

# Firefly Ridge

LITERARY MAGAZINE

*Part I*

edited by Zelda Lockhart

Winter 2014



LaVenson Press  
Studios

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**Judge for the 2013 Women's Writing Award was Dawn Shamp**



[www.dawnshamp.com](http://www.dawnshamp.com)

**Dawn Shamp** is an **editor**  
and the author of the  
historical novel  
*On Account of Conspicuous*.

## Issue #1, Winter 2014



**Zelda Lockhart,**  
Editor

**Sophie Shaw,**  
Intern & Line  
Editor

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The winner of the 2013 Women's Writing Award for fiction is Virginia Ewing Hudson with her short story "Silo".



The winner of the 2013 Women's Writing Award for poetry is Teri Hairston with her poem "An Indiscretion".

***Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine** is an on-line publication produced twice yearly by LaVenson Press Studios. The magazine highlights the works of women writers who have taken LaVenson Press Studios workshops and women who have won the *Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine Writing Competition*.*

***From the Editor:** I conceived of Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine based on my philosophy that one hasn't finished her work until an audience receives it. Over the last 11 years I have taught countless women whose writing has stirred my soul, but whose work remains unpublished. When I'm frustrated I like to ask myself, "What can I do?" Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine is my answer to that question.*

### **Guidelines for Submissions:**

Submissions are only allowed from the revised final works of LaVenson Press Studios Workshop participants.

Electronic Submissions Only at: <http://lavensonpressstudios.com/firefly-ridge-magazine/>

Please upload your submission as a .doc or .docx file.

Include a cover page with the title of your work, your name, address, phone number, email address the date and title of the LaVenson Press Studios workshop you attended or the workshop taught by Zelda Lockhart that you attended.

Your manuscript: Be sure to type the same title of your work on the manuscript as appears on the cover page. Do not print your name or any identifying information that would link the manuscript to you on any manuscript pages. Number all pages.

Memoir and Fiction submissions are limited to 20 double spaced pages, 12 point type, one inch margins.

Poetry submissions are limited to five poems of no more than 2 pages, single-spaced and double-spaced poems are accepted. Must use 12 point type, one inch margins.

Simultaneous submissions welcome. Submit unpublished work only; please notify us if work is accepted elsewhere. Reading fee of \$15. Only one submission per entry.

Multiple submissions from one contestant are accepted, but each must be submitted as a separate entry and requires a separate entry fee of \$15.

The \$15 entry fee for contest includes a \$15 discount on one LaVenson Press Studios workshop (limited to one \$15 discount per contestant regardless of the number of entries): must provide confirmation-receipt email with registration.

**Deadline for Submission April 19th 2014, winner announced May 17th.** Each Winner in the categories of Poetry & Prose will receive **\$300**, publication in the and e-publication versions of Firefly Ridge Magazine, and an invitation to read at **LaVenson Press Studio's Open Studio Events**.

## Contributors

### Part I



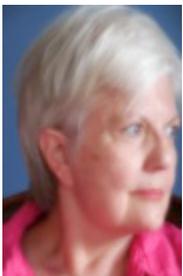
**Teri Hairston** is a poet and fiction writer her writing accomplishments include: 2005 winner of the Salem College Rondthaler Award in both Poetry and Fiction, 2005 winner of a John Woods Scholarship in writing to study abroad in Prague; the scholarship included a 30 day stay in Prague where she attended Charles University studying creative writing under the tutelage of Award winning Author Arnost Lustig, a Holocaust survivor. She won honorable mention in the 2005 Sue Sanieel Elkind Poetry Contest and her poem, "The Product" is published in the 2005 spring edition of *Kalliope, A Journal of Women's Literature and Art*. Her first published poem, "The Perfect Cup" appears in *Niederngasse* an International e-zine which is translated in German, Italian, French and Spanish. Her poems "Illiterate" and "Buzzard Luck" are published in the 2006 volume of *Cutthroat; A Journal of the Arts*. In February 2013 her poem "A Love Song" was featured as the Poetry in Plain Sight Winston-Salem Poem.



**Virginia Ewing Hudson** has published essays, stories, and poems in *The Colton Review*, where she won first prizes in 2013 for a short fiction piece, *Ready*, and a poem, *Rise From Your Pedestal*. "Silo," was a finalist for the 2010 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, and is an excerpt from a novel titled *What Men Do* written that same year. Virginia's writing is greatly influenced by her experience as a professional cellist, and music often plays a crucial role in her stories. She is currently completing a final revision of *What Men Do*, and seeking representation.



**ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS** has a PhD in English, African and African-American Studies and Women and Gender Studies from Duke University and is author of two acclaimed collections of poems. *Good Hair Gone Forever* and *101 Things That Are Not True About the Most Famous Black Women*. Find out more about Alexis at [www.alexispauline.com](http://www.alexispauline.com)



**Dewitt Hamilton** is a native of the NC Piedmont. She attended Hollins College, now University. In addition to personal essays, she writes picture books for children, garden articles on plants, gardening and garden design. She is currently working on a memoir titled *The Red Clay Digger* about overcoming the self-deprecation that came with being raised by a narcissistic mother who was the daughter of a North Carolina tobacco farmer but wanted to be seen as a southern belle.

# An Indiscretion



**by Teri Hairston**

*I told him I wanted to see her pussy*

*if it was satin-lined, gold plated  
if the lips were dipped in chocolate,*

*it must come with attachments  
that snap on to make it function  
Extraordinarily*

*it can't be just like mine  
sometimes too tired to open*

*because of days filled feeding  
children, cleaning house,  
cooking supper, doing laundry, dishes*

*working to supplement his income  
in order to help pay bills, being faithful,  
being strong when he is weak, discouraged,  
or downtrodden by life, nursing him to health  
in sickness, remembering to make special  
birthdays, holidays...until death do us part*

*I wanted to see the pussy so spectacular  
that it made him forget  
his promise*

## *Silo*



**by Virginia Ewing Hudson**

Rooster crossed the dry grass to the veterinary clinic. He wished he were barefoot instead of trudging along in heavy work boots, but if he got inside the Millers' silo, he'd need good leather soles; uncured shucks had sharp edges. He slowed, trying to decide what to tell his father, what to say that wouldn't draw more than a sneer or make trouble for his mother, something that would get Doc on his side so he could work at the Millers' for the day. He stopped to watch his father moving past the clinic window, back and forth, like a wind-up figure. Might be best to tell the simple truth, tell Doc what his mother had said through the screen door as he was leaving: "Don't go inside the silo." She had clutched her flowered robe, and her hair stuck out funny from lying in bed. "I don't have the energy to argue about it," she'd said.

Rooster poked his head in the back door of Doc's office. "Dad, Mom says I can't do the silo job this year. Some kid broke his arm climbing in at the Johnstons'."

A hound dog lifted its head in one of the cages. Doc thumbed a label onto a test tube. "You're eleven years old, you going to let your mother make a pansy-ass of you?" He slid the cylinder into its rack.

Rooster grinned at the word "ass." "Course not. But she said ..."

Doc lifted the black wall-phone from its cradle, mocking as he fingered the dials, "She said, she said."

Rooster's stomach gurgled; his breakfast wasn't sitting well. He heard the phone ringing through the pinprick holes of the earpiece and knew exactly the jangly sound it made across the lawn in the kitchen. His mother would wipe her hands on a dishtowel, getting ready to answer.

Doc palmed the mouthpiece. "Go to the Millers," he said. "I'll take care of this."

Rooster kicked a stone down the road, one foot and then the other. The early morning already held the heat of the day. He was glad to leave the clinic where his father was always working, and the house, with his mother inside not feeling well. She acted more afraid for him lately, making him wear a jacket when it wasn't cold, telling him not to go too far when he went out to play. Now she was telling him not to get in the silo, which he'd done since he was eight. Three years! Nothing bad had ever happened.

*(Continued Next Page)*

## Silo (Cont'd)

The lane to the Millers' was two dirt tracks with grass down the middle. Tommy ran out of his house when Rooster was almost there, and dashed off toward the barn, shouting, "Race!"

Rooster caught up, dove as though sliding for home plate, and grabbed the ragged hem of Tommy's jeans. Tommy squirreled around, snagging a handful of shirt; they rolled together, a scramble of arms and legs.

Tommy's father pulled up, the rusty mudguards of his pickup rattling. He showed stained teeth, patting the side of the truck out the window. "All right, you two. Let's get going."

The boys jumped on the rear fender, and Tommy slipped over the tailgate like a fish into a boat.

"Butt wipe," Rooster said, legging over.

"Your mother's ass," Tommy shot back. He sat down on a pallet of sacks that took up half of the truck bed. "Oh. Sorry. I forgot."

"Screw you," Rooster said. He wished he could forget about his mother being sick. He had no idea what was wrong: something with her breasts. It was all supposed to be a big secret, hush, hush. There would be surgery soon, that much he knew.

