

# FOCUS 2006



Cover Photo: Kerri Dempsey

Inside Photos: Offie Clark

I don't write, or I'm writing poems,

I write to nude white walls, down corridors of cement threads,  
myself here, or there, down walls,

I write to the window, under coffee table, where shade of eye  
sleepily open, exposing the air between, between and shadows of things.

And the door, where I'm here,

going out, but

going out,

going out,

the same, biggest, smallest, of the parking lot.

## FOCUS 2006

this issue celebrates the windows, avenues from which writers create  
chance, work, success, love, silence

it celebrates the house, room from which ideas and stories are  
created

an artist's window

In the last four years, I have had the special privilege of helping  
to shape a publication that has its mission to hear the voices of  
unheard writers, to put the visions from the window of some  
poet or artist.

FOCUS would not be my last issue as editor-in-chief.

I want to thank and honor the writers  
who have read and inspired me and all of our readers.

This is your issue. These are your visions.

*FOCUS passionately supports the small group of publications, academic programs, and spiritual endeavors that sustain writers of color.*

Editor-in-Chief

  
Elise Le Grand

I don't write in interesting places.

I write to nude white walls, sheets undeserving of counted threads,  
muted faces of television actors.

I write to the window by the coffee table, whose shade stays  
sleepily open, exposing just the bottom halves and shadows of things.

And so many stories come from  
pointy toed feet  
urgent legs  
tire tracks  
the worn, striped asphalt of the parking lot.

this issue celebrates the ordinary canvases from which writers create  
chaos, truth, sorrow, love, silence  
it celebrates the blank space from which ideas and stories are  
coerced

the writer's window


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unheard writers, to print the visions from the window of some  
pensive artist.

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Editor-in-Chief,



Arlene Elise Le Grand

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### Advisor's Note

It used to make me angry when people would describe Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUS) as black versions of predominately white institutions. Now such comparisons strike me as tragic rather than infuriating. HBCUS have developed a rich heritage and the promise of an even more dazzling future, and we should celebrate that which makes us unique. And that is why I am particularly proud of FOCUS 2006. This journal is truly a celebration of wonder, beauty, and diversity...FOCUS 2006 would have been impossible without the vision of the incredible Professor Opal Moore and the indefatigable Dr. Anne Warner. Pearl Cleage, Giovanni Singleton, James Iredell, Shay Youngblood, Aileen Keenan, Saptosa Foster, Stephanie Dunning, Dr. Mendi Lewis Obadike, Kiini Salaam, Kalamu ya Salaam, Professor Sharan Strange, Dr. Akiba Harper, and Spelman College's English Department faculty have allowed FOCUS to transition from a student to a professional journal, and we thank them for helping us to re-imagine and re-visit FOCUS. We are grateful too for the generous support of Poets and Writers Inc. (thank you Bonnie and Nicole!), Hammond House Museum (thank you Kevin and Logan!), the Shrine of the Black Madonna, and Outwrite Bookstore. We'd also like to thank Katrina Rogers, Tiffany Polk, Gabrielle Williams, and Alexandra "Alex" Rich for all of their hard work. Last but not least, we give a special thank you to our writers, our artists, our editorial advisory board, and our wonderful staff who have worked so hard to make this issue special.

--Rochelle Spencer  
FOCUS Advisor

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LISTENING TO THE SUPREMES' *GREATEST HITS*  
AS AMERICA WEEPS FOR RONALD REAGAN  
RANE ARROYO

The unashamed always get the cover photos,  
their mob of mourners in photogenic poses.

I need black women to sing to me, their voices  
saying what the lyrics cannot—not yet, but when?

Come on Miss Diana, hurry that love, let's be  
together now. My drag queen uncle died while

Reagan was learning how to spell A-I-D-S.  
Where is Uncle Rachel's statue, the national mourning?



DEATH OF THE SINGER CELIA CRUZ

RANE ARROYO

For someone who has spent  
a lifetime making people  
dance, this woman is so still

in her fairy-tale burial on  
a two-city tour. "It's like  
Prince Diana's wedding again,"

says Mami who watches the TV  
extravaganza. Meaning and  
New York are mere backdrops

for mourners doing the salsa  
on street corners. Our tears help  
exiles float back to the Caribbean.

THE POWER OF THE LIBRARY CARD

RANE ARROYO

I'd read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*  
until sunrise, and then, another sunrise.  
This is a book, I said, and lived for it,  
to write my own. Cousins flowed into

prison like tributaries with their souls  
as the tributes. Instead of libraries,  
they became the tattoos of a stern Jesus,  
the rose in barbed wire. Listen to James,

I'd say, a preacher by accident, *they mean  
for you to die*. But the cousins kept dying,  
some without headstones as islands  
so we could row there and visit and grieve.

My ghosts should not be this young, but  
they are. It's a time lapse film going  
backwards: flowers into buds, into fresh  
dirt once ploughed by men used as mules.

MAGDA AT THE WINDOW  
BRITTNY RAY

she doesn't kill  
the spiders  
because her skin  
is as dry as locust shells  
left on the bark of pine trees.  
she wishes she too  
could leave herself  
for some lovely curious  
child to collect in bags among  
bits of glass and yellow string  
flattened pennies and chips of tombstone  
for these are the things  
we are made of  
what god saves  
and loves  
she worked at one of those  
stress away massage parlors  
where the men would come in  
hard like a rock  
smelling like expensive cologne  
or Skoal and Shell diesel  
and she would knead  
and stroke  
and pulse her hands like a heart  
until they melted right  
in her hands like sticks of butter

a real load off

she could never go to church  
with those hands  
never pray to the blue-eyed God Almighty  
with sticky stillborn hands  
never kneel before the altar  
as she knelt before men  
while they shouted Christ exaltations  
and secreted epiphanies in her mouth,  
this was her temple  
with rooms the color of Christ's blood  
and incense burning she  
anoints men with oil, wipes their  
bodies with her hair  
she believes in performing blessings  
she believes in hidden saints

## UNTITLED LOVE POEM

BRITTNY RAY

im gonna collect  
every word  
you ever spoke  
and put them  
in a box somewhere  
then  
one day  
let them fly out  
like a cacophony  
of colored moths  
landing on brown  
tree branches

FEBRUARY 4, 2005

*For Ossie Davis, newly deceased*

J.E. ROBINSON

Though Satan heard your voice and smiled, thinking  
it was so sweet he must return to Heaven,  
it was the rest of us who saw you float  
and said "there really is a God, and he  
is one of His chosen angels. We heard  
you sing one of your own song many times;  
often, you recited other words as  
if they were your own, and all that dwelled  
below the skies praised you as if you were  
a god, sent at the darkest hour to make  
light real. Now, you have been compelled back to  
Heaven, to be at the left hand where  
whisperers sit perched, to be there to nod  
"yes" as Purlie's fans file past.

SON TO MOTHER

*After L. Hughes*

J.E. ROBINSON

Crystal stair lives are unknown to me, too,  
and in their place, I've tap-danced on plywood,  
and heard my steps echo like lint in empty  
pockets. I've learned to twist a smile from a  
frown, and let my eyes shine like streetlights. I  
imbibe hooch to get by, and let smoke curlicue  
in my hair. Before long, I sniff snow, and  
do the dance like I was born to please. Burnt  
cork is congenital for me, and  
lets me be. A clown is all I live for.  
It is what they want, and besides, it subtracts  
years. Given enough time, I should pass before  
my teens, still thought of as cute. No one  
tolerates me as a man, seriously.

**BOOK BURNING**  
KEVIN GRIFFITH

I reach down into the flames,  
hoping to find a charred spine,  
a few salvageable pages,  
but instead I feel my own

legs turning into ash.  
I look beyond the fire  
and see that it is the books

who are burning me  
and many others.  
They circle around the pyre,  
serious tomes with leather faces,

and I am content,  
knowing that literature  
will survive after all.



## WHAT IS AN ATOMIC BOMB?

KEVIN GRIFFITH

my son asks. Before I open  
my mouth, I am hoisted  
onto a plane, my brain  
replaced with uranium,  
my feet, tail fins.

