

*Whiskey,  
Snakes and  
Voltaire*

*Writing on Things  
Southern and Past*



**JOE BAGEANT**



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**ColdType**

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Websites are a wonderful thing in that they can house a lifetime of work if need be. I'm not up for the world to see all I have written. So much of it, both published and unpublished is so bad. However, I do think some of it documents or speaks to an America that scarcely exists today, one that was kinder, more mysterious and certainly more connected with the earth and its verities. This is a collection of essays, notes, remembrances and mental shards of a Southern boyhood in Virginia. Some are absolutely true, some shift back and forth between truth and fiction and some are outright lies. I will leave it to the reader to discern the difference. I certainly cannot.

JOE BAGEANT  
September 2005



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to this small collection of some of the 'lost' writing of my old pal Joe Bageant. Joe sent me the stuff way back in 2005, first one piece; then the rest followed after much cajoling – he thought them embarrassing and unworthy of print. I had intended to gather it into a small book at the end of that year. Then, after writing the introduction, he asked that I put off publication “for a while” due to a contract he had just signed with HBO TV.

The book idea faltered again the following year when I misplaced the digital file containing the essays. Meanwhile, Joe – already a much-loved internet scribe – became an internationally-acclaimed author with his books, *Deer Hunting With Jesus* and *Rainbow Pie*, before his death in March, 2011.

I rediscovered the file containing the old essays a few weeks ago while clearing out a cupboard full of old computer drives. I read them and thought – once again – that they were most worthy of publication. So here they are – before I get a chance to misplace them again – another part of Joe's legacy.

PS: Download all of Joe's essays at <http://coldtype.net/joe.html> and at the web site <http://joebageant.com>

TONY SUTTON  
September 2013

# *1. Blood and Poppies*

MY FAMILY'S ANCESTRAL HOME ON SHANGHAI ROAD, A great sagging clapboard thing perched on a hill with its many filigreed balconies and porches like heisted antebellum petticoats, sat perched on a hill at the base of Sleepy Creek Mountain. Gnawed by the elements on the outside and woodsmoked by a thousand griddlecake mornings on the inside, where children ran the stairways and mice ran the cellars, my grandparent's house was stuffed and running over with life itself.

It was also a place where people died as well as lived. Died and were 'laid out' in the parlor. My great-grandfather Old Jim, was the last one to be laid out there. At the time I very young and was among the last in my family to see the embalmer dump the white enameled bucket of blood

over the roots of the wavering red poppies that grew hard by the front yard. In those days and in those hollers the embalmer sometimes came to your house and laid out the body in the parlor. Low lamps burned all night and Old Jim was so still in that satin-lined box, like some ancient felled tree. Then that first realization of mortality struck, killing that innocence it kills in all of us. Maw leaned through the kerosene lantern glow and said, "Joey be real still and you'll hear the angels sing." I did. No angels sang. Not a sound except the breathing of Old Jim's great black dog whose green eyes flashed from under the bier. I also remember a strange chemical smell. They say Old Jim had already picked out his burying suit years before and he smelled like mothballs when he went into the coffin.

Years later I asked why the family laid people out like that. After all, there have been funeral homes around for a long time for godsake. "Well, there was funeral homes in Martinsburg and Berkeley Springs," said Aunt Ony. "But they was too far away for everybody to get to in sometimes, then make two trips, one to come back with the body for buryin. So the undertaker came to the house with the coffin in his truck." Meanwhile the body had been washed and dressed and laid on a door placed across two sawhorses in the cellar to cool. By the time the embalmer arrived people had come from all around, the women with food, the men so quiet with fedora hats in their hands. A few had bottles under their coats to be shared out in the smokehouse during the "sittin up," as they called a wake.

But the sight of those poppy blossoms leaning vulgarly



forward in the sun, rooted in the blood of generations, scared me to death. With that obvious literal connectivity of the child's mind, I always associated with the hymn that goes:

*There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Emanuels' veins.  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.*

The summer sun spilled down and the garden dirt got hot, the katydids buzzed their atomic hymn to the void while the poppies nodded in silent agreement. I played in the barn. I played under the high cool front porch, but I never went near the poppy patch.

Except when Cousin Burt came. Not really a cousin, Burt lived up on Sleepy Creek Mountain and Burt was, to my young mind, evil. He was one of those oafish children born late in his parent's life. His father Jake was a tall cadaverous man with the thin cruel Scots-Irish blood that shows up in so many here. He lived up on the mountain where he flogged an ancient flea bitten white plowhorse by day and flailed a homemade banjo in the evenings, playing songs such as *Gone Injun Blues* and *Georgie Buck*. Old Jake's heavy work shoe thumped the beat and he would bemoan in parched voice, *'Mah naim is Georgie Buck, I ain't niver had no luck, niver since the day that I was born.'*

Anyway, Burt "got his meanness honest," as they used to say. One time Burt burned some baby birds alive with

lighter fluid under the porch. I think there were five of them. And he would get me down and give me Dutch rubs with his knuckles. Worst of all he would drag me into the poppy patch. After three or four draggings all Burt had to do was look at me and I'd do anything he wanted. "Fetch me a chunk of brown sugar from the pantry," he'd order. Or "Git me one of yore pap's cigarettes." There was no arguing or it was into the poppies for me.