Rooster turned his face to the wind, bracing his arms on the cab as the truck jolted toward the dairy barn. His mother had looked so pale behind the screen door that morning. Grandpa Frank had died suddenly up in Nebraska a month ago, for no good reason. At least she was alive. Whatever was wrong, his mother had a fighting chance. He thought about what she'd said, but Leland Miller was paying two bucks for a few hours of work, and Doc would disapprove if he gave in to her.

An enormous wagon beside the silo bristled with corn shucks and field-grass. A fat pipe ran up the side of the gray tower. Rooster could see the vacuum-blower at the base of the pipe, near the back of the wagon, ready to suck in plant matter and shoot it to the top, dropping it down through the domed roof. Leland's long-handled rake leaned on the wagon. He would open the tailgate and use the rake to pull the harvest leavings toward the vacuum.

The pickup shook to a stop. Rooster and Tommy stood on the wheel-hubs to jump down.

"Hold on," Mr. Miller yelled, clanking his door open, leaving it hanging wide. "Got something new this year." He climbed in with the boys. "This'll keep the silage from rot." He lifted one of the sacks from the pallet Tommy'd sat on, and propped it upright against the others. He cut through the thick paper with his pocket knife, then dug in with a tin flour scoop, reaching across the gap between the truck and wagon, scattering a zigzag of yellowish powder so that it sifted down into the chopped cornstalks.

"Cover everything you can reach, just like that," he said. "Then I'll move the truck so you can get to the rest." As he handed them each a scoop, Rooster felt a familiar envy: Tommy's dad had confidence in them; his own father would've said something about their scrawny arms not being up to the task.

Rooster dipped and flung, hollering when his powder-mark reached farther than Tommy's. Powder slewed through the air, drifting back and making him sneeze.

Leland was lining up the vacuum near the back of the truck. "Good job, boys!" he called.

When they'd covered the whole wagon-load, Rooster and Tommy sprinted for the barn.

*(Continued Next Page)*



## Silo (Cont'd)

The dark cavern stank of piss and manure. It was quiet, unlike milking time when the place jostled with cattle. Rooster hopped over the feeding trough, ducked into the chute connecting barn to silo, and skittered up the ladder beside the silo doors. The doors, stacked one over the other, were all closed except for a single black rectangle, a ways up, left open for them. Even the bottom door, usually disgorging fodder near the feed trough, was bolted shut for the filling.

Rooster's feet clanged on the rungs. He stopped for a moment to hear the echo. Constellations leaked through old nail holes where the silo chute climbed beyond the barn roof; the smell of sun-baked tin curled in his nose. He knew that if he went all the way to the top, he could poke his head out into the day and see the patchwork of fields and roads, cows grazing, birds swooping over the Millers' barn and house, cottonwoods clustering along the bends of the creek.

"Hey!" Tommy yelled from below. "I'm waiting down here."

"Okay, okay," Rooster said. "You'll get your turn."

When he reached the open doorway, he stood on the ledge then jumped six feet down into twilight, landing on the heap of what was left from last year's harvest. The moldering odor of fermentation engulfed him. He calmed a jiggle in his stomach, thinking: See, Mom, I'm fine. Far above, one triangle opened in the dome, allowing an edge of blue sky around the black moon-face of the vacuum pipe's mouth. Faint stars sprinkled the blue, unveiled by the gloom within the thick-blocked cylinder. Rooster knew that the sky looked blue from all the light bouncing around, but that the stars were always there. Being in the silo was like being at the bottom of a deep well: the daytime sky turned to night.

Tommy dropped beside him. Rooster grabbed his friend's shirt and stuffed a handful of straw down the neck hole.

"Stop it!" Tommy said, squirming away.

Rooster sneered in the darkness. "Pansy-ass."

He heard the engine fire up and the vacuum roar; wind came down from the roof. He backed against the brick wall as the first rain of gray-green shucks rattled in. The air was quickly awash in flying grass; grit covered Rooster's face and got between his teeth. He pulled up his bandanna and kept to the side. Every little while there was a pause in the downpour. That's when Rooster and Tommy darted in, scuffling, flattening the pile with their boots. Their job was to spread all the shucks and leaves to the sides, packing it down so the silo would fill evenly. It was a dance Rooster knew well. He snorted as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. "You look like a doofus," he said.

*(Continued Next Page)*



## Silo (Cont'd)

Tommy had grass in his hair and twigs dangling from his tee-shirt. Then Tommy gagged, clutching at his. "Cut it out," Rooster said, tightening the bandanna over his nose, trying to ignore the bitter taste on his tongue, how his eyes were beginning to sting. His throat thickened. He hacked, and spat. Silage poured in, the crashing fall mounding high. Tommy kicked at the pile, wheezing like an old man. Rooster stomped around, laughing a loud, barking laugh, then couldn't pull air back in through his bandanna. The material was thick with paste. The back of his neck went cold as he strained, his breath a thin keening. It had never been this bad in the silo before. Something was wrong.

He yelled, "Mr. Miller!" jumping for the door. The opening was too high. He banged on the silo wall, dull thumps that went nowhere. Tears streamed from his burning eyes. We're going to die, he thought, watching Tommy flail at the bricks beside him, like a kid having a tantrum.

Rooster fell to his knees and began shoveling armfuls of silage under the doorway. Tommy's elbows bumped, helping. They pushed and piled, coughing in the clattering wind. They climbed the heap and leapt, but still couldn't reach the opening.

"Get on my back," Rooster said, his voice grating. He hunched over and held out his palms for foot-holds. Hands and knees clambered up; heels dug into his shoulders as Tommy pushed off and caught hold of the ledge. Rooster grabbed his friend's feet and drove him the rest of the way. Then he fell back into the flood. He sobbed just once, "Mom," as the air clawed and his vision tunneled.

The roar of the vacuum ceased; a last fall of chaff blanketed Rooster. Everything was black, but he heard Leland shouting through the quiet, then the grind of bolts being hurried from the bottom door. Layers of silage shifted; hands grabbed his ankles, slid him out in a flow of chopped cornstalks, and dragged him across the barn floor into the yard.

Sunlight warmed Rooster's skin, and his closed eyelids glowed red. He gulped air stinking of diesel exhaust. When he opened his eyes, Leland was bending over him. "Christ a'mighty, boy. You gave me a scare."

Rooster's stomach heaved, and he rolled over, sliding a string of puke onto the stubbled ground: cornflakes and milk. Leland caught his arm, stopping him from falling into the mess. "Okay, I've got you," he said.

Leland helped him into the shade of the barn where Tommy was, then brought water from the cistern. He gave a cup to each boy, then dampened his handkerchief and wiped Rooster's face. While he did the same for Tommy, Rooster tipped cool tin to his lips, swishing water through his teeth, spitting grime, splatting the dirt. He swallowed a second time, feeling the column of cold all the way to his stomach.

"I'm going to the house to call your father," Leland said. "You boys stay right here."

Rooster leaned back on the weathered boards of the barn and watched the truck hustle away. The world seemed over-bright. "That was a close call," he said. His voice was still raspy, his throat on fire.

"Yeah," Tommy said. His voice sounded even worse. He had yellow in the corners of his mouth. "We were lucky."

Rooster didn't say anything. Tommy would be dead if he hadn't been there. Rooster wondered what his father would say, though. Probably that it was their fault somehow. He blew gunk from his nose and drank more water, trying to rinse away the horrid taste of the yellow powder.

It wasn't long before Leland's truck rumbled back to the silo, Rooster's father close behind in his sedan. A wad churned in Rooster's throat when he saw Doc's big face through the windshield. The two men strode over, his father thick-necked next to Tommy's dad. Doc loomed over Rooster. "You okay?" His voice was strident in the quiet beside the barn.

Rooster tried to sit up straight. "Course I am."

Doc tilted Rooster's head with his thumb, looking him over. Then he went to the back of Leland's pickup truck. "This the stuff you used on the silage, Leland?"

*(Continued Next Page)*

## Silo (Cont'd)

“Yeah. New and improved.” Leland’s eyes darted at Rooster.

Doc scraped residue from a triangle-shaped label on the top bag and traced the words there with one finger. “You read the package?”

Leland glanced away. “It’s safe for cows, I know that. Biodegradable.”

“Well it’s not degraded yet,” Doc snarled.

Rooster flinched as Doc’s knuckles flashed out and struck Leland in the face. “It’s poison,” Doc said. “You almost killed my son.”

Leland crumpled to the ground, one hand on his jaw. Tommy scrambled over to him while Doc scooped Rooster up and carried him to the car. Rooster’s head joggled, and his heart beat fast. It was strange being in his father’s arms. He looked up into Doc’s face, trying to see if his father was angry at him, too.

The crease between Doc’s eyes squeezed white around the edges. He loaded Rooster in like he would a sick sheep, and slammed the door. Out the window, the Millers were getting into their truck. Rooster wished Leland would look over; he wanted to nod, or wave, something to let Leland know he was all right.

