “Our bus’s held up behind all of them cars,” the country woman remarked to the tortured Margaret. “The line’s awful long; must have been somebody important.”

Margaret was on her feet, ignoring the puddles. “But, there’s NO one today!” Her mistake was devastating. She felt urged to stop the procession and send it back until she had granted it her permission. “Do you know who it is?” She asked the wet group, her lips tightened as she scanned the bunch, looking for a guilty face. “That person was NOT on my list; this death must be corrected!” No one knew, but one gentleman suggested that the procession seemed to approach from the direction of Chance’s Funeral Home, and one might inquire there in the morning. By the time Margaret’s interrogation was finished, the procession had reached the traffic light where the little group waited. All watched, but Margaret felt that the huge black hearse and seemingly endless line of cars that followed—each moving slowly through the light, as if to look at her alone—were reverently mocking her.

Among the group at the bus stop, the gentleman had taken off his hat and stood staring at the wheels as the procession crawled by. The tired woman with the now sleeping toddler looked anxious and chewed her top lip as if she were afraid one of the cars would stop and demand that she climb in. The boy in the dark coat sneered defiantly. He was not impressed. The couple under the plastic bag was deeply involved with their own plans; they gave the procession only careless attention.

As the tail end of the procession passed on down Main Street toward the huge city cemetery, Margaret stared. The bus arrived, and the boy urged Margaret to climb aboard. “Come on lady. Wasn’t you waiting for a lift?” Margaret, mud-splattered, shook her head, still watching as the last tail-light turned the corner: “No, I mean, I remember. I have something else to do.”

The bus pulled away from the curb, shouldered into traffic, and spurted out exhaust that filled the damp air around Margaret with the smell of petrol. The entire bus stop experience had been a troubling affair, and Margaret was glad not to be accompanying those people the whole way home. She stood for a minute, indifferent to shelter, and unconscious of the rain that had made her triumphant over the weatherman just moments before. Across the street was a child’s face looking back at her from a department store window—a startling image that recalled a tinted photograph of Margaret’s mother in a school uniform. Margaret suddenly felt old. She looked both ways after the child was gone from the window and stomped deliberately in a puddle to re-enact something of

youthful abandon. Instead, she was clutched by the realizations that her shoe was now soaked through and that she had missed one important obituary.

That she could have made such an enormous mistake was beyond Margaret. She tried to be methodical and decide the next step, but the procession had affected her in a deeply personal way, like a slap in the face from a stranger. It was several minutes before the smarting subsided and she was able to attribute guilt. One hopeful culprit came to mind. Before she had walked even a block back to the *Olympian*, she had convinced herself that the fault lay with a newly-hired receptionist in the front office. Margaret had spotted her for a fool her first day. A silly fool, but presumably harmless.

It was now obvious that the new receptionist was more than a harmless nuisance, with her gossip and her amazing ability to get messages wrong; she was an indisputable danger to the *Olympian*. Margaret would have to confront her and maybe even go the chief editor. She would return and sort through the “in” basket on this mindless receptionist’s desk to find the neglected obituary notice. Tomorrow morning, she rehearsed to herself, she would wait patiently for an explanation. If the receptionist were apologetic, Margaret might recommend upstairs that the new hire be allowed to stay, but only after it were agreed that she remain under Margaret’s hawklike supervision. Except for the embarrassment for Margaret herself-- having to enter an obituary late--the problem was already solved in her head, and her quick—though still imaginative—discovery of the problem’s source left Margaret vindicated and relieved.

Margaret was too late to fulfill her dream of the prostrate receptionist. The front office was locked for the evening, and security had to let her in. The story of the receptionist’s negligence was wasted on the guard who gnawed tirelessly at a piece of peanut brittle without once looking above Margaret’s shoulders. While inside, the guard waited by the door, hands in his pockets, still working his jaw, slowly, though the brittle was finished. The in-basket on the receptionist’s desk was empty. All of the important notices couldn’t have been sent, Margaret agonized to herself. “The notice must be buried somewhere under all of this rubbish,” she told the guard, who couldn’t have been less interested. He was busy sucking his teeth. Margaret stood with her hands to her throat, plunged in a swell of anxiety--hesitating to search another person’s desktop and drawers, particularly with the guard nearby. “You wouldn’t tell if I just looked a bit? It’s really very important.” Her voice

was no longer assertive; her confidence failed her. The guard finally met her eyes, still working his mouth for a morsel.

“Be back in . . .” he left off talking and looked at his watch, “in five minutes. Got to tell the boys in shipping the truck’ll be late . . . Five minutes,” and he held up five fingers as he turned his back.

“Useless man,” fumed Margaret. “The day he accomplishes anything I’ll personally see to it that he gets a front page headline.” She continued to grumble while rifling through letters, newspaper clippings, empty bottles of fingernail polish, stabbing herself hard on a message spike with half-a-dozen recipes pierced through their centers.

She spent two of her five minutes trying to staunch the blood with directions for making “Festive Peach Salad,” and ruining recipes through to “Bananas Foster: Western Style.” “Yee-haw,” Margaret nearly spit with the offending recipe crumpled over her congealing hand.

The search was fruitless, and Margaret’s frustration was turning to full despair. The guard ambled back into the room after fifteen minutes had passed, smelling of bourbon, and chuckling to himself. “I just heard one hell of a good joke . . .”, but Margaret’s expression did not invite humor. “You ‘bout ready to give it up, Miss?” He asked instead.

Suddenly, no longer assertive, she whined and fished through the trash-can beside the receptionist’s desk, “I couldn’t have overlooked a thing as big as that; I just couldn’t have! I’m a responsible person, and always, always I have carried out my duties with the utmost . . .”

“Lady, I’m needed back at my post. If there’s nothin’ else . . .”

“Wait, please, just a minute.” Margaret sucked at her bleeding finger and glared off into space, trying to focus her thoughts on the limitless hiding places where her elusive obituary might be. She looked back at her own desktop, under the desk, and in the drawers. It wasn’t there. She scanned the front office. There were desks layered heavily with papers and junk extending the length of the room to the back wall where there were file cabinets containing more papers –and this was only one room on the ground floor. There were three floors to this building, and the death notice could be scribbled on any paper anywhere.

“Damn that stupid woman,” Margaret hissed, then she felt her face redden, and surprisingly, she found that she wanted to cry. She had lost someone, strongly close to her,

whom she didn't even know. She followed the guard out, stopping at his post after he insisted that she file the required On-Site Accident Report. Hardly picking up her feet, she looked back through the locked glass door, eyeing the disorderly room—her aching finger wrapped in a bandage the guard supplied. Her dejection felt so complete—a martyr to incompetence. She formed a mental image of Saint Mary cradling the head of a lifeless Jesus while rocking to the rhythms of typing and petty gossip.

The long walk home was wet and exhausting, and her nerves over the last few hours had left her with no appetite for dinner and with a terrible headache. She wanted to avoid people, especially the chatter and long faces of cab drivers whom, in her opinion, expected to be handsomely tipped for doing nothing more than sitting all day. She dreaded the curiosity of her landlady—another unproductive human being.

Margaret, on the other hand, had a useful, almost artistic job. Certainly, it was a noble profession, to immortalize a person's life in type, highlight their achievements (if they had any) and blot out imperfections. She was able to dignify people, even those who—and Margaret produced a sour grin at the thought—never bothered to think of the memories that they might leave behind—people whom she would never respect nor associate with.

Of course, there were dignitaries, too—worthy people. “Why, I even wrote a long story about our last governor, including my own personal feelings.” What she said about him had been lovely, although she had despised the man while he was alive. She straightened her spine, but was soon dragging again.

Margaret arrived home, finally, but wretched now in the presence of familiar things which had been a comfort before: the lamp, the couch, the coffee table. She recognized the room well enough, but didn't seem to recognize herself—never as a person who failed at her job. It was too late to call Chance's Funeral Home, and too humiliating. For years she had—in her own way—conquered death. She had been almost godlike, bestowing nobility and enduring legacies on those lucky enough in death to rise *through* her pen. Now she found herself jabbing at a blank page with her pencil—like a shovel to a grave—attempting to retrieve a lost soul, a soul lost to the *Olympian Sun*, and lost to the town of Jupiter.

Precious Blood

By Rashell R. Smith-Spears

Zola moved like a dancer, her body bending and stretching around Queen Anne armchairs and walnut coffee tables. Carrying her grandmother's antique tea set, she flowed effortlessly, barefoot, across her cool wooden floors onto the plush carpeted ones. After carefully setting the tea tray down on the coffee table, she reclined in her favorite wingback chair. She unconsciously moved into the right corner and relaxed her shoulders against its soft, slightly worn fabric. She inhaled deeply then exhaled reflecting on her life's purpose. In and out, she breathed, confident she could make the world safe; she *would* make the world safe.

As a woman, people never suspected her of being a killer of sex offenders. She could move among people without much attention being paid to her. Because she was also blind, they often ignored her altogether. It made her job that much easier. But in truth her mission was easily fulfilled because she was also a vampire. She could read their minds, be upon them before they knew it, and kill them with a cool efficiency. Sometimes things that seemed like a curse could be a blessing. And sometimes it was just a curse.

Through the open windows of her living room, she heard tires crunch over gravel. A car door opened, and the smell of oranges and sandalwood drifted through the air. It was her beloved, Ron.

"You just can't stay away," she teased him through the open window.

"Like a flame pulls a moth. You're my addiction," he called in the night.

"Didn't anyone tell you addictions were dangerous?"

He laughed and increased his pace. The hurried rustling of his leg against his other pants leg quickened Zola's heart. Even after a year, he still excited her.

Ron wasn't alone. Someone else's earthy smells mingled with his more cultivated one. Ron opened the door with his key, metal against wood. Her living room became an orange grove in the middle of a forest. Ron's thick, muscular arm spread like soft moss around her waist.

"Hmm," she gently moaned leaning in to kiss his cheek. "Who have you brought with you?"

"My brother, Ray. He got out today."

"Hey man, don't tell her that," the voice belonging to the stranger's scent fussed.

"She already knows. I told you she's psychic," Ron returned. "Hey, Zola, do you need me to help you to the couch?"

"In my own house?" Zola laughed at his chauvinistic need to protect. Even after all he had seen she could do, he never gave up his efforts to protect her. It made her love him more. She walked to her chair and sat down with a flourish to prove she didn't need his help.

Ron had told her about his brother's 10-year prison stint already. She knew he could be rough around the edges, but she was determined to be a good hostess, nonetheless.

"Zola, girl, what did my little brother do to deserve someone as fine as you?" Ray exclaimed loudly after she gave him a bottle of beer.

"Man, chill with the little brother stuff in front of my woman. Besides, she's blind; you don't have to yell at her," Ron said.

At a normal volume, Ray said, "You are my little brother.

"Four minutes."

“Oh, he saved my life,” Zola answered. “Believe me, if he had let me die, I wouldn’t have given him the time of day.” She smiled at her joke. Ron’s chuckle warmed her heart.

Only they knew that when Ron had pushed Zola out of the crosswalk just before a car running a red light zoomed past her, he had not stopped her from dying. Of course, he didn’t know at the time. He had thought it funny later when he learned she worked as a psychic. Imagine, a psychic who couldn’t predict a runaway car. But he had found it funnier still—after some time—that as a vampire, she was in no danger at all.

“She fine and funny? Ron, you really don’t deserve this. Listen, Zola,” he stood up and draped his arm across her shoulders, “we look just alike so when you get tired of him, holla at your boy.”

Zola wanted to laugh; her man’s brother, his only living family member, had given her the sign of approval. But she couldn’t laugh because the minute Ray touched her, a barrel of images torpedoed and burst in her mind. They came so fast and unexpected, she did not have the power to stop them. The pictures rained down behind her closed lids, pictures of Ray’s abuse as a four-year-old and his continued suffering as a ten-year-old. She couldn’t stop them even when the image changed from Ray as the abused to Ray as an adult abuser. Zola shuddered at the images and felt the sub-zero cold of fear from all the young boys. It was their fear and her own that froze her in the spot and made it impossible to even pretend to smile.

“Zola, you okay?” Ron’s voice broke through the wall of frozen snow that briefly entombed her in shock and indecision.

“I’m fine,” she answered slowly.

No one said anything for a minute. Zola ran her hand through the loose curls at the ends of her braided hair.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Concern filtered Ron’s voice.

“I’m fine,” she tried to insist. “So, Ray, what do you plan to do now that you’re home?” She wanted to focus on something other than the sobs of so many little boys still echoing in her head.

“No plans really. Guess I’ll get a job since the P.O. says I got to.”

“Oh, where will you go for that?” The sobs were deafening.

“Don’t know. Ron might have something lined up.”

“Yeah, a guy down at the office said there’s an opening in the mailroom,” Ron said.

Zola tried to see Ray dressed in a shirt and tie pushing the cart of envelopes and packages at Brown and Powers. She wanted to see normal, harmless. Instead, she saw more unsettling, monstrous acts of Ray’s deviance.

“Do you see it working out?” Ray joked after she had been quiet for some time. She knew her eyes had been moving rapidly under her lids.

“What? No, I mean. I didn’t see anything, uh, about your job.” She tried to avoid lying. She was not above it—she would lie if she had to—but she promised herself she would never lie to Ron. Although Ray was obviously a very different person from her man, Ron was still in the room, in the conversation.

“So, you really are a psychic?” Ray was curious. “Do you see a sexy woman like yourself in my future?” Zola heard his heavy jeans rub across her sofa as he moved to the edge of the couch.

“It doesn’t work like that, Ray. She doesn’t just pull out a vision on demand.” Ron answered, but she could tell in his voice that he was still concerned about her strange behavior.

“Sometimes, I can,” she said very low, barely audible. The only way to silence the sounds was for Ray to leave.

“Do you need to grab my hand so you can read my palm?”

“Oh, God, no!” She pushed into the back of her chair. She could not risk touching him again. “I . . . am blind,” she recovered.

“Shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She waved him off. “Let me concentrate.”

Zola pretended to be focused on some distant future, but she knew what she was going to tell him. A young boy he was going to abuse lived in the same building as a woman he was going to meet.

“You will meet a woman . . . she will be very sexy . . . she will remind you of a lion with wild golden blond hair. Stay away from her. Nothing but pain can come of your contact with her.”

“Are you sure? Where am I gon meet this chickenhead?”

Zola winced at his disrespect of a woman he had not even met.

“A club you’ll go to tomorrow night. She will be very tempting. Do not go home with her.”

“Is she going to kill me?” he asked ominously but amazed.

“It’s best for you if you stay away from her.” Zola closed her eyes to signal the end of the prophecy.

“That’s some crazy shit!” Ray said, still amazed. “Ron, man, if I meet that woman tomorrow night, you got to bring me over here so I can get some stock tips.”

“That’s definitely not how it works.” A slight scrapping on the floor indicated that he

stood up. “You are not pimping my woman for get-rich-quick schemes. Come on, man, we got some other places we need to go. I can’t take you anywhere.” He laughed good-naturedly, obviously glad his brother and his woman got along.

They were about to leave, Zola thought with a relieved sigh. The sobs had become loud white noise while she was talking. When he left, she could return to a peaceful silence. She stood to walk them to and through the door.

“Zola, it was cool to meet you. You alright.” Ray hugged her. The sobs became anguished cries. “You’re good for Ron; I can tell.”

“He’s good for me.” She stepped out of his embrace and slid over to the overwhelming scent of oranges and wood. Ron’s arm wrapped around her shoulders in a protective cocoon.

When the guys left, the wails stopped. Her world was dark and silent again, but it was far from peaceful.

“I do not understand your problem,” her friend Evangeline announced later that night. She fanned the air slightly. “Zola, for God’s sake, sit down. You are giving me a headache. I keep thinking you are going to run into something and knock yourself out.”

Zola grimaced and halted in the back and forth pacing she had been doing since Evangeline arrived. “Am I going to knock myself out in my own house?” she asked, annoyed.

“You might,” Evangeline answered coolly. “You are so wound up you might forget where everything is located.”

“Hardly,” Zola scoffed, but she sat down.

“Now, what is so problematic about this situation? You kill child molesters; this deviant is a child molester. Ergo, you kill him. Why is this so difficult?” Evangeline presented the case

in such simple terms, but then, most of life was black and white for her. She probably felt no ounce of remorse about turning her. Zola was going blind. Evangeline turned her to try to save her sight. It didn't work, so you move on.

"It's . . . it's not that simple," Zola protested, fighting against the assuredness of Evangeline's tone. "The 'deviant' is Ron's brother. How can I kill his brother?"

"Why do you care so much about this Ron? He is just a man. There are others."

"True, but not for me. I love him."