From up here, the world  
Looks like a child's globe,  
Russia so pink!

Next thing I know,  
I am falling through clouds,  
Moisture growing on my face.  
It's a long way down,  
a long way.

Soon, I'll see a child  
like my own son  
standing in a field  
near a crowded street.

He too, like a million others,  
is waiting for an explanation.

SATURDAY AT THE PLAYGROUND  
KEVIN GRIFFITH

As I sit on the bench,  
I watch the gray clouds mosey  
across the blue sky

and my children, as they  
dash from swing to slide.

My wife warned me  
to watch them carefully,  
so I fall asleep.  
The kids will be fine.

When I wake,  
It is thirty years later.

The playground is now  
a field, empty, except for chunks  
of concrete and shattered glass.

I should head home and tell  
my wife, but she will be gone too.

I will sit on my front porch  
and remember their faces,  
how, when I saw them last,  
it seemed just like yesterday.

## MOURNING WORSHIP

(IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE LATE 60S, EARLY 70)

MEL DONALSON

Nikki sang my song,  
her soprano ringing above  
Baraka's baritone,  
it was a marvelous choir  
of Lee and Knight,  
Sanchez and Harper,  
and Evans  
sometimes, Bullins performed a solo, his breath  
fragrant with the streets and alleys,  
and when the singing finished,  
Seale and Carmichael delivered  
the prayer, all the deacons  
looking on through darkened glasses  
and uniforms speckled in red, black,  
and green

a special collection  
gathered for Newton (in absentia),  
rattled into baskets with African  
embroidery,  
the shells echoing  
an ancient cadence

and the message inspired,  
with Davis preaching,  
her voice resonant with revolution,  
her style profound with liberation,  
her words rooted in Malcolm,  
Cleaver, Hutton, and G. Jackson

and, then, came the benediction  
too soon,  
the pulpit suddenly bare,  
the stained glass melting into colored tears,  
the hallowed walls crumbling,  
reverberating the silence  
like empty thunder  
moving with the congregation  
towards the opened doors,  
the remnants of the message  
faded against the sun  
like a dark dream,  
dissolving beneath the tears of time

IF

MEL DONALSON

A vicious dream had gripped my sleep,  
The darkness of a leaking ship,  
Surrounded by moans that rolled as deep  
As the blood and feces dripping my legs and hips

An auction gallows paid in loss and pain,  
The cries of sister and of mother pulled away,  
My brother dead, my father's shadowed face stained  
By grief that made him mute and grey.

If I could wake the generations gone,  
If I could save the generations unborn...

A vicious dream had gripped my sleep  
And filled my ears with the swinging rope  
That lynchers fashioned with bloody heaps  
Of burned and scarred and tortured hope

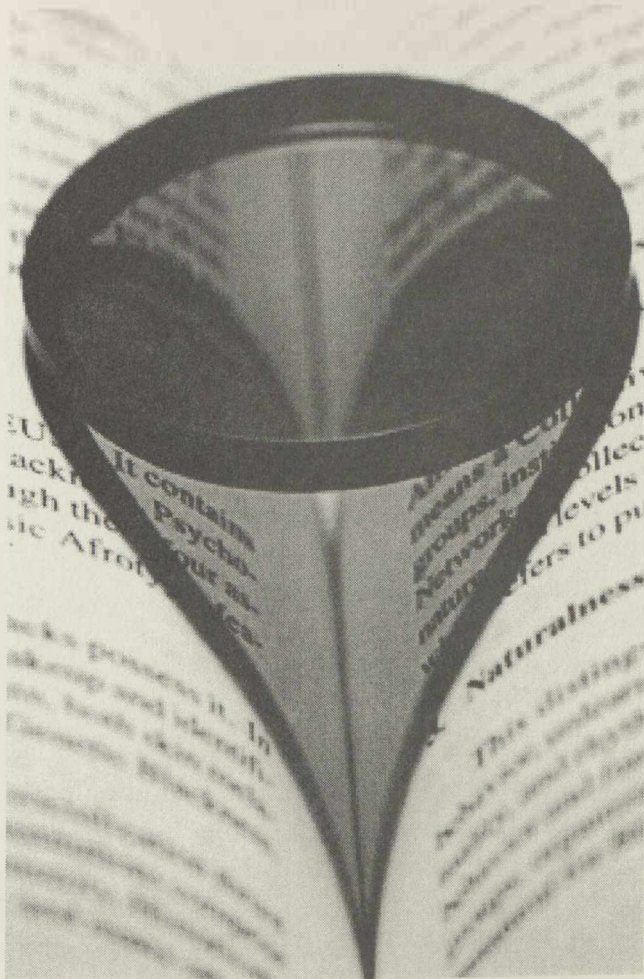
The soldiers marching in fervent steps  
Through countries far and soils of shame,  
The march at home for laws that swept  
the southern streets of stormy disdain

If I could wake the generations gone,  
If I could save the generations unborn...

A vicious dream had gripped my sleep  
Where Nam and Iraq had left us maimed  
And hordes of vengeance would make us reap  
unforgiving words and profit-driven flames

The children grow, nurtured by dollars and cents  
And cry too loud their wants demand  
Where parents woes are loss laments,  
No valiant leader to make a lasting stand

If I could wake the generations gone,  
If I could save the generations unborn,  
Would common sense somehow prevail?  
Would human greed repeat this senseless tale?



REBOUND

MICHAEL HOGAN

If like a crab you could crawl backward.

--*Hamlet*

Say, to eleven, that summer before puberty  
and the complications of sex. When you were complete:  
shooting baskets in the lonely driveway  
in dump repetition of some dream of victory,  
when you knew less than nothing  
and happiness was unscanned, transitory  
as ice cream.

Or fifteen, when the blood ran cervical hard  
and you would exchange everything for a glimpse of  
thigh  
the ecstasy of two skins touching  
or inadvertent glance of a cheerleader  
towards the sophomore you on the bench  
with skinny legs and self-conscious smile.

Or twenty-one when some career choices  
shone green and wondrous as flesh-eating plants  
open for all the wrong reasons  
while other sealed like a tomb  
from foolish choices made at fifteen.

Or thirty-five and the first marriage failed  
and the new independent life less than you imagined  
and your child in trouble again at school  
and the salary never enough  
and the future more of the same  
and the secret knowledge: *You are not the man your father was.*

Or fifty when you have the face finally that you deserve  
but also the ease, the occasional gratitude  
as the sun fades on a summer afternoon  
that you are still alive and all the things  
Which could have killed you are still out there  
but your fears are camouflaged in competence  
and in the genial clamor of working days.

At sixty-one you know  
regretting time lost is wasting time  
and no longer an option. So, even if you could  
go back to, say, eleven, and start over  
you know you'd be forever bound  
to the iron post of your own shadow  
frozen forever in that late afternoon  
shooting baskets in a lonely driveway.



SESTINA  
KYLA BERRY

How still, the wind;  
the moon, how high  
above the field where we await  
the eclipse. Nothing is more fortunate  
than to be under the dark sky tonight, skipping  
through creeks, this fervor never leaving.

At the park, we examine brown leaves  
battered from a night with the wind.  
Today we're bad, and agree it's okay to skip  
A class or two, as long as we're not getting high.  
We've been here before to nibble on fortune  
cookies, and make my ride wait.

In the doctor's office, there's a line to wait.  
One by one, babies leave,  
ear infections gone; what good fortune.  
My mother walks us home through the windy  
day and tells stories of when I was knee-high;  
she says the years, somehow, have skipped.

Around the circle of us girls, a small weaves and skips.  
We talk about the Wait,  
and how someday that prince will come, high-  
high on a horse for sure never to leave.  
We boys and girls all snaky nerves, become entwined  
in small spaces like our youth, each moment, big fortune.

"You need to make more time for romance," says my fortune.