Doc got in, keyed the ignition, then turned the steering wheel, hand over hand. “Leland told me how you got Tommy out,” he said. Then his voice went hard. “You could’ve died in there, and what good would that’ve done you?”

Rooster watched the Millers’ fields go by. He’d saved Tommy’s life. In the swirling chaos of the silo, he’d gotten his friend out. His head ached as the Buick barreled over the bumps in the lane. “Maybe Mom was right,” he said.

Doc stopped to let a tractor and two trucks pass before turning onto the rural highway. Rooster could see the clinic and house from there. Doc flicked his lighter. “Is that what you think?” He sucked quick puffs; smoke streamed out the wing window. “You had a job to do. Be sure to get the two dollars from Leland. He owes you for the full day, regardless.”

“Why’d you hit him?” Rooster said. “He didn’t do anything.”

Doc’s eyes flashed, piercing. “You got that right. He should’ve done his homework on that preservative.”

At the house, Doc held him by the shoulder on the front porch, dusting him off all over with his other hand, rough, almost like a spanking. Then he propelled Rooster to the living room sofa.

“I’m all right,” Rooster said. “Just maybe hungry. I threw up my breakfast.”

“You stay here,” Doc said, heading down the hall. “I’ll get you something.”

*(Continued Next Page)*

## Silo (Cont'd)

Whenever he was sick, Rooster always rested in the living room, but he really shouldn't sit there in his dirty clothes. He untied his work boots, listening to his parents' voices from the kitchen. His mother sounded shrill and panicked. "I told him ..."

Doc interrupted. "Yeah, you told him. If it was up to you, he'd be in silk britches sipping tea." For a moment there was only the quiet clink of dishes. Rooster tensed, wondering what the next sound would be. Then Doc said, "Oh come on, you know what I mean." Doc's boots clomped, then the back door opened and closed, and the house lightened.

Rooster's mother brought lemonade and a ham sandwich with lettuce and mustard, just the way he liked. Her dark curls were damp from the shower. She was wearing her yellow cotton dress, and Rooster could see the lace of her slip and the whiteness of her skin as she bent to feel his face. It didn't seem real that something was wrong inside of her, that a doctor would soon take a scalpel and make cuts there.

Rooster perched on the soft velvet of the sofa, holding his plate carefully. They didn't usually eat in the living room. Heavy blue curtains framed the tawny pasture across the street, holding in the still air.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said, breathing her scent of shampoo and talcum. It made his head ache even more. He wanted to say that he'd been a hero, so she could be proud of him, but then she'd know how bad it had been inside the silo.

"Next time you listen to me, you hear?" Her voice quivered in a way that made Rooster shrivel inside. She picked up his dusty boots and carried them away.

Rooster leaned over for a bite. The mustard was tart on his tongue. Doc had been mean to his mother because of him. He was sorry, but it was her own fault. She shouldn't be so protective. He chewed, letting the mustard cover the bitter taste from the silo, listening to soft sounds rustling from the kitchen.

He heard silverware in the sink, then a quiet "whumph," and then nothing. He froze on the sofa; he was sure that if he got up and went into the other room, he would find her in a heap on the floor.

He forced himself to stand. "Mom?" he called. His head throbbed as he went down the hallway.

She was sitting in her armchair by the back window, gazing across the August grass. Rooster laid his hand on her shoulder, her bones close under the yellow of her dress. Her slim fingers came up and covered his dirty, jagged nails, holding him there.



---

*silver*

by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

*for some specific strands of my hair*

of bullets  
of hidden tea service  
of frightened fish  
of school

look at you strong  
strung in this great blackness  
like moon over river  
bright bridge cable over time

you are made  
of parts of me  
so sharp  
so true  
so terrifying

you patch of breakthrough  
razorwild  
you exposed vibration

ring.



# *Journal on the Making of an Autobiography*



**by DeWitt Hamilton**

Today I am sixty-two years and eighteen days old. Procrastination shadows my existence. Today, I managed to spend hours (like four) trying to find a quote from Hammurabi about being a powerful king and yet in the years of his life counting only fifty-four happy days. I never found it.

For my class I must create an autobiography containing one page for each year of my life with a photograph and three events from each year. The autobiography was due last May, I think, I do not have the luxury of procrastination. I have four days to complete eight collages, an originating circle containing photographs and names of people I have conversations with once a week.

Suzanne, my old friend, and I collected photographs and memorabilia for the autobiography when she was here visiting in May. I was really glad to have help, especially from someone who was familiar with my life.

I remember a poem from Emily Dickinson: "I did not stop for death so he stopped for me." Or maybe it's, "He kindly stopped for me." Somewhere in my being, I think that if I procrastinate, I will not die, because I will never be finished.

The procrastination. I overheard my mother say to my first grade teacher, "Miss Salisbury, she piddles and wastes time," implying I was (am) slow. Okay, it's a story I made up, but I believe it.

Today, I outdid myself. I planned where I could grow flowers on my driveway since there is no sun anywhere else. Classic procrastination.

Even now, I have not picked up the photo album and begun working on the pages of it.

I think I don't want to look at my life, because I think I've done so many unkind and embarrassing acts. I watched a biography of Judy Garland last week. She was treated with cruelty, never given a chance to develop self-esteem, constantly used to make money for greedy, horrid men. I have no talent like hers, but I think I was treated much the same; always being told what was wrong with me so I developed no self-assurance. Sometimes I do things that may require great self-assurance or may be a result of no self-esteem, I don't know which.

I don't know why this autobiography must be written here in the basement, underground, out of the way. It is good, though, to be writing again. It feels good. I think I can get there from here.

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## Contributors

### Part II

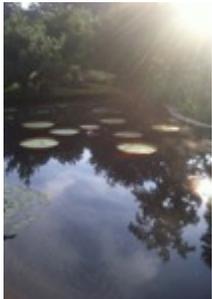


**Joanna Haymore** graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a [Masters in Occupational Therapy](#) in 1994. She is a Registered Movement Therapist with the [International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association](#) and a licensed massage therapist NCBMBT #637. Ecologist Thomas Berry inspired her work as a creative editor and writer for the [The Ecozoic Reader: Wisdom of Women](#). She is currently working on her forthcoming novel, *Through Eula's Eyes*.



Photo by Andrea Wood

**Vimala Rajendran**, 54, is a mother of three grown children. She learned to be an advocate for issues related to women's and children's welfare from her parents from an early age in India. During Vimala's three decades in the USA, she has helped promote healthy and local food issues, breastfeeding, prevention of violence against women and children, fair wages, media literacy etc. Vimala has degrees in Political Science, Early Childhood Education and Educational Media Technology. She is the co-Founder and current Board President of The Peoples Channel and Durham Community Media. As the owner/chef of Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, Vimala manages a micro-loan funded, successful restaurant that is a popular community gathering space. She is currently working on her first book of stories and recipes.



**Joanne Udo Schmitt**: I am 89 years old this year and have been writing journals, essays and pieces for the church newsletters, etc. since 1973, in Japanese and English. I was given a certificate to teach English language by the Ministry of Education, Japanese Government in 1946, after I completed my major in English Lit. Japan was engaged in war since the 1930s period to 1945. I loved to write both in Japanese and English since high school years. I read most of the translated classics in Chinese, Greek, German, English, Russian and American while growing up. I loved to browse around in old used book store in Japan. I have recently finished my memoir *Out of the Cocoon*, which chronicles my life growing up in Japan in the 1920s – 40s and my life after World War II. I now live in Cary, NC.



**Andrea E. Woods Valdés** is a Durham based dancer/choreographer and associate professor or dance at Duke University. Born in Philly, former resident of Brooklyn, lover of Cuba and citizen of the world, Woods finds inspiration in dance, music, art, folklore and life from the African Diaspora. Thank you to Zelda for pushing (and shoving) us all toward the little light that wants to shine. .she is currently working the narration for her 2014 dance/music folk opera titled, "Grace-May B. Brown". Details [www.SOULOWORKS.com](http://www.SOULOWORKS.com)



The photograph *Lilly Pads* that accompanies the story *Out of the Cocoon* is by **Alex Lockhart**. She is a 12 yr. old, avid photographer and young film maker. Lockhart's work has been exhibited at the Durham Public Schools Board of Education Building, and at the North Carolina State Fair.

## Through Eula's Eyes (an excerpt from a novel)



by Joanna Haymore

When I was young, I found a book about a girl with a mental illness, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. I read a short bit, and took it back to the school's library, unsettled and scared, like I had taken the first step for crossing a creek onto a big stone that wobbled because it didn't have a secure bottom.