"Love." Evangeline hissed. "Come out with me tonight, and I will show you a place where the men will give you everything you need."

"Ron gives me what I need. He accepts me for who I am."

"Does he? Well," she mused, "he should understand why you have to kill his brother. Killing bad guys is as much a part of who you are as being a vampire is."

Zola lolled her head back against the wall. She wished she could see the world in such a black and white way.

During a moment alone later that week, Zola asked Ron, "Do you ever talk to Ray about what happened to him? When he was a boy?"

"Not anymore. Not since we were teenagers."

"Do you think he resents you because it happened to him and not to you?"

"Sometimes. He says he's glad it was him and not me; that it was his job as the big brother to make sure it didn't happen to me. Even though he has never treated me like he resents me, I don't know how he couldn't. Sometimes, I resent myself."

“What if you could help him—get justice? What if you could become a vampire and go after that coach?” She asked it like it was a brand-new thought.

Ron responded with a sigh.

“Zola, that’s not right of you to try to use my brother’s situation to get me to turn.”

“I was just asking a hypothetical.”

“Right.”

“What’s so bad about turning?”

“Besides drinking blood?”

“It’s not so bad. It’s good really. Filling.” She smiled.

“Ughh.” He shivered. “I’d have to avoid all chairs with wooden legs, all mirrors, people would have to invite me before I could come in their homes.” He was smiling. She could hear it in his voice. “I’d have to turn into a bat and fly around. You know I don’t like heights.”

She hit him playfully on the shoulder. “None of that is real. It’s all myths.”

“Well, there’s the blood drinking.”

“You said that already.”

“That’s such a big sticking point, it bears repeating.”

“What about the point that you could spend eternity with me?”

“That’s certainly a perk.” His skin was warm as his hand found hers. He intertwined their fingers.

She felt a shift in his mood. He became serious.

“Zola, I’m okay with who you are. All of you. I respect the choice that you made and why you made it. But I like me the way I am. I don’t want to change that. I think we fit with you as the psychic vampire and me as the witting lover. Doesn’t it fit for you?”

She nodded.

“Well, I can’t give you eternity, but if you’ll have me,” he squeezed her hand, “I’ll be with you for the entirety of my life.”

Two nights later, Eva suggested she and Zola go hunting, but Zola could not focus on Eva. She was on the verge of a decision. She had to do it, didn’t she? She had to stop Ray from hurting those boys. She couldn’t let the fact that he was Ron’s brother stop her from doing what had to be done. She owed it to the victims. Ron would understand that—eventually. His brother was hurting. He would want him not to hurt.

“What? Oh. I already went out earlier this evening,” Zola said.

“Oh.” Eva sounded disappointed.

She could do it. She would handle it so it would be humane, quick. But she would have to talk to Ron first. She wouldn’t get his permission, but she would seek his understanding.

“Are you sure you do not want to just come with me while I hunt? It could be fun.” Eva dangled the words like so many tasty morsels.

He would have to understand, wouldn’t he? He could forgive her for this, couldn’t he? He didn’t want to be a part of her mission, but he had told her on more than one occasion that he supported her mission, her life’s work. And he loved her. She would be his family. She would be his family for the entirety of his life. Decided, a calm fell over her.

“Zola, where are you?”

“What? Oh! I can’t go out with you tonight. Ron is coming over and he’s bringing Ray.”

Three hours later, Eva was back and Zola’s cloak of calm was rent down the middle and strewn across the floor.

Ron and Ray had come soon after Eva left. The whine of Ray's victims that Zola would obviously hear every time she saw him until she handled it threatened to drive her crazy, but she focused on tuning them out. Of course, that made her somewhat distant. Apparently sensing her mood, Ray made an excuse of going to the convenience store down the street to get some beer so that Ron and Zola could talk. She had decided that she would take advantage of this time alone to talk to Ron, but when she opened her mouth to speak, nothing came out. She was so nervous her hands shook. It was embarrassing—she was a vampire for goodness sakes!

“Zola,” he had said, concern soaking his words. “What’s wrong? You’ve been acting so strangely lately.” His arms were warm and gentle around her shoulders.

“I’ll be okay. There’s something I have to do. To tell you.”

“What?”

“Do you want some tea? I’ll get you some tea.” She stood up from his embrace and went into the kitchen.

As she worked over the oven with the teapot that always sat on the eye, he yelled that he needed to get something out of the car. He would be back. She didn’t think much of it except to hope that he would come back in before the tea was ready. If she had idle time to sit and think, she might talk herself out of telling him and therefore doing anything.

A whiff of the crisp night air from the open door carried the scent of oranges to Zola. She smiled thinking of Ron, but her smile mutated into a twisted, silent scream as she saw it all seconds before it happened. Ron was walking over the threshold of her house, carrying a small black box in his pocket. His heart beat fast like an automated piston, rushing his warm blood close to the surface of his golden honey skin through the delicate and lovely maze of arteries and veins. His dark green eyes twinkled; he was happy to be where he was. He didn’t know; he

couldn't see Eva behind him. She had come on him like a listless smoke—without purpose and imperceptible. Her earth-colored skin blended well with the night yet stood in a terrible and beautiful contrast to Ron's unsuspecting face. He smiled, revealing his very human, slightly crooked, blunt teeth. He was about to call out to Zola. At the same time, Eva opened her mouth, revealing very white, razor-sharp fangs that made Ron's neck nothing but a tender mound of soft flesh as she sank them in deeply for a long, slow siphon. His smile now mirrored Zola's twisted one as he folded in slow motion to the ground.

Not waiting to clear her head of the vision, Zola sprinted into the living room. Slamming her shoulder on the door jamb between the kitchen and the living room, she made it in time to hear Ron fall.

“Noooooooooooo!” she yelled. She fell herself and scrambled to where she estimated Ron was lying. His shallow breaths called to her like a siren on the sea wall. She knocked over her round, antique wood coffee table, shattering the ebony heart figurine she kept from her mother's house. She tried to remember how to use her other heightened senses, but she could barely think to breathe. “Ron!”

“Zola? What is your problem?” Eva demanded.

Zola's head snapped up toward Eva's voice. She snarled at her.

“I have done you a favor. Now you do not have to kill your boyfriend's brother. I have done it for you.” She sounded self-satisfied and confused.

“You've killed Ron! This is Ron!”

“What? I saw Ray leave. I thought he was coming back. . . .”

Zola found his body and pulled him onto her lap. She felt her hot tears fall on her hands immersed in his warm blood.

“I am so sorry, Zola. I thought . . . I mean . . . I did not know.”

Zola rocked Ron in her lap like a baby. He was a baby. Only 29. He hadn't had a chance to live.

“Zola, what the hell happened?”

Ray's rough voice shattered the last of her composure. She began to wail.

“Zola, it is not completely hopeless,” Eva said firmly, ignoring Ray. “There is a faint heartbeat. You can save him.”

“No!”

“What the hell? Save my brother!” Ray's voice was angry and scared.

“He doesn't want that,” she mumbled.

“Save him!” Ray insisted.

“Do you want him, Zola? He can be mad at you and fight with you once you save him, but if he dies, you will be the only one who is mad.”

“I'll be mad,” Ray interjected.

“Is it Ray? Ray, I am going to have to ask you to shut up right now.” Eva was impatient.

“Who the fuck are you? That's my brother down there. You don't tell me to shut up.”

“Do you know how many ways I could hurt you?” Eva threatened.

“Shut up! Both of you,” Zola sobbed.

“Zola, you need to do it now! Can you not hear his heartbeat getting weaker?”

“I'm sorry,” she mumbled through snot and tears. “I'm so sorry. I know you didn't want this, but I can't lose you. I can't.”

She remembered there had to be an exchange of blood. Maybe Eva's bite was enough, but she wanted the total exchange. Still holding Ron's head with one arm, she raised her other

trembling arm to her mouth and sliced her wrist open with her teeth. She pressed her open wound to his bluing lips and with a lightning quickness, struck the other side of his neck.

“What. The. F--!” Ray yelled. “What are you doing to my brother? What are you?”

“Ray, I asked you to shut up,” Eva tsked.

Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she knew that Eva had fallen on Ray and killed him. Zola could not care, however. She was focused on the ribbons of burgundy flowing from her to Ron. They rushed like wind-whipped rivers, carrying a new life to her beloved. She saw that life floating to Ron, washing him in its power. She saw him lulled to sleep by the river’s steady song. He would sleep for three days. Then, she saw him open his eyes. News fangs crowded his mouth. She saw him drink from her wrist again. And then she saw a gray blankness. Their future was a gray blankness.

That icicle entered her body once again, spreading its creeping coldness outward to her legs, her arms, her fingertips. She had tried. She hoped what she did was enough—she only wanted to do what was best, what was right with what she had been given—but she couldn’t be sure.

She dropped her wrist and pulled him closer to her body. His body was still warm. He was going to make it; he was going to live. She kissed his bloodied forehead and hoped the promise of eternity with her would be enough to garner his forgiveness.

Five Poems

By Jianqing Zheng

Impressions, Autumn Moon

moon through clouds
a bamboo flute meandering
through woods

harvest moon
memory of homeplace
gleaned in dream

moonbeams
strings of an urheen
strings of loneliness

frost night
moon gyrated in the arms
of a live oak

bus view
moon a roller coaster
from tree to tree

storm clouds
moon a weather balloon
tumbling in and out

Impressions: Moon #5

piney woods drive
a hide-and-seek
with wolf moon

out of woods
chased once again
by hunter's moon

~~~

harvest moon  
silhouette of a hay baler  
in the distance

rice fields  
moon a sickle hanging  
sharp and shiny