"Quadratic formulas, Spanish verbs—those you can skip.  
Before your hair thins, let it blow in the wind;  
Find a place where true love waits  
And before you leave  
pick up that penny you see; your luck will shoot sky-high."

In the car, the music is so high  
I can hear the players talking. Fate and fortune  
are yin-and-yanging quite well tonight, and I can't believe  
it. On the lake we skip  
flat rocks, warmed by the midnight sun. The ripples are  
reluctant, but we wait.  
Down into the ocean, the night winds

and winds until the sun is so high  
and the birds wait no longer for tunes  
to sing, tunes to sing about me.

SONG OF THE ELK  
RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE

The willows are starting to bud,  
And my father points to the river,  
how the pine trees waver like  
Faces in a funhouse mirror.  
The warm rains have come  
And gone—just us here now,  
dew steaming off grass,  
thistles that choke the trail,  
the horizon an endless curve  
that stretches our imagination.  
*It's almost like there's no air here,*  
my father said, plucking a  
yellow flower from a patch  
of moss and setting it atop a stone.  
Then came a noise, a spine-  
straightening shrill that makes  
me think of horror movies  
and wide-eyed children. But  
my father did not cower—*that's an elk,*  
he said after a moment, as if  
nothing else was worth seeing,  
listening for. We stood in silence,  
each wanting something we could  
not ask for, our insoluble need filling  
the spaces between the branches,  
The yet-unleafed shrubs.

VOTING RIGHTS  
BUT FIRST MRS. ABERNATHY'S CHICKEN  
MARGARET ROZGA

It keeps on moving, like a happy marriage, celebrating anniversaries and important milestones, raising new questions, and facing new issues. The Civil Rights Movement, often identified with and identifying the 1960s, still shapes thought, makes headlines and provides background, serves as a model.

The summer of 2005 finally brought the conviction of Edgar Ray Killens for manslaughter in the 1964 deaths of civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. The elections of 2000 and 2004 renewed discussions of voting rights and protections. August 2005 marked the fortieth anniversary of President Lyndon Baines Johnson signing into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the beginning of debate about renewing sections of this key legislation. For civil rights advocates, it was a major victory. It promised an end to the obstacles imposed upon African Americans who wanted to register to vote. For me this law had, and continues to have, deep personal meaning.

I was a civil rights worker, in the parlance of those who then opposed our work, an outside agitator. Before the Voting Rights Act became law, as a second year student at Alverno College, I volunteered to work in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project. I was assigned to Bullock County, Alabama, where our group of volunteers were to encourage African Americans to register to vote. If we and they faced obstacles, harassment and intimidation, and we did, part of our job was to record all the details and thus build the case for the passage of the Voting Rights Act. We felt then, and I still feel now, pride in and ownership of this law.

SCOPE began in earnest with a week's orientation in Atlanta, long days of studying relevant history and learning tactics and strategies. The atmosphere was intense, given the dangerous business that awaited us, but I enjoyed meeting other volunteers and had the reward of witnessing some un

forgettable moments. The last day of orientation provided one of the most memorable.

The SCOPE staff needed time to arrange rides for us. Most of the volunteers did not have their own cars. Hosea Williams, project director, announced that those of us waiting should step outside; we'd see Dr. King there, and King would lead us down the street to Rev. Abernathy's church where Mrs. Abernathy was cooking our lunch.

Irene Arnold and Fannie Lamb, teenage volunteers from Bullock County, and I walked together from the warm, noisy Morris Brown College gym into the fresh, though humid, air outside and hustled into the rag tag line already beginning to move out beyond the green and the sidewalk to the middle of the street. Dr. King and those in the front paused and turned around to make sure the volunteers had picked up their cue and knew to follow. In the lurch and jostling during the pause, we found ourselves near the front, almost immediately behind Dr. King.

He took off his jacket and draped it on his arm. He wore a short sleeve shirt. Even so, his face was damp with perspiration. So were ours. The 1960s may be remembered as a time of gauzy blouses and bell-bottom jeans, but that was not yet the style in 1965, at least not in the Deep South. We wore cotton shirtwaist dresses with ample skirts and high necklines. We were weighted down with our bags as we had already checked out of the college dorms that had housed us for the week. It was hot. We were tired, anxious, and hungry.

Dr. King began to move again, but he kept turning to look behind him toward the gym. He craned his neck, looking at the stream of people behind. I followed his glance and saw what I thought were a lot of people headed toward

Mrs. Abernathy's lunch. The line extended perhaps a half a block behind me, maybe a hundred people, enough so that we needed to be in the street as we were and not up on the sidewalk. Yet this was clearly only a fraction of the volunteers.

Without slowing down at all, Dr. King leaned forward and asked those along side of him, "How many people did we say?" I didn't hear who answered or what the answer was. But King replied. "That's what I thought. Look. We don't have that many." Several of the men with King in front glanced

backward. "Oh, well," one of them said. "Oh, well? Oh, well, nothing. She got up a whole crew. Been cooking all morning. Mrs. Abernathy is going to be mad at me."

We continued without interruption through an intersection where the cross traffic waited at a green light until we had all gone by. We were about to walk under a pedestrian overpass. King looked up, saw people there, slowing, looking at the line of us, perhaps wondering if we were demonstrating about some issue. King called up to them, "Hi. How you doing there? We're going to Rev. Abernathy's church. Mrs. Abernathy's cooking chicken. Y'all come on now and join us."

He turned then to some people on the sidewalk who also looked at us with questioning faces. "Come on along for lunch. Mrs. Abernathy's cooking chicken." And so we continued down the street. "Hey, y'all," and a giant arc of Dr. King's right arm invited in still more spectators. Students, men, women, children on the sidewalks stepped down onto the road and followed this Pied Piper to lunch.

By the time we were at the church, the crowd of people had more than doubled. We sat on metal folding chairs at long tables. Women in white uniforms, women in cotton house dresses, moved in the narrow spaces between tables. The aroma of fresh fried chicken permeated the air. We filled our plates, gasped as the steam escaped when we bit into a drumstick. We swallowed sweet iced tea in large gulps. Mrs. Abernathy's crew saw not only their fried chicken, but their beans, potato salad and coleslaw all disappear. It was the best meal we had all week.

All too soon, it was time to go. Cars and drivers had been lined up for us. We were assigned to Rev. Boone's car and headed off to Bullock County, happily well-fed, if still apprehensive about the long hot weeks of June, July and August that lay ahead, hoping but not quite trusting the Voting Rights Act would soon be law.

As far as I know, Mrs. Abernathy did not get mad at Dr. King that day. And as for the menu for my celebration of this fortieth anniversary, that's one of the easiest decisions I've ever made. I just wish I had Mrs. Abernathy's recipes and perfect touch. I also hope, but do not quite trust, the provisions of the Voting Rights Act will continue to be law.

ROOF GUTTERS  
MARK JENKINS

Two men in overalls crouch over  
the white ten-foot gutter  
that rests on three sawhorses.  
One rivets a left end cap,  
the other clamps brackets  
every few feet. They wrap  
the gutter like a hand.

When walking by, I imagine  
water running over the roof edge  
to leave a Maginot Line  
in the grass below. It's a curse  
really. They look like two  
submariners, adjusting a torpedo's  
gyroscope, the torpedo  
shooting out tube #2  
into the blue— at the few clouds above.

And there they are, rearming  
this house, getting ready  
for the oldest battle in the world  
again.

## VILLAGE LIGHTS—NJAVNYUY HOLIDAY

BILL HEMMINGER

The villagers in this mountainous part of Cameroon call their home Njavnyuy. Our driver, Richard, had told us a little about the place before we drove off to meet his family and his village.