### The Graveyard

I held on to the directions the chaplain gave me to the graveyard in Morganton where my grandmother Bessie was buried. My hand constricted, scared that the wind from an open window would catch the code words that led me to her, and scatter them, streaming behind my Volvo on the interstate. I had taken the old newspaper clipping with the stark picture of rows of anonymous graves linked by chains and called the chaplain at Morganton, who'd inspired the newsworthy article. It was true. Bessie, my grandmother, was buried in Potter's Field at the Morganton Asylum. He gave me proof, Bessie's row, and the grave number, apologetic that despite efforts to raise money, most graves still had no name markers, just numbers on metal tags hung on chains as the only identification for the sixteen hundreds souls, unclaimed by family members.

Morganton was never a place in my Mama's mind, only a name, synonymous with inexpressible sorrow: a vague faraway prison that had captured her mother's life and snuffed it out by the time she was twelve. I knew its look on her face. Mama, as strong as she was, had moments when her vision would be far, far away, and a pervasive sadness would overwhelm me. I unknowingly traveled with her on her trajectory into that world without guideposts. She'd stop in mid-stride or mid-thought and simply be gone. I could tell she was seeing something, but if I asked, she'd shrug and life would move on. We'd keep cleaning, or cooking, or canning, or whatever was our task, as if nothing had happened.

Once I saw a copy of the newspaper article, I wanted to fly to my grandmother, to her frail bones, tucked into the oldest of cemeteries in the asylum. Mama had nothing of her mother Bessie's, not even the comfort of a funeral for a twelve-year-old, only the stark words, "Your Mama is dead up in Morganton," and eventually Mama died without her hurt soothed, and I carried it inside me as an ache so deep, so familiar, I didn't know how to separate myself from it.

In my imagination, I clearly saw a rocking chair by the window in the ward of the insane asylum where Granma Bessie sat, mourning the loss of her family. I gripped my steering wheel deliberately, and moved closer to the hospital at sixty miles an hour.

When she was alive, Granma Bessie's frail body glued itself to the confines of the chair, so as to not upset the wardens in charge of her care. Nodding her head in rhythm with the rocking of the chair, frozen back muscles constricted to deaden the pain that had already shattered her chest—there was an empty hole where her heart once beat, where Mama's head had rested before Granpa Tom took her baby away.

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## Through Eula's Eyes (Cont'd)

Granma Bessie's singular comfort was sitting in the rocking chair by the window looking East towards home. Hour by hour, she occupied the rocking chair, fearful that if she called too loudly for her missing baby, she would be deprived of the sunlight from the window and sent into the basements wards, into the bowels of the hospital, along with the dozens of other screaming, disconsolate women who did not inhabit their souls.

I hoped that Granma Bessie had been cared for by a kind nurse, Elizabeth I'd call her, who understood Bessie's pain. I hoped my pretend, compassionate nurse's hand rested on Bessie's shoulder and when Bessie looked up, her eyes were not vacant. I hoped Elizabeth did not have to exclaim in dismay, "Oh Bessie, where have you gone?"

My mama was birthed in the old surgery room in the insane hospital. From hospital records I had learned that in the thirteen years Bessie lived in the hospital, she was granted one visit away for nine days, signed out by Tom, her husband, fifteen months after Mama was born.

Until then, the hospital nursing staff helped Granma Bessie care for her baby inside its walls, and Mama was with her until she was old enough to wean. Then the hospital staff sent a letter to Tom, offering to foster Mama to a family nearby in Morganton. It was hospital policy, unless the family wanted the baby. I imagined that my nurse, Elizabeth, secretly planned to be the one to take Mama and raise her as her own. I told myself that Elizabeth had promised Bessie, that if she got well, she could leave the asylum and come stay with them, because Elizabeth loved her too.

But my imaginary nurse didn't get to adopt Mama or give Bessie a new life outside the asylum. Given a home more kind, less harsh, the bright spots of joy I sometimes saw in Mama's eyes, might have been there more often. Instead, Mama was blunt with me that a woman's life was about pain. I hated it. I rebelled, and ran away to the other side of the country to put distance between me and Mama.

I hedged decisions, fearful I'd end up the same as Granma Bessie if I stepped onto the wrong stone. I leaned towards doing what I knew would give me a reward, rather than risking something daring that my heart wanted. In college, I studied art, but couldn't make myself do art. I married after college, because I knew I could make a home with Richard, not because he was the love of my life. That trust, that I could step with surety and know that if I fell I'd either swim or climb back onto the stones, was missing.

Bessie's only trip home to the mountains of Cross Vine was the day her sister, my great-aunt Eula, waited outside the hospital under the trees, admiring the tall, fancy building named Avery, the likes of which she'd never seen before. My grandfather Tom impatiently marched up the steep granite stairs and disappeared inside the massive double wooden doors of the building to retrieve Granma Bessie and Mama. Once they were on their way back to Cross Vine, the only time Tom spoke to Granma Bessie was with a mean, hard look to his square face. He said that unless she could act right and keep house properly, he'd send her back to the asylum and give Mama to her sisters to raise up.

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## Through Eula's Eyes (Cont'd)

Aunt Eula said Bessie tried really hard, but within a week, the pot on the stove blackened while she hauled in water from the well for washing clothes, filling the house with smoke. The Irish potatoes for dinner were burned to a crisp and Frank and Mama, and baby Alice, were crying, snot dripping with diapers full when Tom got back from the fields. Aunt Eula arrived before him, but did not have time to clean up the mess. He harshly set Bessie down and told her straight up, she was done nursing my mother and he meant to make good on his threat to send her back to the asylum to stay for good.

Granma Bessie fell on cold, wet knees, her skirts and apron soggy from spilling the water buckets. She begged for forgiveness, pleaded for another chance to do better. He turned his face from her pitiful cries and went to the shed, brought back a length of rough-edged, scratchy tobacco twine rope to tie her to the heaviest of the straight back kitchen chairs so he wouldn't have to watch her to prevent her from putting the baby to her breast. She sat roped all night, crying and screaming, imploring mercy from the God that abandoned her to Tom's meanness.

For three days, the chair vigil continued as she bellowed and bawled, but he didn't relent. Her breasts got hot and stung, swollen with milk that hurt so much she thought her chest would explode. She started to get feverish all over, so Tom got on his knees and drained her breasts with his mouth, sucking and spitting the milk into a jar that he then poured off the porch into the dirt.

My Volvo clung to the highway on its own, while I drove resolutely oblivious to the road, consumed by Granma Bessie's sad life. I wondered what I might say to her, when I stood over her grave.

The exit to Morganton put me onto Sterling Road. I steered the car to the right to the stop sign off the exit ramp. Not far, on the left, was a quaint, tattered-looking garden shop. I stopped to buy my grandmother a gift—flowers for her grave. I wondered, when my grandmother died in 1938, if the hospital had a chaplain say words over her, or if the body they buried had no more significance than the life it had held.

I wanted yellow roses, with petals flush in fragrance, like the old-timey bush that I remembered from Aunt Eula's yard. On the dirt paths of the shop I found naturalized roses; the Lady Banks in stalk form without flowers. The only blooming roses left were miniature one gallon pots. Disappointed, but not surprised, I picked up one with multiple small yellow blossoms and carried it to the checkout.

Back in the car, I repeated the code words the chaplain had given me to the cemetery at what was now called Broughton Hospital. He called it Potter's Field: drive past Enola Road to the next turn on the left; Broughton Road, uphill past the buildings, beyond the parking lots, past the old greenhouse. Park and find the identifying information I was given: Bessie's row and grave number, stamped onto a metal tag, suspended by a chain that bound Bessie to the other unclaimed souls.

Once I turned onto the grounds of the hospital, the still-functioning asylum's elegant nineteenth-century Kirkbride architecture and the property's size impressed me with its grandeur, almost as big as Biltmore in Asheville.

It must have shocked and intimidated a simple country woman like Granma Bessie. The steps to the main building called Avery led to double heavy wooden doors. The main part of the building was five stories high with a domed top. I stopped the car just to stare, realizing this was where my grandmother had lived. She had entered its massive front doors only twice; once to be admitted, pregnant with Mama, and once to return without Mama. My hands shook on the wheel.

Double wings, four stories high, spread to the sides, occupying the high point of the property. In the Kirkbride plan of the times, the better a hospital patient behaved, the closer they got to live in wards near the center of social life. The basement wards of Avery Building, with low ceilings and little light, were reserved for patients that had no control of their faculties. I prayed my grandmother was never sent there. The view of the mountains from those upper rooms of Avery to the north must have been breathtakingly gorgeous. Even from the parking lot, the sharp angles of distant mountain peaks were prominent on the skyline, forming a serene backdrop to the agitation in my bones.

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## Through Eula's Eyes (Cont'd)

I drove past the elegant Avery building, followed my directions along the drive to locate the cemetery at the far end of the property. I parked the car in the gravel space to the right of the plain field. The rows of chains that bound each of the sixteen hundred graves that were in the newspaper clipping were before me and Bessie, my grandmother, was somewhere among them.