~~~

mid-autumn moon
a white Go-stone
held heavy in hand

supermoon
loneliness turns
into a ferris wheel

~~~

moon in clear sky  
a coin tossed  
into the reflecting pool

empty jetty  
only the crescent moon  
hangs around

## **Impressions: Moon #6**

her swollen face  
after bad toothache  
full moon

her pale face  
behind window gauze  
moon at dawn

wrapped with a towel  
after hot shower  
this cloudy moon

stretching her foot  
for massage  
moonshine

the pregnant wife  
watches herself in the mirror  
harvest moon

staying up all night  
to share wife's birth pangs  
pale moonset

## **Fishing**

first time fishing  
the fishing line gets caught  
on the branch

fly-fishing  
the red sunset flops  
as if hooked

sun on rod  
man and his dog  
wows and barks

dyed by twilight  
tips of reeds flicker red  
in rising wind

cabin cooking  
sunset slants in and sniffs  
the grilled fish

## Views in the Woods

walking trail  
meditation meanders  
through autumn woods

long drought—  
dead trees  
raise bare arms

colorful fungi—  
cycle of life  
from a downed tree

autumn sunset—  
a defunct nest  
on a leafless tree

graying dusk—  
a raccoon  
climbs a decaying tree

# Pedagogical and Critical Essays

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# Evaluating Writing in Composition Courses: Connecting the Disconnected Writers

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*By Shanell Bailey*

## Abstract

In most Freshman Composition courses, students are required to write essays on specific subjects and/or styles based on the instructors' requirements. Commonly, I encounter similar problems while introducing these assignments. Students often become frustrated and display a strong sense of evident disinterest when given topics that entail additional reading, discussion, and even research. After speaking with others in academia, we have essentially all had the same responses and still have the same questions. How can we increase student engagement while writing certain essays? How can we get the students to put forth more effort while writing? If students are struggling while writing five-paragraph essays, how will they even write an effective research paper? Although there will never be an accurate answer to any of the questions, I have received responses from students that could be taken into consideration. Leisure writing is the request. Although not the sole solution to improving student interest in writing, as teachers we may need to look at the perspectives and viewpoints from research and studies that have assessed leisure writing and some of its outcomes. This research will take a closer look at the students' concepts, expert opinions, and teachers' experiences with allowing leisure, yet standard, writing in the Composition classroom. The idea is not to focus on shifting the traditional expectations of writing, but to produce more effective writing when assigned certain writing assignments less likely to captivate the students' interest initially. With an array of different pedagogical methods that are constantly modifying and the constant decline in student writing outcomes, we must remain receptive to innovating any ideas from all perspectives with efforts of restoring and revitalizing our students' writing.

Nancy Sommers, author of "Responding to Student Writing," states that as teachers, we know that most students find it difficult to imagine a reader's response in advance and to use such responses as a guide in composing. Therefore, we comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of the reader, and to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because we believe that becoming such a reader helps them to evaluate what they have written and develop control over their writing. These comments/and or

feedback oftentimes can result in several reactions from the students. Embarrassment. Confusion. Lack of interest. There is no desire to attempt to make corrections. I have learned that it is crucial to not even reach this point in Composition. In my Composition classes, I have a designed acronym for our writing process called BORRF (brainstorm, outline, rough draft, re-write, final draft). More times than I would like to admit, I have had students never return before we make it to the rough draft submission. It isn't very encouraging to both the teacher and the student. Student retention is just as important as student engagement. We must excel to keep our students' best interests as the primary focus.

I have been teaching Composition 1 and Composition 2 courses for the last decade. Every year, I try to restructure the atmosphere of the classes from the previous semester. Sometimes, I have more success, and other times, I, myself, become discouraged. While it is true that every class has a diverse dynamic, generated by factors including the class size, student-teacher interaction, and aim and motivation factors, I am a firm believer that I must take the fundamental role of facilitator and be accountable for student outcomes.

In my Composition 1 class, our first assignment is an introductory writing prompt. The students are asked to choose from two different prompts which are quite common. They must write a first-person one-page response. In my Composition 2 class, the first assignment is to write a diagnostic essay from a prompt question given. Both assignments are written in class to avoid the use of outside sources. Also, I can categorize my students' writing styles and recognize strengths, weaknesses, and grammatical and mechanical errors that I will have to concentrate on.

With the thousands of students that I have encountered, I have easily determined that students do well on this assignment. Despite any errors that they may have in their



writing, I can say that effort is put in. I also have approximately an 80-85 percent completion rate. This statistic has resulted in me questioning the types of essays that we require our students to write. I know that they “can write.” It’s what they “want” to write about that is the biggest setback. The lack of engagement, the excuses, and the coincidental absences on essay due dates escalate as the semester continues are the major concerns.

So, as instructors what do we do? What can we do? How do the students feel? Some students are oftentimes embarrassed and far from confident about their writing to begin with. Some work diligently and put forth great efforts. I have had to change my grading. I cannot expect my Composition students to write on the same level as upper-level English majors. Knoblauch and Brannon, authors of “On Students’ Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response” reference that many instructors are hesitant to praise papers that are not truly excellent. It is certainly important not to praise students for poor work; nor should instructors provide false encouragement. Still, in neglecting to praise students, instructors lose the opportunity to note and nurture what skills their students possess. So how do we correct our students without discouraging them? How do we hold them accountable as writers when we know that they are not performing at the expected collegiate level? Do we self-assess the students at the beginning of the course?

If we (instructors) plan to allow the students to self-assess, could it help? Will we be receptive to any ideas or changes proposed by the students? The purpose of implementing self-assessments in Composition is to enable students to develop their judgment or expectations for the course. In the self-assessment, students should be expected to thoroughly provide the instructors with their own projected outcomes for the course. Implementing student assessment in the classroom urges students to have expectations of

their work as well as follow the process to the outcome, which is ultimately the final grade/progress made/material learned. Moreover, self-assessment enables a perception of ownership of the student's learning and can lead to a better investment by the student.

Even though we may consider allowing the students to be more voiced with the assignment expectations, will it help? We must continue to remind the students that Composition writing will refine both their reading and writing skills. Many of the writing assignments (brief prompt responses, essay writing, and research papers) will depend on your understanding of course reading assignments or related readings you do on your own that are given specifically by the instructor. It can be difficult to write effectively about a text that you have not understood or not as interested in. Even though the student may not understand/comprehend the reading, it can be challenging to write about it if you do not feel directly engaged with the ideas discussed. The writing assignments in Composition serve a different objective than the standard writing assignments completed in high school. In high school, teachers commonly focus on teaching to write in a range of formats, including journal writing, expository writing, research papers, creative writing, and writing short answers and essays for quizzes/and or major tests. Over time, these assignments help you build a foundation of writing skills. So essentially, by the time one has made it to college, we expect you to already have that foundation ready and be able to begin writing essays immediately.

Traditional composition courses will focus on writing for its own sake, helping the students to make the transition to college-level writing assignments. However, while completing these writing assignments, each one serves a different purpose. For example, in my Composition 1 course, students are asked to write four major essays (literacy narrative,

rhetorical analysis, synthesis, and visual essay). In Composition 2, the main assignments are researching, annotating, and the research paper. Both courses require extensive writing. Therefore, the interest must be rooted from the beginning to successfully excel at each. Does this always happen? No. Can instructors tell the difference? Yes.

After grading these assignments and offering feedback, the challenges begin. Allowing students to make changes is not always welcoming to the students. The article “Feedback on Feedback: Exploring Student Responses to Teachers’ Written Commentary” tends to support my claim. It states that teachers who make extensive directive corrections tend to send a message that “the teacher’s agenda is more important” than what the writer is trying to say. Consequently, students may shift their motives and try to match their writing to “expectations that lie beyond their sense of their intention and method. This may cause the students to lose the incentive to communicate their ideas and become disinterested in writing.

So now, the discouragement changes to being disconnected. If the semester begins in August and the student feels he/she is not doing well by mid-September, the likelihood of course completion is slim. Brannon and Knoblauch recommend that teachers may need to conceptualize their roles as responders, reassess their sense of authority, and focus on the process of negotiation of meeting (109). The instructor must consider the students’ feelings. In addition, we need to take some of the blame for our students. We must consider how some comments might affect the students’ composing process and their attitudes toward writing. Comments such as “rephrase” “avoid repetition” or “elaborate” are not helpful when offering feedback for correction. Students are still confused. Instead, instructors should create motivation for the students so that their revisions are aimed at their initial

intent and may have been worded or even misinterpreted by the teacher. The primary goal is to not take over the students' text. Allow them the chance to understand where he/she went wrong without feeling like time was useless and their content was unacceptable and/or incorrect.

Maria Treglia's article "Feedback on Feedback: Exploring Student Responses to Teachers' Written Commentary" is in agreement. She indicates that students value and benefit from teacher-written feedback, and they prefer it to alternative forms such as oral and peer feedback (70). She investigated the relationship between teacher-written commentary and what students do as a result of it. Their data showed that especially weak students looked forward to receiving feedback that acknowledged what they were doing was in line with the assignment. So with this evidence presented, I thought about one of the particular assignments that I have my students complete. In one of our essays, a peer review is assigned for the rough draft. In an in-class assignment, the students are asked to read each other's papers and offer comments and/or suggestions for revisions. I am now asking myself if this a good method is or not. This has always been a class requirement. Moving forward, I must take into consideration that all of my students may not feel comfortable with their classmates' feedback. The peer review will be optional.

It has been proven that students are more likely to reject and disregard comments if they sense negative emotional responses. Even with the importance of this issue, and all the research that comes with it, I have concluded that certain types of students are more likely to experience negative emotional responses than others.

Henderson and Ryan both expressed that students achieve poor grades for several reasons, including lack of effort or preparation. However, in some cases, students believe

that they have performed well, but receive grades that are marked lower than they expected (882). Students who perform well on writing assignments are more able to predict their grades. On the other hand, some students directed negative emotions (sadness and shame) inward because they attributed the negative comments to their lack of effort or abilities. And then, of course, you have students who felt comments were biased or unfair, and they had angry reactions. These students tended to direct those feelings outward, mainly at the teacher who had provided the feedback.

Hence, while continuing to learn innovative pedagogical approaches in Composition. It is understood that changes will always be necessary. One of the biggest concerns, right now, that I am aiming to improve in my classroom is teacher feedback to keep my students confident and self-assured in their writing. The transition from high school to college is a major milestone, and some students do not adjust well. The writing requirements change, and they are expected to grasp everything quickly. Nevertheless, our expectations (as instructors) exceed theirs. Keeping them connected as writers is only one solution to the ongoing writing difficulties. I have modified the way I word my comments on their essay assignments. For example, my most used comment, at one point, was “What is this?” Now, instead, I will ask “Will you justify the statement?” Instead of making the student feel automatically confused, they will think about what they have written first, then actually attempt to explain and possibly identify their own mistakes. A student feeling confident in his/her writing and staying connected despite the number of errors that he/she has made is the contentment that I appreciate as an instructor. Once a student is disconnected, the odds of captivating that attention again vary. Keep them motivated. Be attentive to the commentary we give so that they can stay connected. Majority of our

students rely on feedback that they receive from us to help them to continue developing their writing skills, the primary focus of Composition.

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# Devil Dogs in Folklore, Fiction, and Popular Culture

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*By Alan Brown*

Household pets have been considered parts of the family for centuries. We rejoice when they are born and grieve when they die. However, like human beings, our pets have always had a dark side. Black cats, for example have been believed to be the “familiars” of witches. Dogs have always been thought to have a close connection to the supernatural. Parapsychologists claim that in those weird moments dogs appear to be staring into space at nothing at all, or when they bark in a totally empty room, they may be in touch with spirits. In folklore, some dogs are said to originate in hell itself. Devil dogs, or hellhounds, appear in the folk tales and myths of many cultures, such as Anubis in Egyptian mythology, Garmr in Norse mythology, and Perro Negro in Latin America (Trubshaw). The best-known of these mythical beasts is Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of Hades to prevent mortals from entering and spirits from exiting. The Romans said that the entrance was at Avernus, but the Greeks believed that Hades could be entered near the Promontory of Taenarum. From the gate was a low tunnel leading to the throne room where Pluto and Proserpina sat in their sable robes (Guerber 154).

Some of the Greeks’ most celebrated heroes have encounters with Cerberus. When Orpheus attempts to pass through the gate, Cerberus growls savagely to scare him away. Undaunted, Orpheus calms the monster down by playing a soothing melody on his lyre (Guerber 67).. As the last of Hercules’ seven labors, Hercules was assigned the task of



brining the hound of hell back to Eurystheus, but only if he overcomes him without any weapons. After surrendering his club, bow, and sword, Hercules corners Cerberus by the River Acheron and wrestles him until the three-headed dog collapses on the ground (Jackson 249).

Hundreds of years ago, the myth of the hell-hound migrated to Western Europe. England and Ireland proved to be especially fertile breeding grounds for the legends. In England, tales of black hell hounds were told in Norfolk, Suffolk, Anglia, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, and Lincolnshire for hundreds of years. Tales of hell hounds served a variety of functions. Some folklorists believe the Catholic Church encouraged the development of these tales to frighten parishioners into attending mass. Some of these stories may have been cautionary tales to keep children inside after dark. Black Dog of Bouley Bay may have been spread by smugglers among the locals to ensure that the bay would be deserted at night (“Inside the Bone Chilling Legend”).

So many legends have been passed down in the English countryside that folklorists have been able to categorize the demonic canines. The appearance of some of these dogs portends evil or tragic events. Many people believe that the Black Dog of Bouley appears just before a storm (“Folklore—The Black Dog). The Black Dog of Preston, which guards the city gates, is usually sighted when danger is on the horizon. Its howl heralds the impending death of someone in the area, even though it has no head (“Hertfordshire’s Last Witch Hunt”). Another hell hound whose appearance is construed to be a sign of death is the Gabriel Hound, which has the head of a man and flies through the air. Some folklorists believe that these sightings may have been inspired by the honking of flocks of geese (Hardwick 153-4). Another creature, a headless dog called the Yeth Hound, runs

through the woods of Devon. A number of black dogs have been known to frequent places where people have been hanged. In the parish of Tring, people speak of a chimney sweep named Thomas Colley who was hanged for murdering Ruth Osborne, whom he believed to be a witch. Eye-witnesses walking past the site of the gibbet from which Colley was hanged claim to have seen a huge black dog with large red eyes and sharp teeth (“Hertfordshire’s Last Witch Hunt”). In some legends, shape-shifters had taken the form of large black hounds. The village of Northorpe in the West Lindsey district of Lincolnshire has a large black dog with huge teeth and claws called a Barghest. Supposedly, a man with the power of shapeshifting was known to take the form of this beast. In a nearby village, a wizard changed his shape into that of a Barghest and attacked his neighbor’s cattle (Henderson 275). In Yorkshire and Westmorland, a man named Capelthwaite often took the form of a black dog to help his neighbor round up his sheep but was also known to play tricks on visitors to the village until he was banished by a local vicar (Henderson 275-276). Another benevolent dog is the Gurt Dog of Somerset, which accompanies lone travelers along dark roads and plays with children (Rickard and Mitchell 286-7).

The best-known of these hell hounds is the Black Shuck. The name comes from the Old English Word “succa,” which means “devil.” The first written account of the Black Shuck dates back to Petersborough in 1127. On moonlit nights when the howling wind blew down from the hills and cross the field, peasants claimed to have seen several packs of ghostly hunters sitting stride black horses. They were accompanied by packs of jet black hell hounds with saucer-like eyes. Over the centuries, many of these medieval tales of hell hounds were condensed into the Black Shuck, whose most legendary manifestation occurred during a stormy on August 4, 1577, in the market town of Bungay (now Suffolk).

Reverend Abraham Fleming's 1577 account—"A Strange and Terrible Wunder"—sheets of rain were pelting the roof of St. Mary's Church when a large black dog attacked to men who were kneeling in prayer and wrung their necks. The men dropped dead as they prayed.

Suddenly, the dog vanished, leaving nothing but scorch marks on the floor and two mutilated bodies a proof of his midnight visit ("Inside the Bone-Chilling Legend").