A few kilometers before you reach the city of Kumbo on a high lava plateau in the Northwest Province of Cameroon, the rugged path to the village splinters off from the main Ring Road that runs in a wide circuit around Mount Oku, at almost 10,000 feet the second highest peak in Cameroon. The Ring Road runs through some of the most beautiful and most populous portions of this nation. More than 360 km in length, the road links mountain communities of peoples speaking a number of languages, many of them Lamnso speakers like the residents of Njavnyuy. Despite linguistic differences, the people share a common occupation—raising a variety of crops and animals on the steep, mostly grassy hillsides. Produce from their farming villages sits for sale in wooden stalls alongside the roadway—firewood, mostly eucalyptus, split into 3-foot post-lengths (suited to outdoor cooking rings); woven baskets and carrying bags made of fur or leather; bananas in massive green bunches still attached at the stem; bunches of tender young carrots, heads of blanched cabbage, cobs of corn suspended from browning husks.

I never imagined that this place might be the caffeine capital of the world as well. Yet, just about every form of popularly-ingestible caffeine grows here or very nearby.

Coffee bushes, sprouting from old tree stock, grow companionably close to every home. The plants are trimmed to a human height, convenient for culling the beans—encased in red cherries—from the slender plants, the first step in the tedious process of removing layer after layer of material from the pale bean inside. Like the Ethiopian highlands, ancestral home of coffee, these African highlands also support the cultivation of the arabica bean, the most particular and most prized of the coffee beans. *Coffea arabica* is quite demanding of its environment in a number of ways. Though able to survive only in tropical regions, it cannot stand great heat or excessive sunlight. Consequently, it is grown as an understory plant, one that grows only in the mitigating shade of overarching leafy trees. Coffee is also a thirsty plant—needing at least 60 inches of rain annually—and its roots demand rich tilth and plentiful oxygen. The villages till the soft, rich volcanic soil into charmingly irregular undulating rows to accommodate the growing demands of their coffee.

At the lower, somewhat sweeter elevations, cacao thrives in the form of smallish trees whose trunks and branches, at the proper time of the year, are strung with cacao pods like Christmas tree ornaments—pudgy



red, orange, and yellow-brown dangles about four inches in length. Along paved roads to the village, you pass patches of pods that have been cracked open and spread on the berm to dry in the sun; their perfume is cloyingly sweet as the pods pass through this stage in their metamorphosis into the oily-sweet confection that we know as chocolate. The cacao plant made its way to choice European colonies after Cortez had stolen knowledge of it from the Aztecs in the sixteenth century. In Cameroon, cacao grows readily and, in earlier years, contributed much to the economic importance of the region.

A couple of hours' ride on dusty and breath-taking roads beyond the village, a tea plantation thrives at the 6,000-plus foot elevation of the highlands near the town of Ndu. Riding higher and higher on the rutted road, you think that you cannot possibly take another minute of the bouncing or the powdery red dust that coats your clothes as well as your throat. It is late December, and it has not rained for about two months. But then, just beyond a tall stand of columnar airy eucalyptus, the pavement picks up again and, spread alongside the tarmac, fields of tea clothe the hillsides in peaceful green. The tea plant, *camellia sinensis*, bears shiny evergreen leaves like those of its ornamental relative, the flowering camellia, whose fragrant exotic winter-flowering shrubs can be found almost as far north as Indiana. But the fabulous flowers will not appear here. *Camellia sinensis*, when kept cropped on waist-high shrubs, bears little leaves that—when picked, aged, and de-cocted—become the familiar English Breakfast, Lipton, and other beverages that find their way to tables everywhere in the world. Like a vast knee-high lawn, the plants cover hillside after hillside; the fields are stitched together with strips of eucalyptus and cedar that, similarly, carry their green wraps into the dry season. And, out across the ocean of diminutive but ancient plants, waves of workers pick their way through the fields, selecting only the smallest leaves at the very growing edge of the stems then deftly depositing the caffeinated crop into loosely-woven baskets.

Less well-known to visitors is the cola nut, which figures prominently in social history in this part of Africa. The cola tree, related to the cacao, grows tall and thick here, its giant boles covered in patchy lichens that attest to the high rainfall and year-round humidity in the village. High up in the tree, large softball-sized sacks shield a cargo of reddish "nuts" that, like garlic, break up into little hard nuggets when brought down and dried. Sucked and masticated, these nuggets are regularly given as gifts—to visitors, to those about to depart on a voyage, to newly-weds. The nuts have given their name to the original recipe of Coca Cola, whose astringent caffeine jolt (partly masked by the addition of sugar or its chemical substitute) has been addicting Americans for many years. Similarly, the cola nut has been chewed—despite its chalky flavor and puckering potential—for the caffeine it contains as well as

its shot of glucose. There are many stories of local people whose hunger or thirst was slaked as they sucked on a cola nut: the nut works as both stimulant and appetite suppressant. In this naturally opulent world, it is hard to imagine that people here could be hungry, so fecund is the vegetable growth that seems to thrive irrespective of human intervention. Perhaps, in this way, the cola nut reminds villagers of their dependence on the green world and its sustaining gifts.

We arrived in Njavnyuy a couple of days after Christmas. My wife Jill and our two girls Johanna and Mollie wanted to celebrate Christmas at our home in Yaoundé, and though typically restless in cities, I did not object. So, we left Yaoundé very early on the morning of the 26th, stopping in the city of Bafoussam to visit Richard's brother and his wife and to enjoy a big meal of njama-njama (local greens cooked with pork or beef in palm oil), chicken in a wonderful red sauce (tomatoes, palm oil, and local herbs), and maize foo-foo (something like hand-held polenta). We spent a night in the capital of the Northwest Province, Bamenda, and had several fine hours with Richard's sister, Hilda, who runs a little restaurant-bar called Festival. The following day we began our trek along the Ring Road, mostly paved, often rutted and dusty, always beautiful.

Our yellow taxi bounced into Njavnyuy around two o'clock in the afternoon. Though the village sits a kilometer or so off the main road, word of our arrival reached the village long before we finally lurched down the road—scarcely more than an enlarged dirt path—and flopped to a stop in front of Richard's family compound. I cannot say what was more striking—the crowd of adults and children that surrounded us as we unfolded ourselves from the compressed conditions of the taxi or the surrounding palisade of stout ochre walls of the compound buildings. The vertical walls stretch directly up to a horizon of corrugated roof panels (people here call them zinc) that pour down water onto the bright red hardpan of the compound yard during the rainy season. The orange-red of the yard and its attendant buildings sets off the bright green of the neighboring coffee plants; within a few yards in any direction you can see oranges ripening in their round shapely trees, a copse of cola trees, bunches of banana trees whose leaves shiver in the slightest breeze, and little rectangular patches of cultivated greens.

We were overtaken by the family, though. Hands reached through open car windows as we approached the compound; once we disembarked, we stood still as the hands came at us one after the other. That these people were laborers you could tell by their hands—the damp bony hand of the woman who had just left the blackened cooking pot on the fire; the thick cozy hand of Richard's father, a healthy and genteel 74 years of age; the dirty paws of kids who had just come from lugging water or chopping kindling; and the rough muscular mitt of the palm wine tapper, a neighbor and good friend of the family. One neighbor woman, in particular, could not stop

thanking us for coming—as if their hospitality was in some way a gift from us—and repeatedly grabbed my hand, shaking it vigorously in her own each time.

And such warm smiles. It had been several years since Richard had been to his village, and you could tell by the look of surprise and pleasure that his welcome was very special. En route to Njavnyuy, Richard pulled the taxi up to a little house alongside the road; inside the compound, a young woman was bent over, sweeping the red yard with the bound whorl of thin sticks that serves as a broom here. He honked the horn, she glanced up, saw only a taxi full of strangers, returned to her work. He honked again, she stopped her work and approached the vehicle, puzzled. The moment that she descried Richard, she screamed, threw down the broom, broke into a run, grabbed him and hugged him through the little Toyota window, then ran around the taxi, shaking our hands one by one and chattering excitedly in Lamnso. We were all welcome. Of the many experiences that we had in Njavnyuy in the space of only several days I will describe only one—tapping palm wine.

We woke up too late in the morning to accompany the tapper on his regular rounds, so he made a point of coming round to get us later in the morning. The nights at this elevation are uncomfortably cool, even by my polar standards, and I had spent much of the night shivering even though we were given beds, blankets, and a room with a door that closed tightly. And then the early morning splash of water, dredged up from its 54-degree vein in the earth. It was chilly. But we were all ready to go when the tapper called.