Maw on the other hand, loved the poppies. A large woman with quiet gray eyes who always wore a faded blue sunbonnet in the garden, she would trim off the dead leaves in summer and fuss over them each spring. There she'd be with that old fashioned home made bonnet moving among them, appearing then disappearing in and out of the poppies as if she were communicating with them, drawing them up from the earth. They grew huge under her now long-passed hand.

Plowed under for lawn years ago, all signs of the poppies have disappeared. Cousin Burt, to my utter amazement, became a well respected Methodist minister. As one of my real cousins said a while back, "I reckon Burt got the call when he seen the mess of meanness he's got to atone for."

I was back there in August when it was so hot even the paper wasps had given up on fanning their nests. Cousin Ray lives there now, mows the vast lawn and steps over the snakes sunning on the rocks. Thus, as our own parents did in the old days, we ordered all the kids to stay close to the house, right here in front the yard, because of snakes lying perfectly still in the woods and fields. And all the aunts and

female cousins, old women now, move silently through the house drawing the curtains, retiring to the coolest rooms. Try as I may, I can no longer see in my mind those poppies nodding through the heat. There is only the very real sight of my Cousin Ray's four-year-old granddaughter rolling and laughing across that once-red spot of lawn. One day no doubt, she will be plunged beneath that flood of generations in order to lose all her guilty stains. But for now, innocence is too trite a word for her joy.

## *2. Lonzy Barker is Missing*

LONZY BARKER IS MISSING. HAS BEEN FOR SEVERAL now. Nobody noticed it until that smelly old hermit didn't show up here at Dalton Bayles' post office store for his sardines and rock candy. "He could be layin over there in his pigpen dead or something," says Dalton. Did I tell you that Lonzy Barker lives in a pigpen? Always has. Anyway, after three months of Lonzy's government checks piling up in the pigeonhole, Dalton has decided Lonzy "just might be ... I ain't saying he is, and I ain't saying he ain't ... missing."

"Dammit Dalton, if anybody in Virginia would know if Lonzy Barker is missing, it would be you for Jesus sake," I tell him. "Stopping in here for his check and his sardines is the only thing Lonzy does regular.

Nobody knows why that government check comes in for

Lonzy every month. To hear Dalton tell it, “Lonzy got shell shocked in the war and that’s why he gets that check.” But Dalton’s got no call whatever to say that. He just made it up because he can’t admit when he doesn’t know something. Lonzy’s check is for sixty-nine dollars and Lonzy spends about thirteen of it. Always on the same things: sardines, crackers and cheese, tobacco and hard green rock candy. Lonzy never signs any kind of papers. So Dalton signs his checks for him. And lord forbid Lonzy should have a bank account like most people. He’s likely got a fortune buried someplace around that pigpen.

“Well, if Lonzy Barker is missing, we ought to go over and take a look around his place,” I tell Dalton. So we drive over in Dalton’s Camero to Lonzy’s place down there at the edge of the county along Back Creek. Lonzy’s place is the same as it’s always been ... wet books, a cold wood stove that Lonzy cooks right on the top of, no skillet or anything, and layers of cardboard on the dirt floor where Lonzy sleeps summer and winter.

“Which tells us absolutely nothin,” says Dalton.

“What did you expect?” I asked. “It’s not like you could check on him by seeing if the newspapers are piling up on the front step of his pigpen. Hell man, he don’t even have a front step.”

Flusterated, Dalton says, “Now remember, all we know for sure is that he is missing. But I wouldn’t go digging Lonzy’s grave just yet.”

“Hell, Dalton,” I tell him, “you wouldn’t do anything ‘just yet’ about anything. If it was up to you, you’d sit on your fat

ass behind that counter and smoke Marlboros from now until The Rapture. I know you too well Dalton Bayles.”

And I do, too. I’ve known Dalton Bayles since the third grade. Left on his own he’d probably be in some damned fool trouble within a week. And wasn’t I his best man when he married that flat chested nitwit from over in Romney? Even after the divorce and even without having any kids he’s still making payments on her Maytag washer-dryer combination. That’s the kind of trouble Dalton Bayles gets himself into left on his own. And that’s the only reason I stop by the store every night on the way home from work. It’s the damned honest truth. Plus he’s got a pool table.