On the same day, the Black Shuck was said to have wreaked havoc in Holy Unity Church at nearby Blythburg. The fearsome creature killed three more parishioners. Once again, the large claw marks on the church floor bore mute witness to the monster's appearance. The church's wooden steeple caught fire as well ("Inside the Bone-Chilling Legend"). The fact that the Black Shuck's rampages took place on "dark and stormy nights" is significant, of course. A more likely explanation for the hellish damage to the church is lightning strikes.

Another source of the Black Shuck legends was discovered in 2013 by Digventures, a London-based archaeology group in the ruins of Leiston Abbey, Suffolk. Archaeologists found the bones of a huge dog that stood over seven-feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. Researchers determined that the canine bones date back about 500 years ago when the abbey was active. According to managing director Lisa Wescott Wilkins, "There's not even a dog alive beside maybe a direwolf on Game of Thrones that would be seven feet tall from nose to toe." Wilkins went on to say that the dog was probably the abbot's pet. It was buried back where the kitchen area would have been. "So when we uncovered it," Wilkins said, "we were thinking to ourselves, god, these are clearly people who had an emotional attachment to this animal and cared for it during its lifetime. So for us, the big story of that sort of moment was dog owners and dog lovers, and just thinking about what it would have been like when the dog was buried" ("Devil Dogs: The Mysterious").

As so often happens, folklore often finds a wider audience when it is incorporated into literature. The first of these devil dogs to show up in English literature was the Gytrash. According to J. Horsfall Turner, the appearance of this phantom black dog “is considered a certain death sign and has obtained the local names of ‘Trash’ or Skruker.” The Gytrash generally appears to a family from whom death is about to select a victim, and is more or less visible according to the distance of the event... On most occasions, the Trash is described as having the appearance of a large dog with very broad feet, shaggy hair, drooping ears, and “eyes as large as saucers.” When walking his feet make a loud splashing noise, like old shoes in a miry road, and hence the name of of “Trash.” The origin of the Gytrash dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (“Gytrash”).

In the Worth Valley, the Charlotte and Emily Bronte’s nursemaid, Tabitha Ackroyd kept the girls awake at night with local tales of the Gytrash. Charlotte Bronte was so shaken by the legend of the Gytrash that she worked it into her novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Chapter 12, Jane is walking on a dark, lonely road when she encounters Mr. Rochester and his black and white Newfoundland dog:

“As this horse approached, and as I watched for it to appear through the dusk, I remembered certain of Bessie’s tales, wherein figured a North-of-England spirit called a ‘Gytrash,’ which, in the form of horse, mule, or large dog, haunted solitary ways, and sometimes came upon belated travelers, as this horse was now coming upon me. It was very near, but not yet in sight; when, in addition to the tramp, tramp, I heard a rush under the hedge, and close down by the hazel stems glided a great dog, whose black and white color made him a distinct object against the trees. It was exactly one form of Bessie’s Gytrash, a lion-like creature with long hair and a

huge head, with strange pretercanine eyes. The horse followed, a tall steed. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash; it was always alone” (120).

Bessie is almost certainly based on Tabitha Ackroyd, the nurse maid at Haworth (Simpson 47). Jane’s fear is fueled by her suspicion that either Rochester’s horse or Mesrour or his dog, Pilot is a Gytrash. The relief Jane feels in her discovery that neither Mesrour nor Pilot is a Gytrash can be said to foreshadow the relief she experiences later on when Jane realizes that Rochester is much kinder than Brocklehurst.

The best-known of the English devil-dog novels is undoubtedly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which is not only generally considered to be the best of Doyle’s four Sherlock Holmes novels, but it was also listed as number 128 of 200 on the BBC’s *The Big Read: The UK’s “best loved novels.”* (“The Big Read”). In the beginning of the novel, Dr. Mortimer shows Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson a 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscript chronicling the origin of the legendary creature that has been preying on members of the Baskerville family for generations. The story goes that Hugo Baskerville, an ancestor of the current owner of Baskerville Hall, Sir Henry Baskerville, was a godless rake who was as well known for his cruelty as he was for his debauchery. One night, during one of his revels with his drunken friends, Hugo walked up the stairs with a plate of food for the young girl he had abducted for his own pleasure when he discovered that she was gone, having climbed down the ivy on the walls to the ground below. Furious, he ran back to the great room, leaped on the table, and swore that he would surrender his soul to the Powers of Evil if he was able to overtake the girl. Hugo, followed by his thirteen sodden friends, stumbled outside. Hugo then ordered his groom to saddle his black mare after giving his hounds the girl’s scented kerchief, he let loose the pack. With the besotted squires riding behind him, Hugo galloped

across the moors in search of the girl. Struggling to keep up with him, one of the squires asked a shepherd if he had seen Hugo and hounds. "I have seen more than that," for Hugo Baskerville passed me upon his black mare, and there ran mute behind him such a hound of hell as God forbid should ever be at my heels" (641). The men left the shepherd and rode on. Suddenly, Hugo's black mare galloped past them in the other direction, his coat slick with froth. They continued riding up they came to a narrow valley, where they found the body of the girl, "dead of fear and fatigue" (641). Nearby was the corpse of Hugo.

"Standing over Hugo, and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon. And even as they looked, the thing tore the throat out of Hugo Baskerville, on which, as it turned its blazing eyes and dripping jaws upon them, the three shrieked with fear and rode for dear life, still screaming across the moor" (641).

For over a century, scholars have scrutinized accounts of devil dogs in the archives of England in search of the legend that inspired Doyle's novel, without success. The closest parallel to the Hound of the Baskervilles can be found in the legend of a spectral hound that haunted Devonshire. The story goes that a notorious squire by the name of Richard Cabell was an avid hunter who sold his soul to the devil. In one variation of the tale, Cabell murdered his wife and was attacked by her dog, which ripped out his throat. Following his death in 1687, a pack of black dogs gathered around his tomb. For years afterward, locals claim to have seen Richard Cabell and his hellhounds riding across the fields (Barber, Sally and Chips Barber 3)

It is also possible that Doyle could have assembled elements from several legends into the plot of his novel. The actual Baskerville Hall is a 19<sup>th</sup> century mansion located

neared Herghest Ridge, which is said to be haunted by a creature known as the hound of Black Vaughn, a 15<sup>th</sup> century squire. Another possible source of Doyle's hell hound could be the coachman who drove Doyle to Cromer Hall in 1901. His name was Baskerville. Afterwards, Doyle sent the coachman a book apologizing for appropriating his name. While staying there, Doyle could have heard the legend of Richard Cabell from his descendants, the Cabell family, who owned Cromer Hall (Invisibleworks.com).

A hellhound known as a Church Grim was incorporated into popular culture in 1909. In English folklore, a dog was buried alive in a newly-established graveyard in place of a human being. On the north side of the churchyard to serve as a guardian of the spirit against minions of the devil, such as vandals, thieves, and witches. As a rule, dogs were buried near the churchyard so that human beings would not have to sacrifice their lives. According to Yorkshire tradition, the Church Grim rang the church bell at midnight as a sign that someone in the community was about to die. During funerals, the appearance of the Church Grim in the church tower would indicate whether the soul of the dear departed was headed for Heaven or Hell ("Why is a Dog").

In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry first learns about the Grim from Professor Trelawney, who describes it as a "giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen—the worst omen--Of death!" (107). After class, Ron tells Hermione that his uncle Bilius "saw one and—and he died twenty-four hours later!...Grims scare the daylights out of most wizards!" Hermione disagrees with Ron's description of the creature: "The Grim's not an omen, it's the cause of death" (110).

Ironically, Harry has an encounter with what he believes to be a Grim when a black dog drags Ron through a secret tunnel, where Sirius Black, an escaped prisoner from the

wizard prison, Azkaban, is hiding after taking the form of a large dog. Harry and begins to struggle with the dog but is separated by the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Remus Lupin, who tells Harry that Black turns into the dog to protect others. Unlike the Grim, Sirius Black in dog form is not an omen of death or something to be feared.

Devil Dogs have invaded the media in Great Britain and America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. They have appeared in films like *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2010), in games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, in video games like *Call to Duty*, and in song. For many Americans, their familiarity with the legends can traced to Robert Johnson's 1937 blues song "Hellhound on my trail," which includes the following lines:

I got to keep on movin'  
Blues fallin' like rain  
And the day keeps on worryin' me  
There's a hellhound on my trail." (Lyrics)

These lines have a strong connection to Johnson's song "Crossroads" and his encounter with the devil, who according to the legend, sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his ability to play and sing the blues. One could say that in "Hellhound on My Trail," the singer is waiting for the devil to collect on the bargain he made with Johnson. This is a truly American devil dog, stemming from a folk tradition separate the ones that spawned the devil dogs of England.

So what is the lasting appeal of the hellhound myths? Could the hellhound—a demonic canine disguised as man's best friend be a metaphor for man's dual nature. Perhaps the dog's similarity to us accentuates—its animal nature and our own bestial side as well.



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# Sad, Angry, and Patriotic: The Landscape of Modern War Haiku

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*By John J. Han*

Rooted in East Asian religions, especially Zen Buddhism and Shinto, traditional Japanese haiku sought peace and tranquility in life by borrowing images from nature. From the seventeenth century, when haiku became a separate poetic form, until the early twentieth century, few Japanese haiku poets wrote about war. Deeming violence an unsuitable topic for haiku, Matsuo Basho (1644-94), Yosa Buson (1716-84), Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828), and other haiku masters pursued the connection between humanity and nature even in their so-called war haiku. Basho's haiku "summer grass / the only remains of soldiers' / dreams" (Basho, "summer grass" 137) and Issa's equally well-known haiku "among footprints / of long-ago warriors... / poppies" (Issa) are related to war but are not political poems. In traditional East Asian thought, war is part of life, whose essence is suffering, and classical haiku generally accept violence in life without either glorifying it or condemning it. Similarly, most contemporary English-language haiku avoid violent or inelegant topics. Instead, they pursue the traditional Japanese aesthetics of suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability as four essential elements of Japanese aesthetics (Keene 3-22).

Although the pacifist tradition of haiku stays dominant, there have been two new trends since the 1930s that deserve attention: anti-war haiku and pro-war haiku. As activist poems, anti-war haiku go beyond expressing the sorrow of war by openly criticizing and

condemning war. At the other end of the spectrum are pro-war haiku filled with patriotic fervor. Mainstream haiku journals tend to welcome sophisticated haiku about the sadness of war, whereas anti-war and pro-war haiku tend to appear in self-published poetry books and on blog pages. Recent years have also revealed the existence of patriotic haiku penned during the era of Imperial Japan in the 1930s-1940s. This paper discusses three divergent forms of war haiku in and outside Japan since the middle of the twentieth century: haiku about the sadness of war, haiku of anti-war protest, and patriotic haiku.

### **Haiku about the Sadness of War**

From the seventeenth century, few Japanese haiku poets wrote about war. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 changed the tradition. Since the end of World War II, many Japanese haiku poets have written about the war and about the importance of maintaining international peace. The predominant tone of these poems is sadness which rises from a deep emotional pain. Here is Yasuhiko Shigemoto's poem:

Children—  
floating lit paper lanterns  
not knowing Hiroshima

This haiku concerns not only the tragic nature of the bombing of Hiroshima but also the fact that Japanese children participate in a commemorative ceremony without understanding the

tragedy. The dominant mood in this haiku is sadness, not anger. More importantly, the poet depends on imagery, not a direct statement, in conveying his sadness and disappointment.

Along similar lines, some contemporary English-language haiku deal with the sadness of warfare. They are found mostly in mainstream haiku journals and poetry collections imbued with the spirit of haiku. The four poems below can serve as good examples. They are written by Richard Wright, Eva Limbach, Aparna Pathal, and Yu Chang, respectively.

On a bayonet,  
And beyond the barbs of wire,—  
A spring moon at dawn. (Wright 20)

\*

lost—  
the soldiers talk about  
another winter (Limbach 14)

\*

hopscotch  
square to square

the refuge girl (Pathal 17)

\*

Central Park

a veteran's war story

still raw (Chang 13)

Wright's poem, written in a traditional 5-7-5 syllable pattern, uses two images, which is a common technique used by many haiku poets today. The first two lines suggest the ominousness of war, and the last line shows the peacefulness of a spring moon at daybreak. Combined, the two parts contrast violence and peacefulness, but the poem is not openly anti-war; Richard Wright simply portrays the tragedy of war contrasted with the peacefulness nature provides. In Eva Limbach's poem, the soldiers have lost the battle, but they must stay one more winter on the frontier. Meanwhile, in the next poem, Aparna Pathal describes a refugee girl who makes the best of her situation by playing hopscotch. Finally, Yu Chang's haiku is about an unembellished war story from a veteran, who narrates it in Central Park, where people enjoy their leisure time. All the four poems above portray the sadness that war entails, but it is hard to know the poets' position on war itself; they may or may not oppose it. The poems follow the traditional haiku aesthetics that call for evocation, and the intentional ambiguity makes the reader savor each poem for a deeper meaning and for reflection.

Meanwhile, in his review of *Haiku Iz Rata: War Haiku* (Croatian Haiku Society,



1995), Michael Dylan Welch introduces several poems about the sadness of war in Croatia.<sup>1</sup> Below are three of them, by Darko Plažanin, Branislava Krželj, and Nada Sabadi, respectively. They appear on Welch's haiku website *Graceguts*.

with a gun  
on my shoulder—I forget  
my paper and pencil

\*

A sleeping baby  
smiles with lips  
wet from milk

\*

A refugee child  
teaches to fly a small bird  
fallen from its nest.

The first poem portrays how engaging in warfare makes one lose connection with the world of creativity. In times of war, little is more important than survival, and the speaker knows that the gratification that comes from writing should wait. As a war poem, the second

haiku describes a baby sleeping in peace after getting milk. The baby lives in blissful ignorance unaware of the horrors of war. The third haiku shows how a child who has experienced hardships in life displays empathy for a bird in distress. During a war, children learn to mature quickly, which often makes them look after those who are needy. As Marijan Čekolj, editor of *Haiku Iz Rata: War Haiku*, notes, these three and other poems in the volume are “the poetry coming from the war (against Croatia) which has happened HERE and NOW as our reality and our everyday life” (qtd. in Welch, para. 2).

### **Haiku of Anti-War Protest**

Those who write overtly anti-war haiku tend to declare their political stance indignantly. An example is M. E. Chasty’s work below, one of the poems in the chapbook *Anti-War Haiku*:

The fly rubs its hands  
Having buzzed to this wise world  
Of profit, fools, and war. (3)

By alluding to Issa’s famous haiku about a fly begging for mercy, the poem wittily condemns the unwise nature of war. Other poems in Chasty’s chapbook also carry a similar tone:

What war will you win  
Soldiers who cannot glide from  
What tyrants glide to? (5)

\*

They think they can  
Fertilise democracy  
But they just drop bombs (7)

\*

The US murdered  
Another inmate that they  
have much in common with (13)

The first poem describes a war that destabilizes a nation, which in turn brings about dictatorship. The second poem is a straightforward condemnation of military action taken in the name of democracy. Perhaps set in Guantanamo Bay or some other detention camp, the last poem criticizes the U.S. government's "murder" of a military inmate, an action—the poet alleges—that makes it as criminal as that of the inmate.

Likewise, the "Anti-U.S. Hegemony Haiku," a collection of ten haiku posted by the poet whose alias is "libbyliberals," condemns war in plain terms. Below are five poems:

## **Unnecessary End**

Sky falling down soon.

Avaricious idiots

ruin Earth and Man.

\*

**enough.**

Under [the] coffin's lid

lies still another stiff kid

lied to by country.

\*

## **David Gregory's Faux Gauntlet**

As war-sell generals

Sundays "Meet the Press", how many

minions meeting death?

\*

### **Young Blood**

Citizens ignore  
war's revolving door to horror  
young soldiers must brave.

\*

Nice enough people,  
enough nice people,  
but it's not enough, people.

All these five poems are haiku-like statements—not imagistic haiku.<sup>2</sup> The first four haiku describe the brutality of war, deploring the poor leadership that brings destruction through their reckless decision-making, mourning the young soldier killed in an unjust war, condemning the generals who drum up support for a war neglecting the human cost of war, and lamenting the fact that the general populace does not know the grim reality soldiers face in the battlefield. The fifth poem is a call to political action for those who do nothing while war atrocities continue.

Finally, somewhat different from the anti-war poems above, Kim Merryman's anti-war haiku exude apocalyptic eeriness. Collected under the heading "End of Days," they are written in a 5-7-5 pattern.

war between nations  
rivers overflow with blood—  
the earth convulses

\*

a crimson sky glows  
meteorites fall like rain—  
hearts fill with terror

\*

stars fall from the sky  
darkness overcomes the earth—  
screams fade to nothing

\*

end of days has come—

all life has been extinguished  
the earth is no more

By using the techniques of personification (“the earth convulses” and “darkness overcomes the earth”) and simile (“meteorites fall like rain”), the poet prophetically describes the horrors of a large-scale war. Each poem consists of multiple sentences, which is not in line with the contemporary practice of using words and sentence fragments in a haiku. Although the poems lack compactness, depth, and mysteriousness, they still convey the poet’s messages in a clear-cut manner.

### **Patriotic Haiku**

Mainstream haiku about the sadness of war tend to be subtle and somber, and anti-war haiku tend to be one-dimensional poems that cry out against war. Patriotic haiku are one-dimensional poems that, in this case, appeal to nationalism. When the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) began, a popular slogan in Japan was “This war is a Holy War [fought] in the name of the Emperor the living-god” (qtd. in Yūki 30). The Japanese Cabinet Intelligence Bureau (*naikaku jōhō-bu*) and the Army took control of all forms of media. Amid jingoistic fervor, a number of haiku poets glorified the war, creating the genre of “The Holy War Arts.” This era saw the publication of holy war haiku anthologies, such as *The Collected Japan-China-War Haiku (Shina-jihen kushū)*, *The Holy War and Haiku (Seisen to haiku)*, *The Collected Holy War Haiku (Seisen haiku-shū)*, and *The Selected Holy War*