The crucial code number given Granma Bessie, the order she held among those moored beneath the grassy field, was the only guide I had to find her. I used the toe of my shoe to scrape away bits of grass and leaves that covered the names and dates of death on the sparsely set markers, wiped at tears with my sleeve so I could even see the small letters at my feet. I bent to read the gravesites that had still only the metal tags as identification. The graves seemed to be organized by year of death.

She died of myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart. It made sense to me, that her broken heart had killed her. She was only thirty-eight when she died, younger than me and I'd never known, other than what Aunt Eula said, who she really was, or what she wanted that she never got.

With all my soul I wanted to tell Bessie that I was sorry that she was bound by chains, and was nameless and unclaimed, even in death. I wanted her to know that Mama had missed her. I called for the power to talk to her.

I moved silently, my feet aware of the stillness of sacred ground, until I found Granma Bessie in the second row, nearest the view of the mountains to the North.

I stood trembling at the head of her sixty-year-old gravesite.

Bessie had nothing of what I'd gotten in my life: an education as the means to seeing the world outside the mountains of North Carolina, along with fifty years of women finding their way in art, literature, and business. She sewed, she cooked, she loved, and it wasn't enough.

I heard a song from church, the sound of Mama's voice from when I was a child. Mama, in the church choir—singing shrilly, slightly out of harmony in the mountain way. Clutching the yellow miniature roses in quivering arms, I gently took the small pot of roses and settled them underneath the chains that connected Granma Bessie to all the others buried in the field. My gift of yellow roses for Granma Bessie; the first homage paid to her in death. The mountain spirits of Granma Bessie's kin, baby Alice, my Mama, Eula, joined in an ephemeral mountain chorus with me:

*I come to the garden alone . . . while the dew is still on the roses. . . and He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own. . .*

I wept, hardly able to form words, willing that her cold bones hear me, "I am your own Bessie, Mama was sad about you her whole life. She wanted to come to you, but never could, but I am here." I sat down on the mowed earth above her, and stroked the ground, feeling the autumn chill in the dirt between the blades of short grass. I would never know if Bessie really belonged where she was sent, if she had gotten better, and was left to die in Morganton, because women didn't have the right to speak for themselves in her day. Tears came again. Bessie had wanted Mama as much as Mama had wanted her. I told her that my warm flesh would carry her with me.

I got back into my Volvo and I drove past the trails in the hills and the ridges of the mountains, from the other unclaimed and disconsolate bones back to Cross Vine.



***Kerala to Curryblossom***  
***(an excerpt from a memoir in recipes)***



**by Vimala Rajendran**

I wonder why I call myself an accidental chef. I grew up in Bombay, peeled cardamoms at age three, went shopping for fish and vegetables all alone at age seven, and have always been fascinated by food. It has taken every bit of my life experience though to become the chef and community activist that I am today.

When I was a young woman, I married a man from India and came to live on Barclay Road in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. One of the things I remember about my parents and brought with me to America was how they always justified being grateful. So I was excited about Thanksgiving; the likes of which we didn't have in India. My first Thanksgiving was less than three months after I arrived in America from Bombay. We were invited to a Thanksgiving feast by dear friends. They made a traditional Thanksgiving feast and invited many of their friends over.

The next year I made my own tradition Thanksgiving dinner, and much thought went into how to feature everything around a roast turkey. I asked my American host how things came together for her and she shared so many details. Looking back I knew so little about using an oven because my mother never had one. I wasn't sure how to understand a recipe from an American cookbook, so I did what I still do, I read several recipes, and closed the book and cooked. That always gave a unique twist to the food itself and how to season things right; that surprisingly brought out the best results.

My last day in the Barclay Road house in Chapel Hill I did the hardest thing that I ever did, I left the house that I loved, left the neighbors. It wasn't safe to live there anymore because of my husband so I chose to leave.

It was Thanksgiving Day, a bright and sunshiny day, a beautiful day out, and I didn't know it would be my last day in that house, but now I remember every detail of it. The most brilliant fall colors were in the trees. The air was just right, brisk and fresh. My younger daughter was cleaning her desk with her dad and I sent my son and my oldest daughter to rake leaves. When they were done, I told them to take our contribution for Thanksgiving dinner to our neighbors; they were expecting us for dinner and I planned to use this as my get-a-way. So I had the older children carry a five-pound bag of potatoes to their house, so there would be two out of four of us safe.

I waited for their dad to release my youngest daughter so I could take her with me. I put on my running shoes and was ready to take off, but only when the child was ready and free. My husband started to ask where the other children were. I said, "They've gone to the neighbors'. We're eating dinner with them." I told him, "We've got to go to the dinner," but he started to chase us and when he caught up, he dragged my daughter in one direction and I was pulling her in the other. The neighbors called the police and that was it. I never went back. That was my last day in that house: Thanksgiving Day 1994.

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## Kerala to Curryblossom (Cont'd)

The very next Thanksgiving my oldest daughter left town to go to upstate NY, because she didn't want to be in town for the anniversary of that day. My son and my youngest daughter and I had been invited to the our new neighbors' for Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving morning I got a phone call from the husband of the family that the night before his wife had to go to the emergency room so they were cancelling the feast, but since they had already bought food, they were distributing it. He dropped off a ham, and sweet potatoes and twenty dollars for me. We had very little food in the house except that delivery. So I went to the nearby A&P. I told my son, who was nine-years-old, that we needed green beans, bread and whole milk to make the meal happen. The smart kid that he was, he started calculating what we had. He said, "Mom I think we have gone over." I told him I'd put away something like flour, but he said no, "I'll put away one thing and you one."

I told him, "No you're are a kid." I wanted him to keep his marshmallows, 7-Up and Jello. I was afraid and sad and felt ashamed of my poverty; ashamed that someone might see me. I got to the car and cried so hard and my son couldn't console me.

I told him, "I don't have a job because I don't have a green card, but you are an American citizen. Get an education, a great job and you'll never lack money to buy food."

He comforted, "I'm so sorry mom, I promise I'll study hard."

On the way home I pulled over with something powerful to say. I told my son, "It wasn't because your father didn't have a job or money that we ended up in this situation. He didn't treat us with compassion and love and it became unsafe. When you grow up I want you to treat everyone with the utmost respect and *then* you will have everything you need." After I told him that I felt like it was the beginning of many Thanksgivings of peace and safety. I wanted to give him everything to be successful in life. Through my successes, my children have never left my side.

My current home is clutter-free, peaceful and has colorful walls and a lush and productive fig tree, symbolic of the great bounty in my life. The last time I'd had a fruit-bearing tree was 1994, the last Thanksgiving on Barclay Road. But now I have the blessing of my new husband who was a friend for ten years before we got married and is my consistent source of support and my best friend in countless ways. My children are adults now with their own homes.

Last Thanksgiving, figs grew on our tree just outside our window, and those figs came to the table. My family feasted on a local, free-range, deep-fried turkey that my husband prepared, dinner rolls that one of my daughters made with local North Carolina wheat. There was local milk; my daughter made a pumpkin puree and a perfect pumpkin pie from home-grown pumpkins.

At my children's insistence I have always made the dressing from scratch. I take good bread and lots of celery, fresh herbs, onions, walnuts, and apples and make a vegetarian dressing. Sometimes I top it with oysters. I always make the green beans to complete the meal. The addition to the meal last year was our home-made, home-grown figs which we made into a compote.

We still continue some of the aspects of our first American Thanksgiving traditions. We invite those who don't have a place to go, we go for a walk after the meal. After our dinner last Thanksgiving we went to Wilson Park where the children played twenty-eight years ago when we first moved to Chapel Hill. The house is now right behind my new home.

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Vimala's Curryblossom Café

## **Fresh Fig Compote**

(Makes 3 cups)

1 pound fresh ripe figs - about 24 medium sized ones

1/4 cup brown sugar

1 cup dry sherry

1 lemon, quartered and sliced thinly, seeds removed

1/2 teaspoon sea salt

Cut stem off each fig, slice fig into quarters, and set aside.

Add brown sugar, sliced lemon and sherry to a 4-quart sauce pan. Cook for about 2 minutes over high heat, stirring frequently, until syrup begins to bubble.

Add figs and stir to coat them with the syrup. Cook for a few more minutes until the figs are glossy and the syrup thickens. Stir in the sea salt.

Serve the compote with brie cheese or as a condiment at a holiday meal.



## Excerpts from a Memoir, *Out of the Cocoon*

by Joanne Udo Schmitt

My adolescent years were colored with Japanese Imperialism's victories over Korea, Manchuria and the occupation of the South Pacific islands and invasion into the mainland of China after Formosa was colonized. From grade school and through high school, I was busy making small gift items, writing letters and stitching knots in cotton towels to be worn around the stomachs of those soldiers on the front line. There were times when I received letters of thanks from those soldiers and some of them would ask me to wait for their return home. The winds of war were swirling around, but we had been indoctrinated to obey the Emperor's edict, and maintain the air of complacency and peace among ourselves. The Japanese Emperor was considered to have come down from heaven where the sun goddess and ancestors live. I thought this was like living in a make believe world; as long as we assumed the attitude of complacency and obedience to the Government, we continued our daily activities as though there would be no drastic change in our life style.