In this area, palm wine is made from the raphia palms. Unlike the oil palms, whose tappers—as Chinua Achebe has famously described—must climb high up the palm to make their incisions, the raphia palm is tapped at the point where the fleshy fronds separate from the ground. The raphia palm—whose fronds, when dried, provide the papery strips that folks at home call raffia—looks like a palm without a trunk: tall, feathery leaves grow right out of the soil in great clumps that reach 15 or 20 feet.

On our way to the raphia palms we passed through a large checkerboard of small, irrigated fields. On this relatively flat plain, in the two or three months of dry weather, the village women channel mountain water around a network of raised garden beds. What interested me was not only what the women had planted in the beds—huckleberry (a source of greens and, in this country, a member of the tomato family, *solanum*), sweet potatoes, and cabbage—but also all the edible plants that come up on their own. In this last group are *colocasia esculenta* (ornamental elephant ears now popular in flower gardens at home) whose characteristic ears pop up anywhere the soil is cleared, tomatoes (from last year's garden perhaps), and watermelons. And, I learned later, these fields represent only a portion of the family's cultivated land; the more significant acreage covers a distant mountainside. In fact, the day we left the village, most of the remaining

family members were heading out—on foot—to the fields where they would stay for several weeks as they worked and harvested the dry-season crops.

We stepped gingerly through the fields, said hello to the women, and made our way to the raphia palms where the tapper was already at work. With his machete, he makes a deep cut on a choice fleshy stem just above the ground level. Suddenly, a milky sap gathers and drips freely from the wound; the tapper jams the glass or plastic jug he has brought for this purpose between the earth and the tree (he knows the precise height and angle to make the cut so that no juice is lost); and in a matter of minutes he has a quart or two of sugary sap. The sap is nutritious and begins to ferment almost instantly. Within a couple of hours, the alcohol content is about 4%; in a couple of days, the sweet stuff has become vinegar. In the several days of our visit to Njavnyuy, we had palm wine at just about all stages of its potable life. When fresh, it is pleasant; a day later, it is almost dangerous.

Palm wine—and its collecting—are important parts of social life in the village. Richard's father Nicolas belongs to a Secret Drinking Society, whose drinking is really not much secret at all, especially since the society men often gather in the home of Nicolas' deceased father just behind the current family compound. His father's house sits squarely in the center of several fields; two paths cross just in front. Nicolas explained that three of his father's four wives are buried at this crossroads (or, more accurately, cross paths), one wife at each corner. These three corners now support a thick growth of crops, while the fourth corner—the future home of the wife who is still much alive, usually hunched inside the cooking house next to the smoky warm fire—bears a couple of stumps that are used as resting spots by passersby. It would be difficult, in village tradition, to wander far from the influence of family members, living or not.

But, the living is not all easy in the village. The simple wooden doors of the compound buildings—if they house children—are marked in white chalk with a hieroglyphic assortment of numbers, slash-marks, and letters. These are the telltale signs of polio brigades that have recently come through these remote villages since several outbreaks of polio have been recorded in nearby Nigeria. The health workers came to inoculate children against the disease that—many had hoped—had been eradicated, only one of a number of diseases—malaria, rheumatic fever, dysentery—that claim the lives of many of these children.

And then the children themselves—so many children. Robert Frost says that "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in," and nowhere is this observation more true than in Njavnyuy. Several adult daughters of Nicolas and his wife Hildegard have returned to the village after years of living elsewhere—probably in crowded cities like Bamenda or Yaoundé. One daughter, a tall attractive woman, has returned to Njavnyuy with three children—who have, as Richard says, various fathers and no father—who

will be brought up on the limited budget of the village compound. The same is true of several other sisters, and as a result there is a welter of young people who fill the compound with noise and play. But there is little financial support for these kids, who may be loved and fairly well fed, but who must also be clothed and sent to school or church.

And yet the children figure in my fondest memory of Njavnyuy. In the village, night falls quickly—just after six—and, as usual, the generator in town was on the blink when we were visiting. The result: a thorough darkness unlike anything most of us will ever experience in the perma-glow of our electrified worlds. Despite the throngs of stars, the sky looked back black at us, and the ruddy ground absorbed what little radiant energy emanated from so far away. Richard's younger brother brought out the hurricane lamps, located some kerosene, set the wicks, and the yellow globes shown warmly though dimly for us all. We set the lamps here and there around the compound, each one illuminating a small circular world of its own. The older women stayed in the cooking hut, washing out pots and preparing for the next day's meal. Meanwhile, the children decided to sing.

One of the older girls—who had obviously sung in a church choir—led the kids in several hymns. The youngest children—Vera and a little boy, both toddlers—were strapped to the backs of their just-older siblings, a strip of cloth used as a cinch. A couple of older boys—Pius and Prince William—stood off to the side and behind, but they too took part in the singing. The tempo quickened, and Miranda, the leader, decided to start to dance. A dancing song—the kids form a circle, clap and sing, while the one whose name has been sung must enter the circle and dance her dance. More singing, much clapping. The lights flickered, and childish shadows became suddenly profound. It was as if the world centered on this place, at this time, where the children of this world were singing out their parts. One by one, the kids' names were called, and each one danced, even Pius. Nicolas sat off to the side, leaning against the building he had probably built, whose constituent bricks he had undoubtedly formed from the clay of this compound. The light shone on his big frame and his kind face. The older women talked quietly in the cooking shed. The rest of us let the children in us dance in the private dark of that evening.

We got up early the next day to leave Njavnyuy, despite repeated requests that we stay. We shook hands around, and Richard's mother grabbed Jill and gave her a big hug. Nicolas gave us a hand-made basket to take back with us, and one of Richard's brothers put a sack of new potatoes and cola nuts into the back of the taxi. It was a quiet ride back to Bamenda, but somewhere in the road dust I asked Richard if, in Lamnso, the name of his village had any particular significance. "Njavnyuy means, 'God shares,'" he said. After what we had seen, tasted, and touched in the village, I felt I understood.

THE MIND OF THE METAPHYSICIAN

RICHARD KENEFIC

As if the whole world  
were stored in the green  
meat of an uncracked pistachio,  
or rises on the breath of a peanut  
eating elephant. All these mono-  
unsaturated lipids to sip on. After  
meeting the concrete and now this  
juxtaposition of wires and jaw  
that caged my tongue behind  
ivory, like the green meat waiting  
in the dark beak of my gray  
parrot that says "eat me, eat me."  
Another witness to the obvious  
weighs in, as if my metastasis  
was a kind of edible fruit with  
a hard, bitter seed inside.



## GOODBYE.

SAVANNAH STEPHENS

This will hurt. I must rid myself of you. I mean to say don't take it personally. And I mean to say it's not me...it's you. I can't keep up the charade any longer. For a while now, in our moments together, I was not really there. I mean, of course I was "there," but I was dreaming of another. I was dreaming, even, of another me. A me without you, and I liked it. Now, we have had some good times, I admit, for you are smooth and easy. But all things smooth and easy are not best for us, are they? I don't want to just do what's convenient anymore. I have to do what's right. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm just going through another one of my phases, don't you? Well, I am not. I mean, I can feel it in my spirit when something is wrong. And I feel wrong. I have felt wrong. I'm wronging myself and you if we keep at it in this way. I have to be free. You have to change.

Remember when we were at that poetry joint and that guy, the guy with the voice, said that the butterfly is the most revolutionary thing on the planet? Well, then I thought, "oh how nice" because butterflies have always been my animal, you know that. But now I truly know what he meant. See, butterflies undergo this miraculous metamorphosis. Sure they were born these ugly, lumpy, fuzzy things that no one notices and no one wants to keep. But watch what happens when the little ugly thing make itself a cocoon. I've always wondered what they do in there. What are they thinking? Do they have to make themselves a nest and shut themselves off from the world because they're searching their souls? Are they looking for the answers like we all are?