*Haiku (Seisen haiku-sen)* (Yūki, para. 20-21) (Yūki 30-32). Below are four Japanese holy war haiku from this period composed by Hasegawa Sosei, Takahama Kyoshi, Mizuhara Shūōshi, and Mizuhara Shūōshi, respectively.

The Holy War overwhelms  
and progresses through  
the violently cold field (qtd. in Yūki 33)

\*

I am a samurai  
of Japan—  
the anniversary of Regent Tokimune (qtd. in Yūki 34)

\*

spring snow  
purifies earth and heaven—  
our enemies perish (qtd. in Yūki 36)

\*

National Foundation Festival—



the enemy base falling  
burns and burns (qtd. in Yūki 37)

The tone of the first poem is triumphalist: a victory is guaranteed because Japan's cause is divine. The war takes place in a *kokkan no no* (酷寒の野), which can also be translated as a “frigid field” or “brutally cold field.”<sup>3</sup> In the second poem, the speaker pays tribute to the medieval Japanese general who defeated the invading Mongolian army twice, drawing a parallel between him and Japanese soldiers in their invincibility. The third poem begins with *haru no yuki* (春の雪), a spring season word (*kigo*), but the remaining two lines are far from peaceful. Instead, the poet celebrates the deaths of enemy soldiers whom snow covers as if they were impure. The fourth poem celebrates the Japanese army's destruction of the enemy camp.

In the contemporary West, numerous poets express their pro-war feelings by borrowing the form of haiku. One of them is Roger W. Hancock, whose sequence “Patriotic Haiku Poems” includes the following poems, which appear on the website *Soul of a Poet*:

Enemy within,  
good men must fight for freedom,  
apathy beware.

\*

Pray for Liberty,  
keep God's given right to pray,  
freedom lives or dies.

\*

Eagle takes to flight,  
freedom reigns within our souls,  
when for right we fight

These poems are self-explanatory. The first one demonizes those who are supposedly disloyal to the nation, the second one is a plea to his fellow citizens to pray to God for liberty which often deserves an ultimate sacrifice, and the third one rationalizes a war in the name of freedom. All of them sound like slogans in their direct and clear style. Those who appreciate his messages will not mind the lack of “the haiku spirit” in the poems; for them, the haiku form is little more than a means to an end.

## **Conclusion**

Mainstream haiku about the sadness of war tend to be the most subtle and somber among the three types of war haiku. Written by literary poets, they criticize war in an

indirect manner. Because of their subtlety, it is sometimes hard to know whether the poet supports or condemns war. Such ambiguity is what traditional haiku aesthetics pursue: a haiku is a tool for conveying one's crystallized emotion in a Zen-like fashion. One can find similar poems about the sadness of war in premodern Chinese and Korean literature as well. In traditional Eastern poetry, for example, some soldier-poets express their grievances over a drawn-out war on the frontier, and their spouses bewail the long separation from their husbands.

Most anti-war and pro-war poems tend to have a forthright tone and be in a 5-7-5 syllable pattern and sentence form. Some of these haiku are titled and tend to use punctuation without reserve. Haiku purists may feel that these activist poems defile the Zen-inspired form, but these poems belong to their own category. How haiku should be written cannot be dictated by a group of poets,<sup>4</sup> and there are many ways to express thoughts and feelings through the form of haiku. In his essay "How to Tackle War Haiku," Susumu Takiguchi offers a criticism of activist anti-war haiku: haiku cannot be used as a tool for "propaganda or political point scoring," and poets should not serve as "political machines" (Takiguchi). From the perspective of traditional haiku aesthetics, he may be right, but the haiku genre has evolved in numerous ways during the last several decades. In an age when some readers applaud vampire haiku and zombie haiku, there is no reason to reject them out of hand. An anti-war or patriotic haiku is a different type of poetry that appeals to a different group of readers. If poets find the haiku form to be a useful political tool, and if readers appreciate their poems, anti-war and patriotic haiku will continue to exist.

The increasing popularity of war-related haiku suggests a new trend in haiku aesthetics: haiku is not always a poetic form of peace and tranquility and has the potential to be an instrument for promoting a certain political view. While haiku in general continues to be a form of meditation that captures the extraordinary moment in the ordinary through the technique of suggestions and hints, some haiku poets now use the form as a tool for expressing their political views. They may often draw nature images, but their poems serve as soundbites marked by their pungency. Their main goal is to convey ideas instead of capturing “a moment of insight connected with nature” (Ross 44), which is one of the principles of haiku writing.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Danica Čerče, Professor and Chair of English at the University of Ljubljana, introduces Marijan Čekolj as follows:

Marijan Čekolj is the founder and president of the Croatian Haiku Association, the editor-in-chief of the international bilingual haiku journal *Vrabac (Sparrow)*, and the publisher of the bilingual series *The Croatian Haiku Poets*. His haiku have been published in many countries, and he has received several awards and special citations in Croatia and abroad. (Čerče)

I appreciate the contribution of Dr. Čerče, who also kindly read a rough draft of this paper and provided words of encouragement and support.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that it is not customary to entitle a haiku as the poet does in the first four poems.

<sup>3</sup> Nature is not tranquil or soothing as in traditional haiku. Some Japanese winter haiku refer to cold weather but not in the context of fatal conflict. The following haiku by Matsuo Basho portrays cold winter weather but contains his empathy for his fellow humans:

a withering blast  
the pain of a swelling  
on a man's face (Basho, "a withering blast")

<sup>4</sup> In his 2007 lecture on haiku, Richard Gilbert of Kumamoto University cites Hiroaki Sato, a Japanese dictionary of haiku, and Harold Henderson, noting that there is no right or wrong way to write haiku:

In 1999, Hiroaki Sato wrote: "Today it may be possible to describe haiku but not define it. This is indicated by the haiku dictionary *Gendai Haiku Dai-jiten* (*[Encyclopedic Dictionary of Contemporary Haiku]*), Meiji Shoin, 1980). Its entry on haiku describes the history of the term, but makes no attempt to say what a haiku is. Both in form and content, all you can say is that a haiku, be it composed in Japanese, English or any other language, is what the person who has written it presents as a haiku."

One of the early pioneers of haiku in English, Harold Henderson (1958) has written, "A definitive definition of haiku is probably impossible [as haiku] must be what poets make them, not verses that follow 'rules' set down by some 'authority' . . . a strict definition is neither possible nor desirable" (46-47); later adding (correctly) that "the rigid 17-syllable [and 5-7-5 on] requirement does not exist in Japanese" (1971). (qtd. in "Haiku Definitions," para. 6-7)

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# Commedia dell' Arte and Political Models in William Gilmore Simms's *As Good as a Comedy*

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*By Linda McDaniel*

William Gilmore Simms's 1852 short novel *As Good as a Comedy*<sup>1</sup> is a curious piece of work that shows the author's bright and dark sides. The central events in the story take place at the horse races and the circus, metaphors for political contests, with a young woman as "the prize." As the lively events unfold, characters and props recall the noisy slapsticks and stock characters of Commedia dell'Arte, and evoke the historical genre Simms's title evokes. In the middle of a humorous narrative, however, a sudden shift in mood occurs at the circus when a clown throws a drunk onto the lap of a slave woman sitting in the stands, and Simms's attack on abolitionists first becomes obvious. Thereupon, the development of Randall Hammond, the hero and winner of the girl, points directly to Simms's close friend, adamant conservative James Henry Hammond, as the real-life model. Details in the picture of foolish dandy Jones Barry parallel insults and lampoons made by opponents of former president Martin Van Buren, Jacksonian Democrat turned Free-Soiler. The resulting mix demonstrates Simms's gift for adapting a popular genre to the American scene as he employs the methods of a political campaign to attack the Northern abolitionists and to embellish the Southern ideal of the aristocratic planter.

*As Good as a Comedy* opens with a "Proem" that sets the scene and introduces a touchy topic inside an overcrowded stage coach while the drunken driver speeds over dark and dangerous roads. Much of the conversation among the passengers, who represent

different states, involves the annexation of Texas, until the Tennessean suggests they each tell a tale. On the next page, with no transition and no apparent connection, the central narrative begins with two planters, Randall Hammond and Miles Henderson, going to the big race day in Georgia where they will find Miss Geraldine Foster, the “prize” whom both men desire to win. A third suitor, Jones Barry, the wealthiest of the three, will race a horse he renamed in her honor. Favoring the richest suitor, the girl’s stepmother conspires with Barry to help him secure Geraldine’s hand in marriage. At the track, prankster Tom Nettles joins Jones Barry and escorts his dupe through a series of drunken exhibitions to lose the preliminary horse race, then make a fool of himself at a gander pulling. That evening, Barry gets too involved with a clown, an African magician, and a sexy Sultana during (and after) a circus performance. Later, Geraldine suddenly proclaims that whoever wins the final race will win her hand.

By the 1840s Simms had won national fame for his revolutionary and border novels. For his venture into comedy, Simms chose to adapt a familiar genre that has remained popular and influenced writers from Shakespeare and Molière to Agatha Christie and the creators of *The Simpsons* TV series. Originating around 1550 in Italy, the Commedia dell’Arte dramatized a primitive world view of characters with unbridled passions and impulsive violence in response to jealousies, insults, threats, and stupidities. Commenting on a sample Commedia play, Antonio Fava notes the “acidic egoism of the characters” and “the general negativity” of their relationships (36). Actors’ improvisations made satire easy, and performers often mocked “well-known individuals” (Smith 25). Performances included bawdy and misogynistic

jokes, hailstorms of body blows, sudden duels, and/or unpredictable bouts of madness. Traveling troupes improvised dialogue from a scenario outline, which would focus on the conflict between the Master (*Magnifico*) and a Servant (*Zanni*), such as Pantaloon and Harlequin, or on the trials of the young Lovers (*Inamorati*) whom their elders schemed to separate (McKee xv-viii; Felix). Each actor performed the role of a Master, a Lover, a Servant, or a Captain type (Fava 127). Whatever their social status, the stock characters in masks often appeared grotesque, stupid, selfish individuals bent on acquiring more money and/or control, getting revenge for grievances, chasing sexual gratification, and/or showing off their possessions and status. Except for the lovers and the wittiest servants, the stereotypes did not think, did not know how to solve problems. If they did not get what they wanted, they tried to take it by guile or force. Antonio Fava offers an important insight into Commedia in his discussion of the Zanni: “The Servants must always resolve the problems, their own and those of the others” because “all the masters in the world unload their own inabilities onto the servants” (68). Over the years the character types developed “endless changes and renovations” (Duchartre 152). The Zanni, for instance, evolved from the acrobatic, juggling clown playing pranks into the wily valet, the witty partygoer, the knowing trickster. The performance often depended on acrobatics and stage props, especially the noisy double slapstick, to keep interest and action going.

Simms selected and adapted elements of the Commedia to the Georgia frontier in *As Good as a Comedy*.<sup>2</sup> Omitting the usual half-masks and costumes of Old Italian Comedy, Simms could pick and choose to include some of the basic Commedia stereotypes and motifs. In the narrative, he introduces the young Lovers early—three rivals seek the favor of Geraldine Foster. In Commedia, the young woman may or may not reciprocate the love

offered by one or more men seeking her favor. Geraldine Foster in *As Good as a Comedy* must deal with her suitors' various strategies. Randall Hammond, the man she favors, pays her respectful attention with tact and reserve; Miles Henderson proposes marriage by letter; Jones Barry schemes with Mrs. Foster behind the scenes. Like the strong women in the *Commedia*, Geraldine shows unexpected spirit. Tom Nettles declares, "If ever there was a woman who had a will of her own, it's that girl fair Geraldine" (*AGC* 118). Hammond praises her "native good sense and strong will," despite her "eccentricities." Furthermore, he admires her strength: "She is a tyrant, knows her power, and is but too fun of abusing it; but she is a noble creature" (30-31). She also rides "wild horses without a saddle," and threatens an overseer "with horsewhip and pistols" (140-41). Incidentally, Geraldine resides in the finest home described in the narrative, a two-story house with "six great columns" (125).

Early on, Randall Hammond and Miles Henderson fit the expected heroes of romance or comedy of the period—both "tall of size and graceful of person" (25)—but "little" Jones Barry draws Simms's particular attention. To develop this character for satiric purposes, Simms combines traits of the most famous *Commedia* Master, Pantaloon (*Pantelone*), and a comic loser Lover, the Captain (*Il Capitano*). As Peter Jordan points out, actors could combine different stock characters to make "more complex composites that nevertheless reflected contemporary preoccupations" (69). Among the most ridiculous grotesque characters, Pantaloon, an Old Man (*Vecchio*), wears a red costume that instantly identifies him on stage. Wealthy, miserly, credulous, and/or licentious, he often tries to thwart the course of true love, usually of a ward or daughter. Allardyce Nicoll notes further that Pantaloon is "easily made

drunk” and “easily duped” (22). In *As Good as a Comedy*, at a horse race in Georgia, Jones Barry wears a showy red outfit and sports several diamonds. Simms emphasizes Jones Barry’s red suit, and Tom Nettles underscores the references to it: “But you should see the figure Barry has made of himself. . . . He’s dressed, from head to foot, in scarlet” (AGC 53). Later, a somewhat tedious conversation about Jones’s red suit continues for two pages (56-58). Barry also wears diamond rings and other jewelry (47), and Mrs. Foster’s conversations further establish a sense of Barry’s wealth and importance.

Therefore, Mrs. Foster champions Jones Barry; and their connection suggests another link to Pantaloon. Geraldine’s stepmother shares traits with a less familiar stock character of Commedia named Ruffiana, an older woman, usually a former prostitute, from a poor background, who has risen to high status (Felix). Duchartre describes a Ruffiana type as “trifling, garrulous, extremely limited, but good at heart.” His examples include the case of a girl who had once made “the rounds of the tavern . . . in her bare feet,” but now “has more silk dresses and pearl necklaces than she knows what to do with” (285). Simms’s variation describes Mrs. Foster as “a farmer’s daughter; a poor one too” (AGC 125). Though she had worked as a housekeeper for the Fosters’ neighbors, she now wears silk dresses and shiny “trinkets” (135). Despite her “low birth and inferior education” (131), Mr. Foster had married her “at a time when his feeble health and the impaired condition of his intellect rendered him too anxious for a nurse to be too scrupulous about a companion” (54). Geraldine’s widowed stepmother is “a woman given to petty scandals, and satisfied with petty triumphs; envious of the superior, malicious where opposed, and insolent when submitted to” (54). Sometimes Commedia dell’Arte scenarios show the older woman romantically involved with Pantaloon. Accordingly, in a surprise ending to *As Good as a*

*Comedy*, Mrs. Foster, “fair, fat, and forty” (121), gets married again—to her stepdaughter’s former suitor and Simms’s part-Pantaloon, Jones Barry (212).

In between this part-Pantaloon’s entrance and relatively happy ending, Jones Barry also takes on the characteristics of the Captain of *Commedia dell’Arte* in his role as one of Geraldine’s suitors. The Captain of the Italian Comedy, often compared to the *Miles Gloriosus* of the Roman theater, appears in *Commedia* as a loud braggart and show-off. An outsider (usually from Spain), he overdresses in elegant clothes (McKee xv). Perlman describes the Captain as “the fifth wheel, the odd man out,” “always an outsider” with “need for approval” (82). Fava sums up the type: the Captain is “a complete disaster, cowardly, ignorant, but he must appear to be a big, strong, fierce warrior” (69). Fava concludes, he fills “a need for a pure, totally guilty party, a scapegoat, and, fool that he is, he fits the bill perfectly” (130).

These descriptions of the Captain seem apropos of Simms’s version of the stereotype as a loser Lover in *As Good as a Comedy*. At their first encounter in the narrative, Geraldine greets him as “Captain Barry.” As if to emphasize, one observer quips, “It’s Captain Jones Barry. . . . He’s rich enough to make any sort of fool of himself” (47). Conversation indicates that Barry does lead some kind of militia (56).

From the beginning, Jones Barry appears an overdressed braggart type at the Hillabee Race Course. He praises his horses, especially the one renamed Fair Geraldine “of which he brags so much” (*AGC* 27). He also boasts about how much liquor he can hold. At the track, he is “cock-sure,” thinking he has outsmarted the “cock of the walk,” though a young “sharp” has easily conned him (51). When

Barry's horse loses the race, the owner/rider offers various "excuses for defeat," with no blame on himself. Tom Nettles though tells him that he weighs too much to ride in a horse race (87). Later, Nettles advises him, "[Y]ou are the greatest brag I ever heard. Let yourself alone, and don't be trying to be everything." He adds, "You are quite enough as you are. You are a good-looking little fellow" (100).

In Commedia dell'Arte a Servant or *Zanni* often accompanies the Pantaloon and/or Captain character, and Simms follows form in pairing a Harlequin figure with Jones Barry. In the Old Italian Comedy, the familiar Harlequin stereotype in his patchwork suit manipulates and manages with his mischievous pranks the comeuppance of rich and powerful showoffs and would-be tyrants. Scholars offer varying accounts of Harlequin's origins and evolution (Duchartre 124), and Michele Bottini provides an intriguing interpretation when applied to a frontier Harlequin: *Arlecchino* (or *Arlequin*) represents a "mix between the servant who is kept on the lowest rung of the social scale and the devils stemming from creatures of the forests, such as elves and leprechauns" (56). Originally wearing a black or red mask, Harlequin may have had connections with the stage devils of the Middle Ages (Oreglia 56-57). Bottini reviews the stages of the costume: Harlequin first appeared in rags and patches, indicating his poverty. The leaf-shaped patches on his clothes may have originally represented leaves from trees in the forest. Later the patches turned into the bright triangle or diamond patchwork of the familiar costume (58). Oreglia extends the description of the later Harlequin as "a busybody, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness." Simms's version may also draw from the role of another popular Zanni, Brighella, a crony of Harlequin: "His job is to guide the action of his comedy, to stir it up with intrigues and give it movement" (Oreglia 71).

Tom Nettles performs the important role of the Zanni in *As Good as a Comedy*. In later attempts to republish the novel, Simms's proposals for revised titles indicate Tom's significance to the author. In 1854 he offered a publisher to drop "the introduction" and change the title to "Tom Nettles, or A Race for a Wife" (*Letters* 3: 293). In 1865 Simms tried again, and he lamented in a letter that "Tom Nettles; or *As Good as a Comedy*" had gone to press before Sherman's March proved "fatal to its publication" (*Letters* 4: 518-19). Mary Ann Wimsatt encapsulates the trickster's function: "The aptly named Nettles, whose particular mission is to sting and goad Barry, guides the dandy through mishap after mishap, designed to mortify his vanity" (*Major Fiction* 198).