When I was twelve, behind my back my mother was preparing me to be eligible for marriage. She sent me to flower arrangement school, and my sister tried to teach me to play a dulcimer-like musical instrument, called 'Koto.' Koto has seven strings stretched over the rounded board of about four feet long and sits on the floor. You need five finger tip picks, called Tsume (finger nail), each one is made of ivory to be inserted and held by a heavy silk band on each finger of the right hand. To play Koto, you have to sit on the floor, facing Koto with its head where all the strings are tied and held under the heavy silk brocade cover, trimmed with leather. You use your right hand fingers to pick, scratch and slide over the strings and use your left hand to put pressure on each string. I must have studied how to play Koto for a year or so, until Chiyoka, my older sister, became too busy preparing herself to become a bride to a dashing Japanese Army surgeon, Captain Murakami.

Meanwhile, Mama and Papa were anxious for me to be educated differently than my sister, Chiyoka. One day Papa caught me trying to ride my brother's bicycle and I was scolded. All he said was, "Young ladies do not ride bicycles." Papa did not know about the days when I used to play with neighborhood boys who were friends of my older brother, Takehiko. One day, a young man of about eighteen pretended to help me climb the tree in the playground of an old kindergarten school yard and tried to touch me. I kicked his hands and told him to get away. This experience left me cold and I developed a sense of self-protection to ward off anyone whom I felt uncomfortable with. I didn't want to be touched by anyone other than Mama or Papa.

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Excerpt from *Out of the Cocoon* (Cont'd)

I preferred wearing pants. Ordinary kimonos had three different sets – one for going shopping, one as a party dress, and one for at home doing housework. Further more, there are sets for tea ceremony, classic dancing and for ceremonial occasions. Most of those kimonos for special occasions are with the long sleeves and big elaborate sashes. It becomes very costly for a family with young ladies to dress them properly. In school I was to wear shorts and shirts for sports. I liked these western clothes better because they were simple.

I thought, I could never marry a Japanese man because I used to look at Mama who would be sewing my father's quilted jackets, putting the bunting in between the outer shell and the lining, then I would see her preparing the charcoal brazier for holding the pot for hot tea or warming the sake bottle. There are special charcoals for the tea ceremonies, and different grades of charcoals for the brazier for guests and regular use. Charcoals for the tea ceremony are beautifully shaped like a flower, and they must be cut into the certain sizes. To be a good wife for a Japanese gentleman, I thought I would have to be able to do all those things Mama had done, including cooking Western and Japanese food and then dressing up like the perfect lady to either entertain guests or for going out to the theatre or ladies' meetings.

When mother planned to go to the Kabuki Theatre to see a Kabuki play, she would wear a fine kimono. Under the supervision of mother, my sister, who was around seventeen or eighteen years old, was dressed like a doll with the help of a maid. Then mother's maid who was in charge of getting mother and sister ready would take out dressy foot wear, with the upper part made of silk brocade material and the soles made of hard rubber. Mother and sister gingerly walked out of the dressing room to the front entrance to step down and put on their respective foot wears, called Zori. Outside the front entrance a Chevrolet would be waiting in the driveway to take my mother and sister to the theater. This hired car, or "hire" is how Mama used to say, was driven by a uniformed chauffeur with white gloves, and the interior of the car was all covered with white seat covers trimmed with lace. There were at least three maids all sitting in the front entrance room who bowed as Mama and Chiyoka stepped down to walk out the door and enter into the waiting car. They would say in unison: "itte irra sshaimase" (please have a pleasant trip). When my time came to be dressed by a maid, I felt awkward and helpless.

When I was training with the tea ceremony, at first I thought it was stupid to use this hand, then that hand, and not put your hand between two things. I was told not to cross the front of my body, because that is like using the sword. I learned later that my tea ceremony teacher was a Samurai and the school was originated by the Lord Matsumura. Everything was just too formal. I just couldn't live up to that standard.

Mama followed these formal ways. Her affection always seemed just beyond my reach, her in a glass globe, and me looking in. Friday afternoons when I was a child, Mama would be all dressed in the kimono and sitting at a table like a coffee table with her tray of rocks and a brush like a feather that was like a quill pen that she used to make traces like waves in the very fine white sand like granule sugar. The rocks were very dark ones painted in black, or they were white crystals. The tray was oblong and black lacquer with low rims all around. I felt that Mama was unapproachable because she was concentrating on making that beautiful ocean scene. I was told by the servants not to disturb her. So, I used to peep into the room through the opening in the little paper sliding doors.

Mama was disciplined by her mother to be a lady like a courtesan of the Imperial Household. She was trained to play the samisen, trained in classic dancing, to do silk screen painting and sewing after she turned seven years old. Also she learned penmanship in Indian ink and brush as well as composing short and long poems, called Wanka and Tanka. These trainings were carried on rain or shine, or snow. She remembered her tiny fingers got almost frozen, but her mother insisted on rehearsing to play the samisen. One time her teacher hit her with the pick of the samisen when she skipped certain tunes during her lesson. The pick was made of ivory and the touch was sharp and stinging.

With Chiyoka marrying nontraditionally and my rejection of the clothing and ceremonies of a young Japanese lady, it seemed my parent's dreams were not being fulfilled, then came the tragic loss of my brother, Takehiko.

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Excerpt from *Out of the Cocoon* (Cont'd)

In 1939 Takehiko's death came suddenly during his first summer vacation from college. He had an acute tubercular infection after an appendectomy. His summer vacation was after he successfully entered into the prestigious Keio University Medical College. He was a devout Christian.

Though my father practiced Buddhism, Papa was very proud of my brother, his only son. He dreamt of Takehiko taking over and running his hospital. Having his own hospital built was Papa's original dream in order to restore the Udo family name in the region of Harutomi village in Kumamoto. With the birth of his son, his dream to go to a higher level was fulfilled. You could tell how proud of his son he was when Takehiko successfully entered Medical School at Keio University. Papa wanted nothing but the best for him.

My brother used to take me on his bicycle to Suginami Methodist church where he had a small bible study class for young adults. When he died, I missed him.

As I was wallowing in my own grief, I had not paid much attention to Papa's feelings. In times of grief, my parent's leaned on the teachings of Buddha and Confucius, but when I closed my eyes and reminisced on times with Takehiko an image of my brother and Jesus started crisscrossing.

Whenever I looked at my brother's photo the way he stood, I was reminded of Christ. His smile was not focused on any particular person. Full of compassion, his whole being, projected a selfless image.

My father honored my brother's pastor, Pastor Monoi, who requested a Christian funeral service at his church. Thus, my brother was mourned at two funeral services; one Japanese traditional funeral at home with his high school classmates and Keio Medical College classmates with school flags attending, and the Christian memorial service at Suginami Methodist Church. I had never seen so many people: his high school classmates, his college classmates, my father's colleagues, patients and their families, neighbors and service people. I knew then how much my brother was missed by all who came to bid farewell to him.

I cherished and read cover to cover a book he had left, titled *The Religion of Jesus* authored by Toyohiko Kagawa, founder of Aoyama Gakuin High School (Christian School) located in Shibuya, Tokyo. That book is still alive in my memory only, because it also was burned together with all other books I had left with my parents at my home in Higashi-Nakano.

I was enjoying the preppy atmosphere of Tsuda Jyuku English Language College where the emphasis on learning our mother tongue was prominent during our freshman year.

When I was seventeen, early in my college years, it became my favorite pastime to go to Papa's hospital building early in the morning before the arrival of patients to check into the waiting room to see whether any new magazines or publications had been delivered. It was a warm and bright day during my first winter break after I was admitted into Tsuda English College. As I walked into the waiting room, the bold black headline of the Asahi Newspaper flashed into my eyes. It proclaimed that Japan was victorious in a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Feeling numb, I dropped my body down onto one of the wicker chairs placed there.

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Excerpt from *Out of the Cocoon* (Cont'd)

Basking in the warm sun sitting in one of the wicker chairs in the waiting room, I looked more closely at the front page photo taken early in the morning of December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941, (US time). The article reported that the USS Arizona had been bombed by Japan by 370 Japanese aircraft; five battle ships were destroyed and dozens of military facilities damaged. Over 2,400 American military were left dead. Japan had incensed US entry into the War. Black smoke rose from three different places of the deck of the sinking ship. The starboard was up in the air and the broken top of the observation tower stuck out of the dark gray smoke.