Anyway, and hear me out, I know I can get carried away with the existentialist psychobabble, but I do have a point and never before have I been so clear. Thank God for clarity.

So the beautiful creature emerges and flies away, lightly, letting the wind carry it, trusting and believing in the splendor and strength of its wings to bear it from place to place. I want you to be that butterfly. I want you to find out who you are and have enough confidence to show the world the real you. That's why I am doing this. I know the real you and you are beautiful in your natural being. You are wonderful in your own right. But you don't see that and it's my fault. You have been trying to be something you're not and I let you. But I was blind then too and I enabled you. Forgive me. I should have never let this happen. I should have clung to truth like a child clings to his mama's breast. Like peanut butter clings to the roof of your mouth. Like wisdom clings to trees.

I used to think that we looked good together, but I hate the sight of myself with you now. And it's not the you, the real you, that I can't stand, but the you that this society has made you be. Can't you see? We're victims, you and I. Because of the place we live in. Because we have been oppressed. Because this is how my Mama did it, and how her Mama did it. Intergration.

Assimilation. Stagnation. Forget. Forget. Forget.

We have taught ourselves to lie to ourselves. We have come to believe, maintain, and even defend a fate and an identity that is not ours. We, and by 'we' I mean more than you and I in this space, but we as in everyone like you and me who have struggled silently. And being who we are, our struggle is often not heard by design because the guilt would be too much if they were made to realize what they have done to us. To our sanity. So they teach us and we in turn teach ourselves not to complain. Not to interrupt. Not to demand. We think we've come such a long way, but we are retreating now. Where are our fists now? Our unclenched hands have let go. We have let go of our voice. We have let go of our right not only to exist, but to thrive. We have let go of ourselves. And you might be wondering how this relates to you and me. This is Not a tangent (I know I have many). But seeing as how everything is everything, I have to tell you that I can't let you be with me if you are going to be like them. I can't be with you if you do not know where you are from. Even this big thing we call the struggle is as small as you and I. Revolution starts with self, remember?

You don't know who you are. I don't want this slick image. I don't want this glib replacement for the coiled and beautiful spirit that I know is there. And it's ever damaging. It burns, you know. In my soul and on my skin. It sizzles like acid. It is acid. I have the scars to prove it. See? Here's the burn from '96, right on my forehead. And just look at my shoulder. My lovely shoulder. Scarred by trying to tame you. I've had to fight myself to get to you.

And I can chuckle now as I remember the day my mama taught me to find this imitation of life appealing. And it's not like she meant to cripple me because she had more love than I could stand. I remember when she used to tuck me in and rub my nose lightly with her finger and say, "Good night, button...with the soft, soft nose." Even when I was too old to be tucked in, I had to let her. She would've exploded if she couldn't love. Mama had never led me astray like I know some mothers can do with their daughters. That's why it hurts so bad, you know? It pains me to swallow the fact that someone who I thought was all-knowing, who I worshiped like a god and tried so hard to please, was so lost. And she taught me her lost ways. She taught me the lost ways of almost every brown woman I knew in my childhood. Because they would all sing the same old song.

Why are Black women so strong in every way but this one? Why have Black women put up with this for so long? Why do we, Black women, hurt ourselves? Why must Black women always heed and never shout like we need to?

But, Mama. Mama, I thought, was so different. She was a smart woman. A take-no-shit woman. But in this, she was blind and in this, I find comfort. Only because I know now that she was human. That I can make a mistake now, because no one, not even Mama, is perfect. Do you wish that I was still blind? Do you wish that I was still that little girl holding my Mama's hand, believing everything I hear and adopting it for my own? Are you angry with me for finally saying what we both realized long ago?





WE CAN NOT GO WAY BACK  
TO THE GOOD OLD DAYS  
FRAND ANTHONY

Twenty Five Percent US  
People dream getting a  
Sleeping uninterrupted  
By bad dreams or noise  
Guantanamo dirty cells  
Black people have AIDS  
Twenty-four your hours  
daily White people now  
sleep in new psoriasis  
sore throats headaches  
vomiting incontinences  
These are side effects  
drugs a mental problem

## BIRDS BEES FIRE, BRIMSTONE

KRISTE PEEPLES

“I’m poor, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook, but I’m here. I’m here.” — Celie, *The Color Purple*

Instead of having a gentle mother-daughter conversation about the birds and the bees, I got a fire and brimstone sermon:

“You think this feeling is love, but it ain’t. Love comes from Jesus. Them little knuckleheads don’t want nothing but to ruin your life, and the only reason they come around *acting* like they like you, is because they want to get in your pants. They don’t *like* you. They don’t *want* you. And once they get what they want, after they’ve used you and taken something you can’t never get back, where will you be? They’ll leave you knocked up or knocked down somewhere in a gutter. Then what? Where you gonna go? You ain’t coming back here, because I’m *through* raising babies in *this* house. Them twenty seconds of sin ain’t worth a lifetime of trouble. You better find love in the Lord if you know what’s good for you, but apparently you don’t because you’re so hot to throw yourself down behind these little illiterate jail-bound idiots. And for what? Ten seconds of pleasure, think you know so much. Them boys don’t *want* you—them little ugly, nappy-headed rascals who don’t know no better than to scratch themselves in public. And for what? Five seconds of fun? They don’t *care* about you.”

Her sermon worked.

I listened to my mother’s guiding advice and somehow managed to dodge the evil clutches of teeming, godless, rabid hooligans who went wilding through the streets, dicks in hand—cocked and ready—looking to do their business on tender pre-teens like me. In fact, I steered clear of real relationships for years by choosing risk-free types who never required me to invest too much of myself: the endearingly sexless geek whose idea of a hot weekend was ordering in Chinese food and reading through a stack of obscure books on short-term loan from the library; the enigmatic foreign artist who suddenly heard the cry of his homeland soon as we started to get serious; the sweet-hearted borderline gay who kept my self-esteem on life support; the hazel-eyed radio guy who had never fallen out of love with his ex who shared my name; the cool, brooding musician who made sure I never got stuck carrying the really expensive equipment to his gigs; the pouty-mouthed jock who had nothing more to bring to the table than a fork and a plate. All told, none of them were without their charm, but none of them had any real staying power. I made sure of it. I’d been hardwired.

After all, men didn't mean me no good, did they?

Once I was safely out of my teens, and well beyond the reach of getting knocked up and thereby unnecessarily burdening my mother, she started asking why I wasn't seriously dating anyone and how come I was so hard on men.

*Well, have you met Mr. Wonderful yet? What about Mr. Right? How 'bout Mr. Right Now? A certain someone? A secret admirer? Any gentlemen callers? A sugar daddy? You mean to tell me ain't nobody calling? Maybe you're being too picky.*

As the dawn of my thirties began to break along time's horizon, my mother, sensing no change in the timbre of my man talk intensified her badgering by asking about the prospect of children. *I sure would like some grandbabies*, she'd say, trailing off in a voice melancholy and thick as a funeral dirge.

*What about the ones you've already got?* I'd ask, gently reminding her she was already a grandmother three times over. Well, she'd inevitably reply after accepting my condition of chronic manlessness as inoperable, *I don't blame you.*

I could hear her shrugging resignation and looking heavenward over the phone.

You know, she'd finally say, we never been lucky in love no how. I might not have known much, but I knew enough not to ask who she meant by we. Besides, she had absolutely no idea how steadily her hard-driving sermon had been echoing in my head, repeating on me all those years. They don't want you and they don't like you neither . . .

As an adult, I spent a long time feeling inadequate and ugly around men I liked. I always seemed to be too smart and dumb at the same time; able to leap to the head of my class in a single bound and foolish enough to think it mattered to anyone but me. Sometimes I'd have flashbacks of walking down my junior high school corridor, smiling shyly from behind my books at Kevin, the football and track star I secretly adored, only to have him point me out to his friends and make jokes at my expense. They laughed in my face.