Tom guides and instigates, lubricates, and pushes Jones Barry toward trouble, chaos, and humiliation. Simms introduces the name when Hammond tells Henderson that "Tom Nettles was with me yesterday, and he has all the news" (*AGC* 27), a sign of "a busybody." On the road near Hillabee Race Track, Tom "suddenly" makes his entrance from "a private avenue through the woods, which conducted to his home." Wearing a simple blue denim hunting shirt with white fringe, he dresses in an outfit, Simms hedges, like neither "a plain farmer" nor "a professional man," and "not exactly one whom we should call a gentleman" (52). Tom has a small house in the woods, and Simms leaves the reader to guess any source of income. In the same paragraph introducing Nettles, the narrator adds definitive Harlequin traits: Nettles "loved fun" and "was something of a practical joker" (52). Later, Simms describes Tom as a "famous mocker" (155) and a "mischievous creature" (158). Also, on different occasions, the author connects Tom



Nettles with devils, calling him “Mephistopheles” (152), “Satan,” and the “Devil” (207). After he meets up with Jones, Tom ushers his victim from one venue to the next with brandy and toddies.

After Jones’s horse named Fair Geraldine loses a preliminary race, Nettles accompanies Barry to a “Gander Tournament” which points directly to a Southern genre with affinities to the *Commedia dell’Arte*. The pair enter a noisy amphitheater where Jones Barry will do combat with a greased and tortured screaming goose strung to a rope. Barry loses that courtly battle in the confusion of “cognac and a concussion” (95). Simms’s “The Gander Tournament” chapter, of course, recalls Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s “The Gander Pulling” in his classic sketch in *Georgia Scenes* (1835). Discussions of the influence of the Southwest Humorists on Simms refer to this early comedy.<sup>3</sup> Elements of the native genre with its crude humor and physical violence meld well with *Commedia*.

After the gander fiasco, Tom has difficulty conducting the inebriated Jones to the big tent, the setting of extended *Commedia* action that anticipates the Keystone Cops, the Three Stooges, and the Marx Brothers (who also went to the races and the circus). Simms’s big tent features clowns and equestrians, a juggling clown who will “swallow his own head,” an African magician (in blackface created with burnt cork) who will “swallow his own soul,” and a Sultana in a luxurious bower (102-03). However, Jones Barry’s entrance brings about revisions to the program. As he and Tom enter, a *Commedia* clown in a giant Egyptian mask offers Jones a glass of brandy, then jerks it back and drinks it himself. Infuriated at this insulting deprivation, Barry “*mounts*” the clown and tears off his artificial head, whereupon the clown ducks beneath Barry’s legs, raises him up like a screaming and kicking

child, and runs to the slave section of the benches to pitch Barry onto the lap of a large slave woman (104).

The consequent melee destroys the “exquisite garden of Baghdad,” where, awaiting her cue, lies the Sultana Zerlina, who parallels yet another Commedia figure named Franceschina. In early scenarios the name might indicate a generic maid-servant. However, Simms’s version reflects changes in her development. Talia Felix describes Franceschina as a flirt with “a particularly libidinous nature”: “If she’s unmarried, she doesn’t care; and if she’s married, she still doesn’t care.” One of the old Commedia illustrations, remarks Felix, shows her “gushing out of her corset . . . with the spiral lacing on her dress ready to burst.” As the scenery falls around Simms’s version of Franceschina, the Sultana pulls out a dagger from her costume and lunges at Barry, who grabs her arm. She fights and screams as help arrives: “Her husband [the African magician] rushed out from the interior, armed with an axe. The clown again made his appearance, followed by the whole *troupe*, each seizing whatever weapon offered as he came. There were sailors, and Turks, and magicians, and even little Cupid’s urchins, two feet high” (105). Instead of brandishing a Harlequin wooden sword or a slapstick, Tom Nettles calls out, “Hillabee boys, . . . bring out your hickories!” (106), a possible nod to the sticks and bats of the Commedia, and to Andrew Jackson and the recently elected “Young Hickory,” James K Polk. Then Tom picks up a wooden pole himself. The farce looks like Commedia dell’Arte.

Nettles, who by the way, happens to have a suspicious prior acquaintance with his hosts at the circus plays diplomat to turn the scene from “war” to

“philanthropy” (*AGC* 107-08). The Sultana, a.k.a Nell, wife of “Mumbo Jumbo,” starts paying Jones Barry special feminine attentions, and the couple spend the rest of the evening drinking, whispering, and singing together. As Nell sits on his lap with her arm around his neck, Barry feels such delight that he finds himself “forcing a great ring from his [finger] upon her finger.” She also “coily” allows him “to transfer the diamond breastpin from his to her bosom” (109). The episode parallels one of the earliest recorded *Commedia* scenarios in which a courtesan exchanges a promise for a piece of jewelry (*Oreglia* 8). The motif also recalls Voltaire’s naïve *Candide* giving away two of his last Eldorado diamonds to the teasing, flattering Parisian, Madame de Parolignac.

The scene in the Sultana’s dressing room the next morning leaves Jones Barry the target of Tom’s teasing and makes Jones appear even more gullible and naïve. Nell appears half-dressed: “[H]er fine bust and figure afforded not a bad idea of Cleopatra. Her breasts seemed breaking through the very partial restraints upon them” (*AGC* 113). She engages Jones to lace up her corset. But Jones laces too slowly, and she grows impatient: “Come now, you’re a nice little fellow, I know. Let me see—you have small fingers” (111). When her husband asks her to bring him a glass of his “antifogmatic,” Jones holds on to the lace-up strings of the corset as he follows Nell around the room. The dialogue goes bawdy. After they leave the circus tent, Nettles chides Barry and accuses him of inexperience and naivety: “Looking for all the world like a great boy, with his big eyes spreading at the sight of an apple-tree filled with fruit, yet trembling to think of the steel-trap lying quiet in the grass below” (116).

A few weeks later, Simms’s Harlequin character keeps up the trickery and harassment of the loser Captain Barry at Geraldine Foster’s seventeenth birthday party.

Just a simple maneuver on the part of Hammond makes Nettles smile like a Harlequin: When Randall appears “suddenly” from behind trees to offer his arm to Geraldine before Jones can, Tom Nettles nods approval with “that sort of grin and chuckle which the man of mischief puts on when he sees sport” (*AGC* 153). In subsequent scenes, stupid Jones continues making a fool of himself. For example, Tom maneuvers dancers into positioning Jones to take a pratfall tumble onto the ballroom floor, knocking his partner down with him (172-73). At the same event, after Barry falls off a log into the mill pond, Tom supposedly saves Jones from drowning. Yet when Randall and Tom throw wooden poles toward Jones for him to grab, Tom uses the pole to give Barry a kind of waterboarding experience (159-60).

As though Simms had not already shown Jones Barry in enough humiliating situations, he becomes the stooge of one final scheme initiated by Tom Nettles. After Randall Hammond waves goodbye at the finish line of the race for a wife, he disappears. When Geraldine receives his letter releasing her from “supposed obligations,” the embarrassed girl cries for an avenger; and Barry challenges Hammond to a duel (193), also a common motif in *Commedia*. Nettles devises a scheme to pretend at the duel that Jones’s shot killed Randall Hammond. When Hammond falls face forward after Jones aims and shoots, Barry flees the scene and stops running only after he crashes into a tribe of Seminole Indians at war in Florida.

Finally, in a kind of coda or epilogue, the storyteller from Tennessee himself enters the narrative and recounts how he came upon a madman (yet another motif in *Commedia*) in the wilderness. The Tennessean tells how, amid hot battle against a tribe in the Seminole uprising of 1836, he spotted among the savages, a white man

with “half-white hair,” wearing rags, and acting crazy—Jones Barry gone mad (200). Three months after the duel, the tortured Barry confides to the Tennessean how the ghost of Randall Hammond haunts him and keeps him awake at night, how Jones has determined that he must go back to turn himself in for trial. At last, Tom Nettles, Simms’s Harlequin, has accomplished the total humiliation and defeat of the Pantaloon-Captain figure.

Despite rough spots, in *As Good as a Comedy*, Simms produces lively, humorous, creative adaptations of the Commedia dell’Arte for satiric purposes. W. J. Cash also included a version of a composite Pantaloon character in his classic *The Mind of the South*: Cash discussed the antebellum plantation writers’ portrayals of Northerners and Southerners and observed that they presented “on the one hand, the Yankee—a cowardly, avaricious, boorish half Pantaloon and half Shylock—and on the other, the Southerner—as polished, brave, generous, magnificent, wholly the stately aristocrat” (70). Simms’s Pantaloon-Captain composite plays a boorish cocksure coward, naïve and incompetent loser, who expects he has the means and the backing to win the prize. Randall Hammond performs the role of the handsome aristocratic slaveowner winner.

The scene in which a clown tosses a short man onto the arms of a woman sitting in the slave section as he shouts derogatory epithets, however, moves the narrative into another territory and recalls comments regarding Simms’s use of literature for political purposes. Jon Wakelyn, for instance, argues that Simms’s fiction generally had political purposes, that his fiction turned into propaganda (xi, 82). John Guilds, on the other hand, discusses Simms’s conflicting impulses between fiction and politics and suggests a kind of “rotation” back and forth between the two interests (164). Charles Watson though explains:

“During his years of national popularity, Simms wrote as a clearly identifiable Southerner, but not as a polemic sectionalist” (12); however, in Simms’s later career, the author “would not separate literature from politics” (*Nationalism* 68). In the case of *As Good as a Comedy*, Simms started out, it seems, with an agenda; and he would use his Commedia variations to take down New Yorker Martin Van Buren as a representative of abolitionists, to suggest, from Simms’s entrenched perspective, how gullible, obsessive, and befuddled they could become regarding the institution of slavery. Details in the presentations of Randall Hammond and Jones Barry, as they agree with or depart from historical records, demonstrate Simms’s highly selective process in what turned into political campaign spin and propaganda against abolitionists’ arguments.

Simms had voted in the election in 1844 for the “dark horse” winner for president, James K. Polk, slaveholder from Tennessee, after Martin Van Buren had failed to become the Democratic nominee (*Letters* 2:23). Then Simms based his own fictional dark horse winner in *As Good as a Comedy* on one of his closest friends, James Henry Hammond. Randall Hammond represents many of the prototype’s slaveowner views and biases. The central narrative opens on the Hammond plantation, where Randall lives with his widowed mother in a one-story white house on grounds that show “good taste and a becoming sense of the beautiful.”<sup>4</sup> Simms depicts a man of good breeding and elite background. Randall Hammond looks like a hero: “A finer-looking fellow lives not in the country. Tall, well made, and muscular, he treads the piazza like a prince” (*AGC* 197). Following more details in praise of Randall Hammond’s handsome features and style, the narrator elaborates regarding Randall Hammond’s plan to attain his “prize.” At the racetrack,

discussions between Geraldine and her stepmother provide other perspectives on his character and pursuits. Randall Hammond serves as colonel of militia and rides a fine military horse; he also has some connection with “the Legislature” (62-63). Mrs. Foster, however, talks of his “pride and arrogance.” She warns: “He thinks he can do as he likes with women.” Geraldine’s stepmother later opines that Hammond is “one of the greatest despots I ever saw” and “too proud . . . to climb the tree for the fruit” (180). Nevertheless, his conversation and presence please the sixteen-year-old Geraldine. The girl does, however, have some reservations of her own: She recalls hearing about a scandal connected with Randall Hammond (75). Even worse, in her opinion, despite her repeated pleas to race his horse in her honor, Randall refuses: he “*dare* not race,” he confesses (75). Before he left home, his mother had made him “promise” that he would “neither run a horse, nor bet upon a horserace” (23).

Differences in the fictional and real Hammonds suggest that Simms whitewashed and flattered the prototype. After James Henry had received his copy of *As Good as a Comedy*, Simms had asked in a letter how his friend liked his fictional namesake (*Letters* 3: 178). Hammond approved (Oliphant and Eaves 3: 178n). Despite his flaws, according to a recent view, “Hammond was for Simms the ideal republican statesman, intelligent, self-sacrificing, and the only South Carolinian who could take the place of John C. Calhoun” (Rogers 62). Commentaries then and later often described James Henry Hammond as a handsome fellow, a man of charm and diplomacy (Faust 10, 31). Simms’s prototype did command the South Carolina militia as Brigadier General, and he had served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1835 to 1836, then later as Governor of South Carolina from 1842 to 1844. He did not, however, derive from “old stock,” as the novel asserts (17, 31).

Determining to marry a rich woman, he became a member of the elite Southern planter class in 1831 only after he married seventeen-year-old Catherine Fitzsimmons, who had inherited a considerable estate, including several plantations (Faust 58-59), though, as Bleser observes, wealth based on slavery “had become by then increasingly repugnant to much of the western world” (Introduction 9). Still James Henry tried to play the role of the magnificent polished and wealthy aristocrat. In later years, he commissioned a search for his aristocratic ancestry, then refused to pay the British genealogist who could find only records documenting his yeoman background (Faust 326).

In addition to his aristocratic aspirations, specific details in the biography of Simms’s friend Hammond illustrate patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes in the nineteenth-century South. His diaries fussed and whined about women, for instance, as “by the by, being mostly fools and savages” (*Secret* 260). They also record his interest in other women outside his marriage, and he had an appalling record of abusing women and girls. For instance, he added the twelve-year-old daughter of his slave concubine to his supply (Bleser, Introduction 16-19). Surprisingly, since Simms seems usually to flatter his friend in the fictional portrait, the author also alludes to a “scandal” that casts “a cloud” over Geraldine’s impression of Randall (*AGC* 75). Possibly Simms refers to the two-year-long molestation of Hammond’s wife’s nieces, the four teenage daughters of Wade Hampton II, on a weekly basis it seems, as Hammond himself described in his diary (*Secret* 169-73; Faust 241-45). Simms and James Henry alluded to the scandal in their correspondence (*Letters* 2: 236, 246, 384). The outrage had cost Hammond the election to the United States Senate in 1846.



Nevertheless, when a death left a Senate seat vacant in 1857, the South Carolina legislature elected him to fill it (Faust 338-39). On the other hand, because of the scandal, Wade Hampton's four daughters never married (Faust 290). As for his fictional namesake promising his mother neither to race nor bet on horses, James Henry confessed to the problem in his diary: After marrying, he admitted, "I had turned my attention to race horses and invested thousands and lost pretty largely" (*Secret* 102).

Other details in the life of the Hammond prototype remind students of earlier stages in the evolution toward a constitutional democracy. The South Carolina powers rationalized their "peculiar" economic system as a latter-day version of "classical republicanism," which had condoned slavery (Faust 41). Also, James Henry Hammond opposed popular elections (Faust 331), preferring a monarchy over a democracy (Sinha 123). He complained in his diary, for instance, about the "mad-dog cry of democracy" (*Secret* 190). Furthermore, an extremist, he had beat the drum for disunion, for secession, since the 1830s (Nevin 543). For years he had supported firebrand John C. Calhoun before moving even further right of his fellow South Carolinian. As for Hammond's views on abolition, his Congressional speech in 1836 had warned abolitionists— "ignorant, infatuated barbarians as they are"— that "if chance shall throw any of them into our hands, he may expect a FELON'S DEATH" (*Remarks*). As Governor in 1844, Hammond accused abolitionists of a conspiracy to destroy the "rights" and "institutions" of the South (Faust 250). He certainly did not want to see a man sympathetic to abolition in the White House.

Before the 1844 Democratic Convention, Southern Democrats had long suspected that the former president leaned toward abolition, or, as Widmer explains, they had "a lurking fear that Van Buren was antislavery" (113). Simms had voted for Van Buren as

Jackson's favored successor in 1836 (Watson, *Nationalism* 7-8). However, in 1840, when Van Buren requested Joel Poinsett to invite Simms to the White House for dinner, Simms declined the honor, explaining, "I am so little an initiate in the forms of *court*" (*Letters* 1: 177)— a jibe referring to Van Buren's reputation for royal pretensions. Following Van Buren's loss for reelection to Whig General William Henry Harrison in 1840, the former president from New York had finished off his hopes of a second term in office when he had published his decision not to annex Texas (Roseboom 127). Historians conjecture that Van Buren would have won the nomination and "probably" the presidency if he had agreed to annex Texas as a slave state (Nevin 526; Cornog 88). Furthermore, the Southern slavocracy, men in the master class like Hammond, would have held Van Buren's "egalitarianism," his belief in a democracy of the people, against the former president from New York (Carnog 79; Faust 331).

Thus, opponents feared Martin Van Buren and often ridiculed his appearance and lifestyle along with his policies. Nicknames like "Little Van" or the "Little Matty" indicate the barrage of "short people" jokes about the man who stood five feet six. Other taunts drew him as a fancy dandy who wore too much jewelry and drank too much alcohol. The most famous attacks appeared in a campaign biography, *The Life of Martin Van Buren*, supposedly written by Davy Crockett. The fake biography, first published by the Whigs in 1835, called Van Buren the "Little Magician," and caricatured him as a man of cunning and sleight of hand. The Whigs also made fun of him as a "dandy," "laced up in corsets, such as women in town wear" (Crockett 80). Holmes Alexander comments on another problem, Van

Buren's "capacity for imbibing enormous amounts of intoxicants without the usual result," adding yet another nickname, "Whiskey Van" (75). Shields-West further contributes to the picture: Van Buren was painted as "a pantywaist who wore corsets and bathed more often than a good man should," and he lived in royal style and ate off "gold plate" (62). Crockett also made fun of a man who enjoyed social events, and mentioned how Van Buren "has crossed over the mazes of country dances" (60). Remarkably, in that rumor-busy era, though a long-time widower, Van Buren had not become the subject of scandals in his private life (Niven 162-63) for Crockett to use against him. Eventually, Crockett named the worst of all the dandy's vanities, sins, and treacheries: Van Buren supported abolition (94).

However, if Simms depicts Jones Barry as a Van Buren figure, nothing in the text seems to prepare readers for the humiliation Barry suffers at the circus when the clown Diavalo throws him into the arms of a large slave woman and yells, "Here's an abolitionist for you, mother-Possum fat!" (104). Barry's appearance, talk, and drunken behavior reveal no obvious abolitionist clues to a reader today, and the target of Simms's satire does not have the talents of a cunning magician. If Simms mocks Van Buren in this satire, possibly the clown and "African" magician embody Simms's theme. Maybe Simms here compares abolitionists' campaigns to free the slaves to a zealot's obsession (like a clown "swallowing his own head") and dismisses charges that bondage destroys the soul of a slave (like an African magician "swallowing his own soul"). John Brown's zealous attacks against slavery had already turned extreme, and Frederick Douglass talked for instance about "the soul-killing effects of slavery" in his 1845 autobiography (ch. 2, p. 19). Possibly Simms wanted to imply that, from his entrenched, invested stance, such opposition to slavery is naïve. Not only does Jones Barry believe a man can swallow his own soul, but he has never

even unlaced a woman's corset before. And he has small hands. Certainly, in the scene with Zerlina/Nell, Simms presents Barry as a naïve fellow easily duped who does not have experience in the ways of the world. The differences in the historical record and Simms's depictions demonstrate how much the disagreements over slavery and abolition had polluted discourse.