I was stunned. This small island country must have gone mad; a madness that started so long ago. I remember when I was around seven years old one lazy summer day during the days of Japanese Imperialism. There were loud shouting voices and a crowd of passersby milled around a stretcher draped with the bloody thin blanket. When my curiosity overcame fear, I peeked through the crowd of people and saw a bloody head with short messed up black hair and tanned arm hanging out of the side of the stretcher. Then I heard some hushed voice saying that a man tried to kill himself by throwing himself down from the overpass bridge onto the freight train tracks when the train passed Higashi-Nakano station.

Looking at the bloody stretcher, my head started spinning and I began to feel faint. As I was called to come home for lunch, I turned around and struggled to get through the crowd of people. As soon as I reached to the gateposts of our house, I sat on one of the rocks placed near the entrance to calm myself. After taking a deep breath a couple of times, holding my mouth with my back bent, I hurried to the bathroom to vomit. I remember I did not eat lunch that day, and Mama understood why. When I recall that time, a very graphic picture of hell comes to me, of people moaning and groaning because they don't know how to submit themselves to a higher power. There was so much depression.

I felt numb where I sat on one of the wicker chairs in Papa's waiting room. I continued to read the paper's accounts of Pearl Harbor. Before, it was like everything in my life happened the way we planned. In the cocoon I didn't have to worry about anything. The day was December 8<sup>th</sup> 1941 (Japan time) and it was the beginning of the total change, not only in my life, but also in the future of this tiny island country of Japan. However, this fatal day was like any other placid winter day in Higashi-Nakano, because the winds of war had not yet reached this small island country of Japan, which is separated by the vast Pacific Ocean.

After my morning ritual, I sauntered back to the house and sat on the windowsill that looked out on Mama's flower garden to have my usual breakfast of toast with honey and milk. A bumblebee, attracted by the sweet smell of honey, started buzzing around my head. When I waved my hand to get the bee away from me, it stung me on my neck. I screamed and spilled my milk.



# Learning to Throw Stones

by **A. W. Woods Valdés**



## *I. The Bridge*

I have always been a morning person. I was even a morning baby. Born at 6 am and loved to wake early. My brother was on the scene two years before I was born but I remember being by myself sometimes too. In my baby vision, I never had the full layout of our one bedroom apartment on Carlisle Street. I saw everything in sections and partialities. My crib was in the living room space. Maybe my brother had a bed somewhere near my parents'. The place was so small we could not have ever been far from one another. As a toddler, I was my big brother's shadow. If he pulled books off the shelf, I scrambled over to pull some off too. If he made noises like an automatic shotgun, "Pa-pa-pa-pow-pow!" I wanted to make some too.

The physical separation from my family came between nightfall and dawn. Just after sunrise I would be calm, chillin', as my mom now says, quietly in my crib. I was alone and noticing the space around me. On my back, my view from inside the crib was limited; wooden crib bars, pastel padding, sheets, ceiling, and soft toys like sheep and kittens. It was like a heavenly nest but I knew everyone was somewhere else without me. When the alone time turned into agitation I began to cry. I don't remember walking just yet, but I could stand and scream and shake those bars. I was wet and wanted out of the diaper. That was the source of the agitation but I also wanted someone to be with me. I wanted someone to pay attention to me and to make me feel better. Where was everyone? I would just wait... and wait... and wait... I was afraid to be noticed or to intrude on the morning solace. Patience and impatience battling it out inside the tiny me. Every morning it was the same thing. Maybe I waited a few minutes, maybe for hours. Baby time flows differently. I contemplated how I could fix things for myself. My internal baby thinking said, "If they would lower the side of the crib I could take care of myself." Dependence and independence joined in the fight with patience and impatience, a sure-fire recipe for a cranky baby.

I don't remember anything about being changed. But I do remember the joy of finally being picked up and held. I remember relief and the scent of love. I remember reaching up as my dad was reaching down. That space between us was, and still is, the invisible bridge where nothing bad can ever happen to me.

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## Learning to Throw Stones (Cont'd)

As the softness of my cheek was pressed to his warm, crinkled undershirt I thought, “Here comes the comfort.” The smell of sleepy dad in the morning was like a balm for my agitated and angry little girl body. Combined, we were the scent of something new and old, the scent of the day before the day begins.

It was the reach that did it. No one goes first. Instinct kicks in and says, “Reach for him. He’s the one.” There was never any doubt that he wouldn’t be reaching toward me at the same time. Strong, chapped hands with long, solid fingers that know work and creativity reach for me. My Daddy always smells like soap. Even after all the scrubbing, a very light residue of oil or paint defines the cracks in his fingertips. You need to be close enough to see work and creativity embedded in the tiny pathways and trails, a roadmap to his day. I believe my father only knows stillness in sleep.

The problem came about when there was a delay in Dad’s timing. So, we are all seeing the new day together... Waiting. Waiting. Waiting for the comfort... This was something special... More waiting... That quiet could have only been broken by my baby screams. Will I be the cause of disruption for anyone? How could that be? If they would arrive earlier, this wouldn’t be necessary but here goes...

Over the years I was called sweet but bad tempered, moody and even mean. I was a picky eater and a skinny kid. My dad invented the occasional nickname, “Mean-Mean String-bean.” He would say it like it was the title of a jazz tune. He only used it at home where he had the capacity to make us giggle and laugh in private. Even as I detested that name and I still do, I have to admit that it was accurately descriptive, clever and maybe even apropos. That my moody behavior could be the inspiration for such a catchy tune was not a good feeling for me. It did, however, reflect that even as a child, I ran hot and cold without any warning. Sometimes my father would abbreviate the name and just say, ‘Come here *Mean-Mean*.’ If I was already in one of my moods, it was like lighting a match inside of me. My temper escalated whenever I heard the name. It was a trigger and would just make things worse. I wasn’t “Mean-Mean”. On the inside I was nice, lovely and loveable. Remember the baby in the crib?

I was really such a delicate soul. I believe there was a universal consensus that I would have to learn to toughen up, take care of myself, stick it out and, as Nat King Cole would say, *Straighten up and fly right baby* for the road that was ahead. I still got lots of love. Some of it I shoved away, I know. But most of it was stored in places I did not even know would become the love reserve or the cloaking device that has been so necessary throughout my life. *Mean-Mean* reminds me not to take it all too seriously and to never forget about that space, that bridge where I reach toward love and love reaches toward me.

## II. Seychelles

Keith likes you. Do you like him? Check here, Yes or No.

I unfolded the little note, read it, checked my choice and handed it back to Cheri to deliver to who knows where. Hmm, Keith is cute but why didn’t he ask me himself? Does this really count? Are we boyfriend and girlfriend now? Before I could even decide my little middle school friends were coming up to me saying, “I heard you and Keith are going together.” I don’t even think I saw or spoke to Keith until a day or two later. So that was that, we were contracted and nothing changed.

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## Learning to Throw Stones (Cont'd)

Jeff Israel came to our school in the middle of the semester. It was fall because I remember wearing puffy jackets outside. He had shiny, chestnut brown hair. He was white but now people would refer to him as *olive complected*. Meaning, his ancestors came from somewhere other than the Mayflower. I just thought he was cute. He was quiet and didn't seem interested in groups or fitting in. That made me curious about him. What is he thinking over there scuffing his sneaker against the red brick building? Maybe he was shy or scared. I was intrigued by his last name. Israel is a place. Lots of my school friends had relatives that came from that place long ago. People from there know their own language, religion and food. They have their own holidays and leave school when their religion says so. They have compound word names with gold, silver, rose, bloom or man in them. I think that's cool. You would know one of your own people just by name. Goldwater is a pretty one. Tina Goldwater. Gold in the water like Ochún. Beautiful. But Tina Israel, I don't know. I could pick a name from my family's far away place like Tina North Carolina, Tina Philadelphia, Tina America, Tina Cuba, Tina Africa. I could just stick my finger on a map, Tina Seychelles. That's pretty, Mr. and Mrs. Jeff Israel and Tina Seychelles. That makes us a little bit of everything we want to be.

I was too naïve to recognize jealousy. I could feel it for sure but to clearly know what that is and to call it by its name was confusing for me. Cheri had the plan. She wanted to see a fight, and a good one. Keith vs. The New Guy Jeff Israel. It would be like Michael Jackson vs. Donny Osmond, but how? "Ok, Tina..." who yearns to be the diplomat, like Stevie Wonder in the black and white glossy photo thumbtacked to her adolescent bedroom wall. The prefab autograph reads "Peace, Love and Unity, Stevie." I thought those words were so sophisticated and grown up. Over the years, I ritualistically placed pinpoint bubblegum and kisses on Stevie's photo lips until the paper was blotted white and sticky. "...you, can start something with Jeff..." Cheri divulges the plot to the group. "...Get him mad, get Jeff to punch you, then yell for Keith who will come out of hiding, take over the fight and kick Jeff's butt." A master plan if ever there was one.