*Ouch.*

But I'm not fourteen anymore, I remind myself. It's a new millennium and grown men don't act like impulsive, insensitive teenagers or indecisive, oversexed, well, teenagers. Generally speaking. Somewhat. I guess. But I've said it before, and for the most part I believe it to be true: if we are lucky, with help of a little time and temperance, we learn the important lessons that can't be gleaned from books. And I have had the good fortune to meet men and women who would help me debunk some of the long-cherished beliefs of my childhood, those flinty ideas so prized and passed down through the women in my family like purple hearts conferred for service in the Great War of Love.

Ultimately, my friends and lovers would teach me I didn't have to be a casualty of my own heart. Every date, fling, and flirtation *didn't have to be riddled with grief and dread*. It was all my choice. I won't say I was a quick study, but eventually it made sense.

And thankfully, so far there are two things I've come to know for sure about knowing myself and men:

1. Pleasure can last longer than five seconds; and
2. Not all men ain't shit.

## MILLENNIUM

PAUL PEKIN

"We can't let the terrorists win!"

No matter how bloody the day, television reporters always find someone willing to say that for them.

They should ask me. At the very least, I'd tell them who has not won.

That's what's running through my head when Pat and I, older married couple that we are, board the Blue Line Saturday evening, two days after the London subway bombings. There is a concert we want to see and to skip it would mean we have let . . .

But already I've chosen Saturday's concert over Fridays, identical programs that they are, and why did I do that? Because Friday would involve riding the trains in rush hour, and Saturday would not. I wonder what encouraged me to think that way?

Londoners have their "tube." We Chicagoans have the "El" as in "elevated," since, more often than not, you will find our trains running well above street level on elevated tracks. But our most heavily used trains do come underground in the Loop, and our most crowded stations are often right beneath our feet.

My theory on the terrorism business goes like this: The Blue Line first because it links up with O'Hare International Airport. Next, whatever happens to be circling the Loop on those elevated tracks (imagine train, platform and all crashing down on a crowded street). After that, take your pick.

I've always been in love with Chicago, my Chicago, always been in love with the lakefront, in love with the skyline, in love with Michigan Avenue, State Street and Wabash, in love with the colleges, the libraries, the museums, the theaters, the book stores, and the restaurants, even my own humble neighborhood, a mere fifteen minutes from it all.

And now we have the new Millennium Park.

Pat and I were a bit uncertain about the Millennium while it was being built. The idea seemed sound, to cover up the railroad tracks and parking garages on the east side of Michigan Avenue with parkland, but to move the Grant Park Music Festival into the noisy Loop, well, that didn't seem carefully thought out, and we had no hope at all for the new music pavilion, one of those Frank Gehry designs that cannot possibly be meant to suggest the ribbons and bows we attach to wedding-anniversary gifts but somehow this one really does.

All was forgiven when the park opened last year. Up close, we decided we should not have tried to judge a whole by any of its parts,

even when the most conspicuous of the parts is a enormous stainless steel bow. Now we could see the stage, large enough for a full symphony orchestra and chorus, now we could see the seating area which had been invisible from Michigan Avenue, now we could experience the "Great Lawn" where thousands of additional concert-goers might spread out on blankets and folding chairs beneath a great trellis of steel piping that draws everything together and shuts nothing out. Add the orchestra, add the sound system, add the roomy bathrooms (Pat insists I do add them), add the rest of the park, all its gardens, its fountains, its artwork, its walkways, and I would find myself writing the same brochure that someone else has already done better.

Instead, one year later, I find myself talking about trains.

At Logan Square, the Blue Line does travel beneath the earth for several stops, but no sooner does it leave our station than it rises right back up to rooftop level. Pat and I have a standing joke. She fears tunnels, I fear heights. If this train is going to stall, I prefer it to happen in the tunnel, Pat would rather take her chances upstairs. Tonight, we stay off that topic.

Not at once, but very soon, I become aware of a slender dark-skinned man with a salt and pepper goatee, and a seriously unsmiling face who looks somehow, well, foreign. He is alone, has several large carry-on bags between his legs, and holds what appears to be a cell phone in his hand. There is something about the way he stares at it, first pulling the antenna out, then pushing it back, then pulling it out again, that makes me uncomfortable.

Well, let's not be silly. Every second person in this car has a cell phone. Every fourth person is carrying luggage. Doesn't this train start at O'Hare? I say nothing to Pat. Last week we abandoned the train altogether when I noticed an set of untended luggage taking up two entire seats. "Who belongs to that luggage?" I asked. Nobody would claim it. Nobody even cared. Luckily, the next train was only five minutes behind.

So I watch the foreign looking man fiddle with his phone, thinking, if he does have a bomb, I won't even hear it go off. Then the phone rings, and he answers it and his face bursts into a smile. With that smile everything foreign about him melts away.

Suddenly he is as American as I am, and just as harmless.

Fifteen minutes later Pat and I are in the Loop. We stop at Dunkin' Donuts, pick up coffee and doughnuts, and carry them off to the concert. Life is good, we say, and so it is, even when, as we settle into our seats, I realize I've forgotten my artificial teeth and will have to gum this doughnut down. "Can't go anywhere with you," Pat says, which is what she always says when something is spilled or forgotten.

Sometimes I hear music well, other times my mind wants to drift. Clearly, too much stuff is going on my head. The first piece leaves no better impression than what I find in the program notes--that the composer has drawn his themes from the scores of old movies, one of

which, "Captain From Castile" sets me to thinking about the movie, a kind of a hokey historical romance based upon the conquest of Mexico, and then the conquest itself. Quite a story if you know your history. A handful of Spanish ruffians takes on an entire civilization and destroys it. Instead of listening to music, I find myself thinking of the Aztec empire and the sacrificial altars where thousands of living hearts were torn out with the aid of obsidian blades, and of the Spanish Inquisition, ready to burn anything that looked like a heretic at the stake. Which god had been less cruel? Is today's world better, or less, for what these people once did?

It's history. No one knows for sure. No one ever will know. We live and die and fall upon each other in hatred and ignorance or greed. I'm not saying this is the best way to listen to music, but like Popeye the Sailor, I am what I am. Meanwhile the people in front of us open a large picnic basket and settle down to a leisurely, a very leisurely meal.

"Look at that woman," Pat whispers,. "She keeps spooning it down!"

Pat is easily annoyed at concerts. She's taken to calling herself "the curmudgeonette," citing "the too-big man" and "the talkative family" and "the snoring woman" from previous years.

By intermission the meal finally is down, the sun as well, and a crescent moon hangs next to the Pittsfield Building--which shows up several times in Joseph Epstein's

marvelous short story collection, "Fabulous Small Jews." Colored lights play upon Mr. Gehry's great bow, giving it an air of mystery and purpose. All across the great lawn candles twinkle, shadows move, and there is the muted murmur of thousands quietly sharing the summer night.

They say Cortez had less than two hundred men when he conquered Mexico. They say Pizarro took down over ten thousand Inca warriors with even fewer men than that. So how many would it take to do this crowd? Somewhere beneath our feet, I think, is the north end of the Grant Park Underground Garage where anybody can park a small white van without so much as a question. I probably shouldn't mention that, but, just in case, remember, you first read it here.

You can't really describe music. All you have to do is look at a typical set of program notes and you will see this is so. Tonight's program is no exception. Happily, the second half, Ravel's Daphnis and Chloe suite, has a little story to go with it, and that can be told. Daphnis and Chloe are on an island with shepherds and nymphs and a goatherd. They dance, the goatherd dances, pirates attack, and the God Pan sets everything to rights while the chorus sings wordlessly (ooooaaa, ooooooaaaaaaa) and a young woman plays a flute solo so difficult one has to wonder what made the composer believe there would always be someone available to play it. So now I'm thinking of Ravel, and how he was too small or too fragile for service in World War I, and how he drove an ambulance instead, and how he later wrote a concerto for a one-armed pianist who had not been too small or too frail for front line duty, and how



he finally died, in my own lifetime, of a brain tumor, or something equally disturbing. No, this is not how you should be listening to a concert, but here in the heart of this great beautiful city, on a balmy summer evening with the Mr. Gehry's improbable design taking on a life of its own, with this woman I love at my side, and with the music finally reaching into me, it seems more than enough.