William Gilmore Simms was a man of his time and place—and ultimately a victim of his time and place. At his best, Simms could transfer Commedia dell'Arte to an antebellum frontier horse race and circus with humorous effect. Simms's Pantaloon-Captain composite plays a boorish cocksure coward, naïve and incompetent, who expects he has the means and the backing to win the prize. But the Harlequin figure easily dupes him into running away and losing his mind. On the other hand, Hammond, the aristocratic Captain, heroic in Simms's view, wins the prize; and the author glorifies his candidate for the southern slaveowner ideal, though at the very time when the rest of the western world was banning or phasing out the primitive barbaric practice by which planters derived their wealth. Unfortunately for his literary legacy, Simms would not envision or adapt to more humane options. However, just as we compartmentalize to read around the slavery or the polygamy, for instance, in *Genesis* or *Things Fall Apart*, students of American literature and history can discover much of value in the work of William Gilmore Simms.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>References are to the Centennial Edition of *As Good as a Comedy* and appear in parentheses in the text. Though the novel was published anonymously by A. Hart in “The Library of Humorous Works” in 1852, the publishers had held the manuscript since 1848 (Oliphant and Eaves 6: 108n1). Simms first mentioned plans to write the narrative in 1845 (*Letters* 2: 84).

Robert Bush’s introduction to the Centennial Edition provides details on the evolution of the novel (xi) and excerpts from favorable reviews (xvii). John Guilds discusses the literary and historical contexts of the novel’s place in Simms’s career and in history (203-09). Mary Wimsatt includes a fine discussion of *As Good as a Comedy* in her *Major Fiction* (195-202). J.V. Ridgely discusses the many problems with unity, structure, and development (80-83).

<sup>2</sup> Simms would have seen Commedia scenarios staged in Charleston theaters. He dedicated *As Good as a Comedy* to Harry Placide, actor and son of Alexander Placide, who became a theater manager in Charleston. Watson includes a mural featuring important figures in Charleston theaters: Simms stands with other playwrights and notables before the stage; actors on the stage include Matthew Sully in a Harlequin costume and Harry Placide, “comedian” (*Antebellum* 13, 35).

<sup>3</sup>Other passages in the novel recall various sketches by southern humorists who flourished in the 1830s and ‘40s. Bush mentions their influence (xiv-xv), and Mary Wimsatt explores Simms’s use of their work in *Major Fiction* (195-202) and in “Simms and Southwest Humor.” Watson also includes commentary on the influence of Southwest Humor on Simms (*Nationalism* 64-66).

<sup>4</sup> Bleser describes as “rough-hewn” the residence of James Henry Hammond at Silverton plantation near Silver Creek, South Carolina, less than twelve miles from Augusta, Georgia (“Founder” 8, 14). In the novel, Randall Hammond and Miles Henderson might have ridden on a road like the one from Silverton to the race track in Augusta.

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# Critical Race Theory and Charles Frazier's Historical Fiction: History, Narrative, and the Romance of America

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*By J.B. Potts*

“The Trojan War wasn’t fought over a woman. Or are you as romantic as ever?”

—*Varina*

Contemporary fiction in the United States includes plenty of fiction driven primarily by the issue of race, but even historical fiction not particularly written to be about racism can hardly help but reflect the hegemony by whites over all others. Southern literature in particular, even by writers not conspicuously focused on race, cannot be taught legitimately without reflecting it. Thus, although Charles Frazier’s novels are, he says, more about “strong women,” they fairly reflect the true nature of their historical environment, in three novels in particular. The novels, *Cold Mountain*, *Thirteen Moons* and *Varina*, involve strong women, but the overwhelming undertow that shapes their lives is the enforced racial hierarchy in the development of America.

Frazier’s approach to novel-writing clearly commits to authentic history. No apologist for the South, Frazier nevertheless depicts realistic voices for the Southern impressions about the Civil War, the ones that are typically either romanticized, satirized, or suppressed. Frazier’s own comments on writing historical fiction include a few indispensable points. His commentary in an interview at the back pages of *Varina* asserts that when “I am writing a biography or a history, I’m in search of a fictional character (*Varina* 360). And certainly Frazier’s historical research proves to be extremely meticulous.

In a conversation in 1998, immediately before Charles Frazier was to speak on *Cold Mountain* at the University of South Carolina, he told me that he enjoys the research more than the fiction writing. In *Novel History*, he claims that to a large extent the bulk of the historical research is for credibility, to know, for example the names of the kitchen implements his characters would use, “snath, spurtle, hame” (315 Frazier *Novel History*). To be sure, Frazier’s historical research along the way proves to be extremely meticulous.<sup>1</sup> One of Frazier’s own comments upon the place of history in his fiction is especially instructive: the concrete essence is “the difference between *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*” (Frazier *Novel History* 312). If the former takes its shape from Hawthorne’s concern with Puritan fanaticism, and the latter grows out of British anxiety about revolutionaries, then what tide of history gives impetus to Frazier’s fiction? At the most basic level, it seems to attempt to balance the romances and polemics that American culture offers to understand our warlike and troubled tapestry. I would argue that to parallel the analogy about *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *The Scarlet Letter*, Frazier’s fictions share with *Huckleberry Finn* a concern with the cipher of racism in America.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is both about his characters’ human struggles in history’s repetitive holocausts and presents, inevitably, another American jeremiad against the greed and racism that characterizes American political history.

In one of the better critical responses to *Cold Mountain*, Ed Piacentino concludes that the novel is not so much a war novel as a novel about the need for harmony and healing. It seems to me that precious little healing takes place in the novel. Conspicuously, Western North Carolina fought in great numbers (on both sides) even from counties with less than six percent slaveowners (Piacento 101). The interactions between the Southerners do not act out pure racial binaries, and the issue of slavery does not drive Inman or many of his

neighbors to fight for the Confederacy. Piacentino notes that in *Cold Mountain*, the slaves rescue the white Southerners. At one point, Inman is practically rescued by a “yellow” slave who demonstrates substantial intellectual ability (reading and mapping, e.g.), generosity, as well as a strong enough sense of self to decline payment for gracious acts. The Southerners respect the Cherokees and perhaps treat the African Americans with mutual respect--out of necessity. In explaining this dynamic, Piacento describes Inman’s respect for Swimmer, a Cherokee friend in the Cherokee tribal lands, and his positive impression of a travelling band of Ethiopians, Creeks, Seminoles and others of varying tribes and races who operate without any hierarchy, racial or otherwise (106).

Since all of the voices in the novel are Southerners, the honest historical depiction of them includes their pointed criticism of the other side. Inman himself contends that “anyone thinking the Federals are fighting to free the slaves has an overly merciful view of mankind” (*CM*275). No romance that represents an Abraham Lincoln without doubts about freeing African-American slaves or featuring the noble angels of the North freeing oppressed blacks to wipe out racism would likely include the kind of inconvenient but true details that Ed Piacento points out: “the Federals retaliate against women and children for battlefield losses, robbing them and burning their homes, stealing even from the slaves” ...stealing jewelry and burning houses out of malice (Piacento 107, see *Cold Mountain* 136). Certainly, Frazier’s fiction includes Southern voices inconvenient to a Union propaganda campaign, as well as a depiction of Southerners that though hardly similar to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, nevertheless reflect atrocities of enough range. So while some historians may conclude that the Civil War was over slavery, as if that one cause explains the most massive casualties in

American history, those who doubt that will hear some of the rebuttals from skeptics, especially among the Southerners' heirs, then and now.

That does not mean the novel devolves to pro-Confederacy propaganda, and Frazier's own commentary is quite direct about it. Frazier considers the Confederates "fighting for a bad cause" (NH 314). He sets out a proposition about the historical backdrop:

I have not since childhood romanticized the Confederacy and the "Lost Cause," an impossible proposition once you acknowledge that while it may be true that many—perhaps most—Confederate foot soldiers did not think they were fighting to preserve slavery, it is equally true, that...to a large extent they were. And it provides no particular motivation that no great majority of Federal soldiers thought they were fighting and dying to bring about slavery's end. (314)

One of the primary questions then, is when does race matter in *Cold Mountain*? The elusive shades of skin color that Frazier describes lead us to wonder at what point does mere whiteness become the primary virtue? The answer appears to be that when it affects politically driven wealth and power, it suddenly becomes the determinant. Although it is not the central thread of *Cold Mountain*, Odell's tragic and frustrated love for a slave girl prefigures Frazier's recurring conflict with laws against interracial marriage, and apparently arbitrary designations of binary race; Odell's slave is an octoroon who looks practically white. Only a sliver of color remains, but Odell's father and other slavers insist on barring the union. So while the story of the novel indicates the extraneity of color to most of the ordinary people, once wealth and property are at issue, whites craving a racist wedge for the desired hierarchy use color as the trump card. The undercurrent of the historical conflict

here, the Civil War, has much to do with insisting upon a significance to skin color that burdens the real human lives. In dramatizing that authentically, Frazier's historical backdrop does not match either Piacentino's or Wicker's propositions; the force of race cannot be ignored.

Of course, *Cold Mountain* is primarily a love story: the tragedy is what war does in the lives of ordinary people, and with how they struggle not just to live but to love. Frazier's next novel evidences that more clearly, as the tragedy of laws and wars over skin color also pervades *Thirteen Moons*. What makes the life that Will Cooper, the story's protagonist, recounts, so remarkable is that he has risen from a "bound boy," an indentured apprentice store-keeper at a frontier trading post to chief and spokesman for the Cherokee nation, owner of hundreds of thousands of acres, and one of the more important politicians fighting the exile and absorption of the Native Americans. His experience of race merges into the chaos around him, and he does not oversimplify that element. He later expresses a distant regret about having "owned" upwards of four-dozen "Negro" slaves along his way, but he worries a great deal more about other issues (326). For Cooper, slavery within the system seems but one of many sins, and perhaps one of the lesser ones, since he has absorbed the cultural rationalizations for slavery. Throughout, he struggles to decide which categories may be accepted as discrete, and which may not. *Thirteen Moons* sees ambiguity everywhere in the visual, and in the written and spoken word we use to make sense of the world. Despite these ambiguities, *Thirteen Moons* develops another tragedy about race laws and wars over skin color.

From Cooper's arrival at the frontier, the world is in flux. His first encounter in a frontier outpost includes such a mixture of languages and nationalities that amongst the skin

tones, foreign curses, slitted earlobes, and the like, he cannot tell who comes from what tribe or even what continent. Soon the names and clothing began to be mixtures of white and Indian words and fabrics (72). He tries with spectacular success to accommodate the indoctrination he has received from the white world with the Cherokee frontier, but the borderland retains an otherworldly instability. Mostly, he sees the whites as poseurs, as earnest hypocrites with the ethics and the appetites of locusts, hiding their rapacious acquisitiveness in self-righteous rhetoric. He mediates with wry humor between the whites and the Cherokees. He recalls that when Baptists convey their offer to render the Bible into English, Cherokee leader Bear decides, ultimately that it is “a sound book. Nevertheless, he wondered why the white people were not better than they are, having had it for so long. He promised that just as soon as the white people achieved Christianity, he would recommend it to his own folks. And that is the message I sent to the Baptists, which they chose to take as a yes.” (91). At another point, two of the wealthy Cherokees get Connecticut educations and take white brides, leading Will to observe that “the people of the North are so much more open-minded and so much more advanced than we are. All they did to one of the girls when it became known that she intended to marry an Indian was to burn her in effigy on the main street and chime all the church bells in the town hourly through the night” (*TM* 191).

Cooper’s sympathies—and quite possibly Frazier’s—clearly lie with the Cherokees, but he does not leave them as an entirely discrete or absolutely noble set, either. Before he sets out for Indian territory, his father prepares him for the ambiguity of the Cherokees.

Will’s father explains,

they vary in every degree all the way to those you can’t tell from white men.

Some of them have as high as nine parts in ten Scots blood, and might as well

take to wearing plaid skirts and honking on the great pipes. Those kind of Indians own slaves and plantations, dress in tailcoats, eat off china plates with silver cutlery, and have crystal chandeliers swinging over their mahogany dinner tables....A lot of them can't even speak their own language. (31)

Will concedes that “the Cherokee were about the same as everybody else; they considered themselves the only people that mattered. The exclusive way to be one of them was to belong to a clan. Skin color or blood degree was not the issue back then” (94). *Thirteen Moons* is a Deconstructionist's dream text because few propositions that Cooper declares do not undermine themselves as they unfold. His proposition about “blood degree” is perhaps the most salient example, which becomes more evident, given the frequency with which he mentions it. Early in his reminiscences he praises a woman who takes care of him, saying she is “too beautiful to be real”: May “is the color of tanned deerhide, a mixture of several bloods—white and red and black—complex enough to confound those legislators who insist on naming every shade down to the thirty-second fraction” (5).

Attaching names to calibrate the indeterminate shadings of black and white children, Southerners then build a code for privilege based upon whiteness. Frazier is not exaggerating: “In the antebellum South, portions of mixed blood created hierarchies of worth and difference in treatment. One who was three quarters black was called a “sambo”, seven-eighths black was a “mango,” one-sixteenth a “meamolouc,” down to one sixty-fourth black, a “sang-mele” (Moran 54). Preference in positions and privileges followed upon higher percentages of white ancestry (54). A similar attitude was applied to Native Americans. The Dawes Act forbade full-blooded Indians to sell land, but allowed mixed bloods to do so, because their white blood supposedly rendered them competent. The full-



blooded Indians resented this deeply, because it made them settle for a government allotment of the tribal lands, which they could not then sell (55). The matter of interracial marriage cut both ways, too. Once whites could bear to countenance an interracial marriage, the next threat was the utter absorption of the minority—breeding them out of existence. For example in 1870, an influential cultural anthropologist named Lewis Henry Morgan advocated a policy of intermarriage to solve the Indian problem, arguing that through several generations of intermarrying the children would become more attractive and respectable (72).

At the end of the novel, Cooper is an old man coming to terms with the memories and regrets he has earned. And one gnawing mystery remains: why did he make the one decision—not to ride away with his one true love when the opportunity arose—that has haunted the last part of his life? From childhood, Cooper has been in love with a Cherokee named Claire. Claire has lived more as the wife of Cooper's worthy adversary Featherstone than as his, but her relationship with Featherstone is an informal marriage inconsistent with Cooper's white-influenced perception, so much so that he seems to dismiss it as a conflict. But something unspoken has held Cooper back. I suspect that the one remaining place in Cooper's consciousness where the abstract law rules over identity is, ironically, at the intimacy of marriage.

Somewhat anticlimactically, long before the outcome between Claire and Will is determined, reminiscing about an idyllic afternoon they spent together, he muses bitterly that “minor fractions of darkness undetectable to the human eye were given significance to the extent that a drop of blood in a bucket of milk were sufficient to keep lovers apart” (141). The image is haunting because it suggests that a drop of wild, savage, red might sully

his wholesome white purity. On that afternoon in their adolescence, he says, “we sometimes tried to joke about marriage. But mostly the jokes did not work” (141). Cooper observes that “the law was the issue” (141), though the law is not truly compelling to him at any other point in the story. He knows at the time that just across the state line, they could be married as others have. Elsewhere the law only exists to be subverted and when he chooses finally not to accompany Claire to the new Indian Territory, the negation begs for an explanation; after all, even the old one-drop law would not be relevant in the territory. Ironically, on that afternoon in their early years, both set out the identity they have already absorbed, and that they will become; they really are both what they say they are and what the world says they are, but confined to the worst of both worlds. Claire intends to marry no one but a rich old man “of vague race with money to burn” so that if they had children they would be “a living confusion to the law” (142). Will counters that when she was done expounding “all I could swear fidelity to was bachelor freedom until death. A long string of women stretching from here into withered senility” (142). Both should have been more careful what they wished for, and this is the novel’s most personal and poignant matter. He sometimes recognizes dissonance traceable to gaps between the symbolic world of words and the real, but when he is challenged at the most intimate levels of his own identity--blood, milk and bone--he remains a bound boy. Again, however, the historical background obtrudes: the current reflects the rise to power of Andrew Jackson leading up to the Trail of Tears’ exile of the Cherokees. The whites offer words as they dispossess their allies of color.

And then we come to Civil War Mississippi. When Frazier returns to write in the periphery of the Civil War, he goes to a Mississippi much more embroiled with slavery. The plot weaves through the larger history without the politics: he does not render the debates in

Congress over slavery—though these are indispensable to historians—nor does he describe battles; he follows the life of a Mississippi politician’s wife with Northern roots, who may have remained largely an outsider from the mainstream of Confederate sympathies. How does one read this narrative in a vacuum, without perceiving Jefferson Davis’s wife caught up in history—as many will have to, without more grasp of history than is merely typical? It appears to me that Frazier has set up another narrative where the In these two novels, the strong women and the strong men are effectively washed away by a tide of greed. Although the historical record features combatants at propaganda selling at least two opposing narratives, Frazier declines to be seduced by either; however, he makes the suppressed claims of the Confederates more ubiquitous, which should come natural within this setting. The historical record makes certain facts clear, and they drive the tide that carries the characters along. From a materialist perspective, Mississippi’s stake in slavery was enormous. Mississippi’s small population was one of the wealthiest in the country on a per capita basis immediately before the Civil War, but that includes “human capital,” slaves as property (Mississippi Historical Archives). To outlaw slavery without compensating for the investment in it would destroy its economy and confiscate most of the state’s wealth.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that in the debates prior to secession, Mississippi’s representatives made statements that identified the state with slavery as fundamental to its identity. In most such historical debates, one seeking truth can probably just follow the money, and the profit-motive figures mightily in the war, if not for the working class, certainly for the large landowners who populated legislative bodies.