We huddled in the backyard to our school. It was a three-floor brownstone located at the upper part of Germantown. Out front, the 23 Trolley teetered by every half hour or so. In the mornings and afternoon we scrambled in and out of it like happy little ants. The entire length of The Avenue was really a series of long hills paved over with streets of cobblestone and trolley tracks. The wobbly warped streets were part of our everyday existence. The desire for stability and security was reflected in my parents' push to have my older brother, my little sister and me all in private school at such an early age. The building looked like an ordinary brownstone, bookended by more of the same. It was more like our second home than a school. There was nothing to differentiate it from the resident neighbors or businesses. Only a small, wooden sign provided proof of an educational institution inside.

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## Learning to Throw Stones (Cont'd)

I did not say much to the group. Just listened to my instructions. It all seemed fine to me but I kept asking myself, "Why would I want to fight Jeff Israel, he's so cute?" Fighting was not my strong suit. I figured my real job was to get beat up for the cause; that I could do, or so I thought. When the time came to provoke Jeff I just literally walked up to him and hit him in chest. He was wearing a brown winter jacket so there was little impact. Punching, pushing and tumbling in the wood chips was regular play activity for us kids. Our school was very open and active, both physically and mentally. Tackle, pushing and shoving were regular expressions. Jeff was new so for him, the punch was really a punch.

It was not until I was on my back in the wood chips with Jeff straddling me, that I felt trapped. His punches were coming faster and harder. Above me his little face was blushing red and moist, not with love but with anger. His shiny curls were bouncing around his forehead and I felt sad to be the cause of such disorder and meanness. This was not a good feeling but I did my part, I started to yell. "Keith, Keith, Keith!" I kept repeating the call, but no one came. In fact the yard was deserted and I did not even hear the usual after school screaming and chatter. I could however, hear traffic swishing and clunking along the avenue out front. I had been abandoned. I could imagine my gang of friends on a trolley car headed north where they would transfer in another neighborhood for the XH bus to their final destinations. But at the present, I was being pummeled by the little guy I actually wanted to hug. With no recourse, I began to punch back. It was futile. My heart was not in it and my spirit could take a good punch better than it could give one. At some point Jeff must have just thought, "What an idiot," and walked away. Even before the fight ended, while I was thrashing to and fro trying to protect my little bosom, I was feeling and knowing that the gang had betrayed me. No one was coming to save me. No one was coming to help. In fact, they were the reason I was down here. I should have said, "No, Jeff and I are going to get married and change our names. We will plant flowers by a river in the name of Yaa Asantewaa. I can't punch him or let him punch on me. We stand for peace, love and unity or we stand alone. No. Pick someone else."

### III. Learning to Throw Stones

It was a hot summer night. We were walking alone, in the middle of the street, but surely someone was seeing this. I was struck down by a force so great that my knees buckled. I saw a flash of lightning directly in my eyes then I felt dust and broken cement rise up to meet my face. I was totally disoriented and somewhat ashamed. The dark, easy silence was torn apart by a streak of pain across my left shoulder blade. I was struck from behind and did not see a thing. Midway to scrambling to my feet I saw the topsy turvy scene of my cousin Butchy with a strange and clumsy figure in a choke hold. Within seconds I realized the ragged form he was dragging down the street was a woman's body dressed in a long white skirt and a white hood. This was surreal. Her bulging eyes stood out from her face. She made guttural noises like a beast. I thought Butchy might actually break her neck. I was terrified that he would be guilty of killing someone for my sake. The almost tangible fear made me realize that I had been attacked. My first thought was, "Don't kill her Butchy!" But my mouth just said, "No Butchy, no. Let her go!" I slumped near the curb and stretched toward them like a pathetic pietá. In his rage Butchy was deaf and blind to my plea. The beast-woman had hit me with a slab of cement or a rock from the broken sidewalk. It was a mighty powerful blow. She must have had a running start from behind or she had raised both arms high enough to gain momentum and deliver the impact that would knock my willowy body into the dirt and gravel like a wet sack. In my haze, I could see that Butchy had caught the beast-woman and that he was saving me.



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## Learning to Throw Stones (Cont'd)

began to breathe deeply as if trying to pick up the scent of danger. My instincts had not failed me. Like a recurring nightmare, the hateful beast-woman was back! She reappeared from behind a bush ready to charge. She had actually waited all this time to finish the job. How hateful could this person be? This time she came at us with smaller rocks. But I had had enough. I picked up a rock too. With the other hand I started swinging my cheap, cloth shoulder bag like a windmill. The Beast and I closed in on each other. Taking on the role of referee, Butchy stepped in between us trying to separate us. What he did not realize was that this time she was aiming at him. My plan was that if she threw a rock at Butchy I would throw my rock at her. I was actually afraid of the harm a rock would do but I did want to hit her hard with my bag. I wanted to pound her over and over again but it was useless, I was too far away. Butchy could not stop me from swinging at her. I knew I was not going to run away. He had never seen me defend myself. Even an onlooker could have mistaken me for the aggressor. By grabbing my wrist Butchy tried to prevent me from throwing my rock. He kept saying, "Get back. Get on the sidewalk! Stay back!" Stuff like that. I put more force into my arm, as if I held a spear or a torch. Butchy just wanted me to stay away from the Beast. He did not seem afraid of her rock. He gave me a clumsy shove in the direction of the sidewalk and as I lowered my arm, I felt cool air rush into my mouth. The rock in my own hand hit me in the mouth and broke a front tooth. That was enough to make me back down.

Butchy dealt with the she-wolf and we eventually made it back to his place. I showed him my tooth and told him that he did it. He cried knowing that he hurt me. Butchy is a good, strong man but when he hurts, he hurts hard. I've seen him cry before. We are too close for faking it. I did not solve anything that night. I did not save anyone and no one saved me. The only thing I can say is that Butchy never left my side. I fought good and hard and made up for the thousands of times I never stood up for myself or fought back with words, with the law, with actions with anything. Yea, I fought good that night. And Butchy and me, we're still tight.

## ***IV. Birthday Party or Fireflies with Dragonfly Wings***

Today is my birthday. I am 12 and I just love my birthday. Thank you mommy, thank you daddy, because I was born! June 16 comes up in the history books as a day to remember but it's not because of me. My happy day is known for sadness but also for the fight to learn and to speak freely.

Dead bodies. I am so frightened of those dead bodies I have seen in my head. They are all brown bodies. Slaughtered bodies, hurt and wounded bodies; red is such a horrible contrast when it is splattered on small brown bodies. Even in black and white photos, you see the red and the brown. Grace says, "I will play the scene backwards and shield them with my words."

"You say no, we say yes, you say go, we say no, you say small, we say big, bigger, big enough to eat you, swallow you whole and take down this whole town. Our march was for intelligence and for peace. You tried to take us down but what we did will be known in history as an up-rising."

It is my birthday and I do not want to be massacred. I do not want anyone to be massacred on my birthday anymore. Some children say "happy birthday", some say, "I speak. We speak. We will speak the highest language; a tongue and a mind that no one can degrade. We will speak." When I remember the little house party in 1976, I see myself wearing beige painter's pants or blue overalls. It is just play. I do not paint and my family does not live on a farm. It was my birthday. Blue skirts, white blouses, knee socks, sneakers, brown skin, then blood on those pretty, running, screaming, jump roping bodies. June 16, 1976. I was 12 and I knew nothing of bullets, bottles, dogs and stones. But I would learn that not everyone is free to be free.

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## Learning to Throw Stones (Cont'd)

There were stones against bullets, sticks against dogs, children against police, the living against the lost. Sister Antoinette, what did you see? What did you feel when you saw your brother fall? Tell the story Sister Antoinette; tell it all. You children forced the struggle inside the nation that wanted to keep you down low. You rose up! Uprising! And you will continue to rise. You shook something loose, made it unstable and weak. You shook the lie that said you are not worthy and not free. Shook it loose from its hinges and left it to dangle like flesh, unfinished and open on a wound that can only be healed from the inside out. 1994 awaits you. Healing from the inside to be free.

June 16, 1976. Soweto. The day was supposed to be about peace. Grace was there; before and Grace was there after. Her memory, her spirit flew to Soweto and she remembers how the spirit of hope was changed into the scent of fear and confusion. You could smell it in the dirt, in the air and over the sea. Grace wanted to give the children wings, double wings like dragonflies. Flying dragons with translucent wings, whizzing safely through a labyrinth of bullets. We are fast and free. Dragonflies with tails that light in the night like fireflies. Fires that burn wild and free. Grace was there to see the children into their next mission, fast, wild and free. You may still see their fire light in the night from time to time. Quick, small fires that blink in the night because they are not afraid. They speak, they think and they rise up free.

Sometimes a fight isn't about the fight. It's about the dust being kicked up, the fire burning brighter and the message rising higher. I don't remember any of the gifts but one. One gift pricks the night sky with light and stays I am Grace, courageous and free.