After the concert, the usual beat-the-traffic folks having fled before the final crescendo, the crowd seems reluctant to leave the park. People on the great lawn are finishing up their wine, folding blankets, talking softly, and flashing their digital cameras. Following the flow, we slowly move along the boardwalk that runs between the Lurie Garden and a shallow artificial brook. Lovers sit side by side, dipping their feet into the clear water, mummers appear in costume, performing some kind of a ritual dance, a little girl in a snow white dress glides ahead of her mother, a siren rises up and fades into the distance on Lakeshore Drive.

At Monroe, our train is almost empty. By the time it reaches Lake Street, standing passengers are crushed together in the aisles. By the looks of things, we seem to have picked up the remnants of a soccer crowd, tattooed young men in red Chicago Fire jerseys embracing their girl friends, also tattooed (sigh). with evident pleasure. White Sox fans are present too, looking a bit silent and glum, and I take this for a bad sign. Shoppers struggle with their packages, travelers on their way to O'Hare squeeze in with their bags. Rap music plays on someone's head-set. I keep my fingers crossed. Several weeks ago this very train, and every bit as crowded, stalled in the tunnel, somewhere short of Division. There would be a slight delay, an announcement told us. Necessary maintenance was being done on the tracks. ("I have to go to the bathroom," a woman wailed.)

No such problem tonight. When we come out of the tunnel and rise up above street level, I see my city running off in all directions, street after street, house after house, neighborhood after neighborhood. Here is where I live, where I have lived the last forty years, where, God willing, I will live till I die. Here live my people, most of whom have lives so unlike mine I cannot even imagine them, many of whom speak languages I can never hope to understand. We have so little in common we have it all in common. I suppose it is that way in London too.

All this terror stuff, should I even be writing about it while bodies are still being extracted on the other side of the world?

So let's just end like this.

At nine thirty or so, Pat and I are back in our living room in time for the WGN news. And just as I feared when I saw those glum White Sox fans on the train, my team has lost.



## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Frank Anthony** PhD, teacher, poet, essayist, is founder/president of New England Writers ([newenglandwriters.org](http://newenglandwriters.org)) and editor of *The Anthology of New England Writers*. His historical, autobiographical novel, *Terminus*, was serialized in his birth town, Breckenridge, Minnesota, in 1976.

Frank has published several collections of poetry: *24 Poems*, *Vermont Poems*, *That Special Voice*, *Poetry of the Unconscious*, *Beyond the Fruited Plain*, *The Magic Bench*, *The Amsterdam Papers*, *The Brussels Book*, *The Conch Chronicle*, *Down Gullah and Evening Vespers*.

His "Legendary" radio interviews are archived in Special Collections at Dartmouth's Baker Library.

Frank Anthony passed away March 10, 2006 from heart failure while visiting relatives in San Diego. His wife, Susan, will be compiling his published works for publication. Contact her at [newvtpoet@aol.com](mailto:newvtpoet@aol.com).

**Rane Arroyo** is a Chicago Puerto Rican poet who is the author of five collections of poetry. His latest projects have won him awards like the John Ciardi Poetry Prize, the Gwendolyn Brooks Prize for a Poem, and a nomination for ForeWord Magazine Poetry Book of the year; he is also the 2006 Cesar Chavez Visiting Writer. His latest book manuscript is called *Far West Of Eden* about his years among cowboys and actors.

**Kyla Berry** *Sassified. Scintillating. Soprano.* Okay, not really. Kyla Berry is a poet and she even has a button she wears to prove it. She likes alliteration, saying 'smooch' instead of 'kiss,' and often dreams about food.

This is her first officially published work, but she has self-published in the past, a cute little chapbook called *Maimed by Rock & Roll*. She looks forward to someday living in that NYC, being a professor, and secretly? A celebrity's celebrity and a poet's poet.

**Ryan G. Van Cleave's** most recent books include a poetry collection, *Imagine the Dawn: The Civil War Sonnets* (Turning Point Press, 2005), and a creative writing textbook, *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes* (Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003). He teaches creative writing and literature at Clemson University.

**Melvin Donalson**, an Associate Professor in the English Department at California State University-Los Angeles, is a published poet, fiction writer, novelist, and essayist. His work has appeared in various publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Upscale*, *the African American Review*, *Obsidian*, *The Independent Film and Video Monthly*, and *Chicken Soup for the African American Soul*. He edited the text, *Cornerstones: An Anthology of African American Literature* (1996), and his critical books explore aspects of American cinema: *Black Directors in Hollywood* (2003) and *Masculinity in the Interracial Buddy Film* (2006). His current study, *Hip Hop in American Cinema* is scheduled for publication in December 2.

**Kevin Griffin** work appears in *The Southern Review*, *Chelsea*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poems and Plays*, and *Poetry East*. U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Koser has selected his poems to appear in "American Life in Poetry" column.

**Bill Hemminger** teaches English and French at the University of Evansville. His poems have appeared in *Ruah*, *CaliforniaQuarterly*, and *Hopewell Review*; essays and stories of his have been published in *The Journal of African Travel Writing*, *Dominion Review*, *Présence Africaine*, and *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature & Environment*, among other journals. He was a 1994 winner of the Syndicated Fiction Writers prize. From 2004-2005 he was Fulbright Professor of Literature at the University of Yaoundé I, in Cameroon, Central Africa.

**Michael Hogan** is the author of several books including a well-known history of the Irish soldiers in the Mexican War. His poetry has appeared in the *Paris Review*, the *American Poetry Review*, and the *Colorado Review*. He lives in Guadalajara, Mexico.

**Mark Jenkins** received his MFA from Bowling Green State University. His poetry has appeared in *Faultline*, *Georgetown Review*, *Minnesota review*, and *Yalobusha Review*.

**Richard Kenefic** work appears in the *Natural Bridge* and *Briar Cliff Review*. He teaches engineering at Indiana Tech in Ft. Wayne.

**Kriste Peoples** currently lives and writes in Phoenix, Arizona where she is at work on a book of creative nonfiction. "*Birds, Bees, Fire and Brimstone*" is excerpted from that larger work.

**Paul Penkins** work has been published in *Best American Sports Writing*, *the Chicago Reader*, *The New York Press*, *Sou'wester*, *Other Voices*, *The MacGuffin*, *The South Dakota Review*, and many other markets. His nonfiction feature, "Extended Care," won a 1991 Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headline Club. Paul lives in Chicago where he once worked as a printer and later operated his own business. In addition, Paul has taught writing at Columbia College and the Art Institute of Chicago and worked as a police officer. Now retired, Paul remains active with stories currently appearing in the *MacGuffin* and *ParaSpheres*.

**Brittney Ray** is a native of Texarkana, Texas. She is currently a junior, English major, Creative Writing minor at Spelman College. Her work has been published in Spelman's online journal *L.I.N.K.E.D* as well as the AUC publication *Static*. She enjoys writing in all genres and plans to attend New York University after college to pursue her Masters in Creative Writing

**J.E. Robinson's** work appears in current issues of *The Mid-America Poetry Review* and the *Sierra Nevada College Review*.

**Savannah Stephens** was born in the wild, western state of Texas in 1983. Savannah writes: "I am a 2005 graduate of Spelman College and I am currently at Georgia State University pursuing a Master's degree in Public Administration/Non-Profit Management (quote what I say to my parent's friends). It's the truth, though, and I'm glad that I'm doing it. Two of my life's passions include writing for the soul and seeking justice for the disenfranchised (i.e, degree in Non-Profit Management= after-school program= our youth= bridges built).

Other things I love: independent film, solitude (at times), (in other times) conversation, using parenthesis, the smell of wood, green tea, and people.

Well, I only have thirty more words left, so why not use them in gratitude? Regularly, I thank God (for the existence), Mama (for the material), Opal Moore (for the facilitation), and FOCUS (for the opportunity)."

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