The case with Varina Howell Davis requires enough complexity, and sustained response to critics engaging in the propaganda war that it is too long to address completely here.

Varina comes to us largely from the viewpoint of a mixed-race child that Varina took in and raised as one of the family—the extended family at least. So while Varina’s mind is not always occupied by race or slavery, which might be expected of a white woman of the day, the story makes clear that Blake is not allowed to forget about either. The character of James Blake, Frazier says, derives from Jimmie Limber, a similar person’s tale in the Davis family history (Interview *V* 358). Jimmie Limber appears with family in photographs much as the children do. He was taken off the streets of Richmond and cared for by the Davises. Then at some point after the war, he returns to African American schools and to an entirely different set of opportunities and limitations. In the novel, Blake notes the felt need of others to classify his “fractions—mulatto, quadroon, octoroon” (197). Pointedly, he asks Varina if she thought of him as “a pet,” and she says no. James asks, “If I had been darker would he have let you keep me?” (56). Varina’s rescue of Jimmie makes the fiction much more deeply human, and complicates it. To the question, Varina can only answer, “I don’t know...I hope so” (57). So Jefferson Davis and the racial tsunami in American history overwhelm the strong woman. Even for Varina, the delusional values of skin tint leaves behind crucial uncertainty; again, confronted with the great sweep of history, Frazier declines to deliver a simple romance. It is too unwieldy and lengthy to deliver the case of how Varina’s life is overrun by Jefferson Davis, his brother, and the Civil War; it is a case for another paper. But the ubiquity of race—and its centrality to Davis’s empire of four thousand acres and four hundred slaves Davis, Jefferson MHA) as the driving force in their lives cannot be missed amidst the “romance” elements in the story. Nor is the shading of skin irrelevant to destinies.

Frazier is clearly aware of the recent surge trying to suppress the inequities of racial history in America—what may be taught in schools, what may be carried in libraries, what may be burned in the town square. But he has chosen to write genuinely historical novels driven by the forces that drive history, rather than morality plays, or whitewash.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This, as Tom Wicker reminds us, forms much of novelistic art as Joseph Conrad described it, “to make a reader or viewer see and feel the thing or event depicted” (Wicker 308). Wicker declares that for all its minute detail about nineteenth century life and the war, the novel is about more universal concerns—all wars, any time. Speaking of *Cold Mountain*, Frazier explained to me, for example that the Cherokee curse in the novel is patched together out of three different ones he found in research. He said that he found a site that could tell him the position of the stars on every night of the novel but decided that would “just be neurotic” (Frazier, 1998). He also told me that at most points he enjoyed the research more than the writing.

<sup>2</sup> If I may be permitted to return briefly to my proposed parallel with *Huckleberry Finn*, the most important single line in that novel likely comes when Huck declares “OK, then, I’ll go to Hell.” [rather than turn Jim over to slavers] *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Chapter 31 Having spent enough time with the runaway slave Jim to recognize his humanity, decency, and friendship, Huck then refuses to go along with the cultural propaganda that tells him that slavery is the right order of things, and that to go against slavery is illegal and sinful.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1830s a slave sold for around \$900.00, and the slave population was nearly 1.5 times the number of whites in Mississippi (MMH). The overall “investment” in slaves has been estimated at between three billion and four billion dollars in 1860 dollars, and its confiscation would mean “utter ruin” for the slaveholding economy (Jefferson Davis 96).

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# Spiritual Epistemology in LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*

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*By Tyler Smith*

In LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*, Howe links the ancient religious and cultural traditions of Choctaw Native Americans to the present by representing contemporary characters as psychologically fused with such traditions. The novel revolves around the Billy Family, who attempts to solve the mysterious assassination of the Choctaw Chief Redford McAlester by correlating it with the past assassination of Red Shoes, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Choctaw warrior. Although the murders occur 253 years apart, they both constitute an overarching, archetypal narrative. Although both Redford McAlester and Red Shoes are deemed to be the *Imataha Chitto* (the greatest giver) of their tribe, they both surreptitiously succumb to rapacious corruption, neglecting the welfare of their tribe by conducting business with untrustworthy parties for monetary gain and are ultimately murdered for their treachery. As the female members of the Billy family become increasingly attuned to the spiritual guidance provided by Shakbatina, the matriarchal ancestor of the novel, they realize that they must bury Redford McAlester's body under Nanih Waiya, the earth mound, or "Mother Mound" in Mississippi which the Choctaws believe to have been birthed from in order to eclipse and lay Redford McAlester's patriarchal spirit of greed to rest. In the same way that Auda Billy is accused of murdering McAlester, Auda's ancestor, Anoleta, was accused of killing a woman of the Red Fox village 253 years prior. Throughout the novel, Auda and Anoleta form a spiritually intersubjective relationship through their reciprocal understanding of the historically repetitive archetype of the disloyal

chief embodied by Redford McAlester and Red Shoes. By experiencing trancelike states in which she time travels to the past and inhabits Anoleta's body, Auda discovers that her relationship with Redford McAlester mirrors Anoleta's relationship with Red Shoes and that the archetype of the disloyal chief will perpetually manifest lest the spirit of greed which animates it be extinguished. In this novel, Howe pits spiritual forms of truth derived from Choctaw cultural and customs against material forms of truth derived from legal customs, ultimately prioritizing spiritual epistemology as a superior mode of truth. In this essay, I explore the way in which Choctaw ancestral mythology provides a metanarrative which the contemporary Choctaw characters consult as a retributive, epistemological tool. Owing to their intimate accounts of the hereditary motivations which impel human behavior, ancestral narratives represent historical patterns of criminal behavior in a much more holistic manner than mere legal documentation of actions and consequences. Therefore, I argue that, in this novel, ancestral mythology acts as a more effective and permanent mode of justice than temporal law.

The novel begins from the perspective of Shakbatina, a member of the *Inholahta* tribe and the Billy Family's matriarchal ancestor who serves as their principal spiritual guide throughout the novel. According to *Inholahta* tribal customs, murderers must be sacrificed to maintain peaceful relations between neighboring tribes. Contending with the ramification of the murder charge against Anoleta to prevent Anoleta from being sacrificed, Shakbatina volunteers to serve as Anoleta's scapegoat in a blood sacrifice. When Shakbatina announces her self-sacrificial decision to the rest of the *Inholahta* tribe, she declares, "I will follow our Choctaw ancestors to our Mother Mound at Nanih Waiya. When released by the bone-picking, I will grow and sprout up like green corn. From the mound I will watch over our

people” (Howe 8). In this passage, Shakbatina not only foreshadows how she will later serve as a time travelling, spiritual guide to the Billy family 253 years after her blood sacrifice, but she also expresses how Choctaw femininity reflects a primordial understanding of the earth as the symbolic site of life and death. According to Annette Trefzer in her article, “The Indigenous Uncanny: Spectral Genealogies in LeAnne Howe’s Fiction,” “[Howe] sketches a gendered landscape that links women to a sacred cosmological geography...To the Choctaw, ‘the earth work is still gendered as ‘Great Mother’...it is, in other words, the place of origin and return, the womb and the tomb” (Trefzer 205). When Auda Billy’s aunt Delores visits the Billy family, she immediately becomes aware of Shakbatina’s spiritual instruction to “Put your dead chief [Redford McAlester] in a mound so he will be protected from escaping again. Give him everything in death he wanted in life. That way he will never leave it again” (Howe 158). Exceptionally attuned to earthly connotations of death and rebirth, Shakbatina recognizes how Nanih Waiya serves as an interdimensional portal through which a kind of transcendent absolution can be attained. Contrasting with meager, temporal legal systems which merely provide petty forms of justice, spiritual justice enacted by the Choctaw community’s adherence to religious and cultural traditions supplies substantial, everlasting justice which not only punishes the accused, but prevents archetypal patterns of criminal behavior from persisting. By burying Redford McAlester under Nanih Waiya, the Billy family can prevent the spirit of greed from perpetually recurring and enact permanent justice.

Accused of laundering money through the Italian mafia, Redford McAlester is described as a backstabbing Choctaw chief who is possessed with the same spirit of greed which possessed Red Shoes. Because both chiefs are murdered for their treachery, Trefzer

argues that “a chief’s betrayal of his people causing female sacrifice and revenge” serves as an historical archetype which manifests itself in “acts of unconscious repetition compulsion” (Trefzer 202). Choctaw ancestral mythology serves as a metanarrative in which both Red Shoes and Redford McAlester serve as archetypal antagonists whose crimes are interchangeable. In the chapter entitled “Suspended Animation,” Auda experiences a dreamlike state in which she drives with the undead Redford McAlester to Nanih Waiya to bury his dirty money. In this chapter, Redford’s incorporeal presence serves as Auda’s conjured conception of the perpetually remanifesting, undead archetype of greed which possessed Redford as a corporeal agent. “She [Auda] studies his [Redford’s] face, sees that the back of his head is caked with blood, but is not disturbed at this” (Howe 190). Redford explains to Auda that his deceitful actions were motivated by pure intentions to reinforce the economy of the Choctaw Nation, mirroring Red Shoes’ claim that his dealings with the *Inholahta*’s rival tribe, the *Inkilish okla*, were prompted by his righteous aim to “unite the Chickasaws and the Choctaws against the foreigners” (Howe 199). When Redford shows Auda the nine million dollars of siphoned money he has accumulated, he states, “‘Nine million...my last hurrah. Stealing from the Mafia...it’s kind of mythical, isn’t it? I always knew I’d be caught and killed,’” supporting the proposition that Redford McAlester assumes a preordained, historically repetitive, archetypal role of the disloyal chief which Red Shoes originally occupied within the Choctaw ancestral metanarrative (Howe 191). Although Auda does not travel to Nanih Waiya with her family to bury Redford McAlester along with his wealth, her imaginary interactions with him in this chapter provide her with sufficient closure. Laughing with the undead Redford McAlester on their unreal trip to Nanih Waiya, they both realize that Redford McAlester’s death and ultimate burial fulfills

Choctaw prophecy. Redford McAlester is destined to embody Red Shoes' spirit of greed and Auda is fated to extinguish it.

When Auda's uncle Isaac visits Divine Sarah who is described by Auda's lawyer as "not really a human being, but a porcupine spirit who claims she's fighting an evil war chief named Red Shoes, come back in the form of Redford McAlester," she states, "they [the Choctaws] haven't forgotten Redford McAlester. Besides, that is the reason the *Osano* returns...To continue consuming—it's his job" (Howe 73, 116). In this novel, Howe uses the term *Osano* to mean "horsefly" or "bloodsucker." Both titles aptly describe the historically repetitive archetype of the unfaithful chief embraced by both Red Shoes and Redford McAlester. Addressing Auda's uncle Isaac, Divine Sarah states, "'Red Shoes started the war that continues even now, two hundred and fifty years later. I've come to tell you—what is in the past has not passed. The time has come, Nitakechi, for you to fulfill your destiny'" (Howe 72). Nitakechi, Shakbatina's brother, serves as Isaac's eighteenth-century doppelganger in the same way that Anoleta functions as Auda's ancestral counterpart. Paraphrasing one of William Faulkner's most popular lines, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," Divine Sarah reveals how the *Osano* archetype persists through time, waiting like a dormant volcano to be espoused and re-animated.

Although Redford and Red Shoes are murdered 253 years apart, both of their murders transpire on September 22 during the Autumnal Equinox. Choctaws refer to this season as *Tek inhashi*, or Girls' Month, "a time when things break open...The old is sloughed off and discharged, [and] the new begins" (Howe 62). In the beginning of the novel, Shakbatina explains how her grandmother communicated with *Itilauichi*, the Choctawan god of the Autumnal Equinox. After Shakbatina's grandmother carried out a

blood sacrifice by performing a Shell Shaker dance, *Itilauichi* provided her with a song to sing to invoke *Itilauichi*'s guidance whenever her or her descendants require it. The song lyrics are as follows: "Itilauichi, Autumnal Equinox, on your day when I sing this song you will make things even" (Howe 2). According to Kirstin L. Squint in her essay, "Burying the (un)Dead and Healing the Living: Choctaw Women's Power in LeAnne Howe's Novels," *Itilauichi*'s divine song "is passed down matrilineally through the novel and operates as a tool for 'evening out' personal, social, and cultural injustices" (Squint 194). Choctawan community is sustained by a prophetic divine order rather than a worldly legal system. *Tek inhashi*, or Girls' Month, is a time perennially inscribed in the Choctawan cosmological calendar signifying the predestined re-emergence of feminine, Choctawan power and its supersession of patriarchal authority propelled by the spirit of greed. The female characters in this novel are matrilineally endowed with special, spiritual authority which allows them to directly communicate with the transcendent realm inhabited by the spirits of their ancestors. According to Trefzer, "women...shape and mold narrative history, and they are able to decode the spectral messages hailing from the South. Howe's contemporary Choctaw women are literate in the signs they receive and empowered by the spectral ancestral history" (Trefzer 203). Thus, Auda can time travel to the past, inhabit her ancestor Anoleta's body, and acquire clues which illuminate the way in which Redford McAlester serves as a modern doppelganger of Red Shoes. During one of Auda's trancelike states in which she occupies her ancestor Anoleta's body, she recognizes how Anoleta's relationship with Red Shoes directly reflects her relationship with Redford McAlester.

She [Anoleta] kisses him [Red Shoes]. They hold each other, lost in the pain of knowing they cannot stop what is coming. She pulls him to her

again, but he vanishes like a shadow in sunlight. Auda begins to whimper because she knows now that she is dreaming. (Howe 81)

In this scene, Auda is made aware of the fact that her romantic relationship with Redford McAlester and his ultimate demise serves as a historical repetition of the events which her ancestor Anoleta experienced.

Trefzer's claim that the female characters in this novel possess a sort of spiritual authority manifested in their ability to "decode the spectral messages" from their ancestors in order to make sense of contemporary reality can be clarified here. More specifically, the female characters in this novel possess privileged insight into how Choctawan myths form a metanarrative which provides the Choctawan community with a spiritual epistemology which transcends legal epistemology. In this novel, Choctaw myths constitute a spiritual metanarrative which the Billy family consults in order to work out real-world scenarios. In "Choctawan Aesthetics, Spirituality, and Gender Relations: An Interview with LeAnne Howe" conducted by Kirstin L. Squint, Howe explains that she hopes this novel "will help other Choctaws remember their own stories so that they might bring more of the past back into existence" (Squint 218). Contemporary society can refer to mythological metanarratives of the past to better understand the ways in which historical behavioral patterns persist and re-manifest in the present.

At the end of the novel, the mystery of Redford McAlester's death seems to be resolved in court. Auda's lawyer presents audio recordings which reveal one of Redford McAlester's business associates to be responsible for the murder. However, in the epilogue-like chapter entitled "Shell Shaker" at the end of the novel, Shakbatina informs the reader of "what really happened," explaining how she pulled Auda's finger on the trigger, causing

Redford's death (Howe 222). The court officials were wrong; Shakbatina's spiritual force killed Redford McAlester, proving Auda's lawyer's claim earlier in the novel that "'A spirit killed him [Redford], not you [Auda]'" (Howe 116). By depicting Shakbatina as the supreme judge and executioner whose verbal confession resolves the primary tension of the novel, Howe stresses "the importance of Choctaw conceptions of justice over and beyond US sanctioned legal processes," as expressed by Nicole Dib in her article, "Acting Appropriative: LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* and Native American Literary Performativity" (Dib). Dib asserts that "This final revelation is a solution to the question of the murderer's identity that also gives Auda and Shakbatina agency in their own stories; Shakbatina's exposé positions the two women in a tradition of Choctaw guardians who keep the tribe safe from corrupted leaders like Red Shoes and Redford" (Dib). Red Shoes and Redford McAlester are not the *Imataha Chittos* (greatest givers) of their tribe as they claim to be; rather, Shakbatina and Auda act as the *Imataha Chittos* of the Choctaw Nation, proving Shakbatina's assertion in the beginning of the novel that "the *Imataha Chitto* was most likely a woman" to be true (Howe 12). Consequently, the epistemological metanarrative constituted by Choctaw ancestral mythology transcends legal epistemology, allowing the matrilineal narrative realized by Auda and Shakbatina's spiritually intersubjective relationship to disrupt the master narrative embodied in material law and reclaim tribal sovereignty.

In *Shell Shaker*, Howe demonstrates how spiritual forms of knowledge derived from cultural customs constitute a sound mode of epistemology which surpasses legal epistemology. Because Redford McAlester is murdered by the spirit of Shakbatina rather than a corporeal agent, worldly jurisprudence is divested of its epistemological authority in



this novel. Owing to the female characters' extrasensory perception, they are exceptionally aware of the way in which Choctaw myths constitute a metanarrative which can be consulted to resolve real-world dilemmas. Via Shakbatina's spiritual guidance, the Billy family realizes how Red Shoes' death directly corresponds with Redford McAlester's death. The historically repetitive archetype of the greedy chief derived from the metanarrative of Choctawan spirituality is not a mere myth, but a recurring reality which must be spiritually stifled. Legal judgment can punish the mortal, but it cannot prevent the remanifestation of immortal patterns of criminal behavior. Redford McAlester's burial under Nanih Waiya enacts eternal justice not by punishing Redford McAlester as an agent possessed by the spirit of greed, but by laying to rest the spirit of greed itself so that it cannot remanifest itself through another agent again. Unlike legal epistemology, the spiritual epistemology ancestrally inherited by the Choctaw community can permanently prevent criminal behavior by locating and exterminating its archetypal root within a mythological metanarrative.

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