“Well lookie here!” says Dalton, coming out of Lonzie’s pen holding up a copy of *The Southern Living Guide To Home Entertaining*. “Never thought Lonzy had a socialite streak,” Dalton giggles. “You and I both know Lonzy’ll read anything,” I said. And he will. Back in the late ‘50s when Dalton and I were about twelve we used to come up here and listen to Lonzy read out loud from books he hauled out of the dump. He never read to anybody in particular except maybe some pin oaks and butternut trees. From all this reading Lonzy got to be right smart about things like Flemish art and weed control, all kinds of stuff. Sort of. He knew a million facts, but he only recited them to himself: “Mouse-ear chickweed, *Cerastium vulgatum*, Perennial reproducing by seeds; small hairy leaves opposite each side of stem; small flowers with five petals; pods very small, cylindrical at stem tips ...” Somebody had chucked a set of plant biology textbooks at the dump. I can still see

him squatting there on the pine needles turning the pages. Lonzy always squats to read or eat. His dirty old beard actually touches the ground when he does that. And stink! Gawd does that man stink!

“Probably he pisses on his beard like billygoats do,” claims Dalton.

“If he squats to piss like he squats to do everything else, I’m sure he can’t miss the beard,” I said.

When Lonzy ain’t squatting, he’s walking. Night and day and everywhere.

“I’ve seen him twenty-five miles away, clean over near Fort Valley,” Dalton says. “Once my daddy stopped to give him a ride. ‘No thanks,’ Lonzy snaps, ‘I’m in a big hurry.’”

But that might well be one of Dalton’s lies because Dalton’s daddy was an asshole and a drunk that never did anybody a favor except fall out of his dump truck into the rock crusher at the quarry. Fact is, Lonzy used to let Dalton and his mother hide out at his place when old man Bayles would drink and thump on his family. “She was too proud to go stay with kin,” says Dalton. She must have been proud all right, to sleep on cardboard instead of a nice warm bed.

Lonzy does have his nice side. Once, when we were kids, he let us butcher a poached buck at his place and wouldn’t even take any deer meat for his trouble. He grinned like a possum eating shit through a screen door the whole time. Not that Lonzy’s grin is any comfort. He sure enough smiles like a regular person. But he has the kind of eyes that drill little black holes in you. Sure, Lonzy’s got his nice side. But it’s awful small. He’ll talk with the old people who live

along the road to the dump, but only on days he takes it into his head to make sense.

I know you've never been in Buck's Tavern so I'll tell you about the picture of Lonzy on the wall there. Above the bar alongside all the other gewgaws is a little brown photo of Lonzy. Except this Lonzy is young. He is athletic looking and well dressed, like a college boy, with a Panama hat and a light colored suit and a striped tie. He is holding a croquet mallet on a big wide lawn. Nobody at Buck's knows where it came from. But it is sure enough Lonzy. Black beady eyes and all.

One day a couple years ago I was squirrel hunting on the ridge behind Gainsboro, way up at the top where you can see down on Nat Smith's junkyard. Nobody goes up there because it's too steep a climb through the blackberry thickets. And wouldn't you know I ran across Lonzy squatting right there at the crest. I almost missed him because Lonzy has shrunk down right much from age and when he squats there's not much to see these days. But there he is, arms crossed, staring at the sky through a hole in the trees. Something was spooky about this, like he was praying. But without words and with real bright eyes. I just stood there a while. Finally he got up. I nodded at him.

"What're you staring at, Lonzy?" I asked.

"Yonder side of the grave," he answered.

"Reckon it can be seen from up here?"

He glared at me like I'd just pissed on his shoes, then walked off. But if you'd been there you'd know what I mean. It gave me the heebie jeebies. I spotted him again later in



the season at the same spot doing the same thing. Weird.

Last night Dalton starts in on how, “technically, Lonzy would be what they call a homeless.”

“Another bullshit idea from Dalton. Stand up and take a bow Mr. Bayles!” I said. “Now we’ve got folks who’ve been around here all their lives that everybody knows are right strange. But they’ve all got roofs over their heads and people look out for them when they can and let them live their own lives. Besides, this town wouldn’t be the same without Lonzy. He’s a landmark. Or something like that. And the truth be told, nobody ever saw Lonzy Barker look anything but generally satisfied and happy with the world in his own grumpy way. He is what you call eccentric that’s all.”

But, like I said, Lonzy Barker is now missing. So we left Lonzy’s pig pen and drove on in to Sheriff Mock’s office in Marlboro. The sheriff said we needed to be relatives of Lonzy to fill out a missing persons report.

“Who in the heck would ever admit to a thing like that? Being related to Lonzy?” says Dalton.

“You got that about right, Bub,” says Sheriff Mock. So the deputies and the Back Creek Volunteer Fire Department pulled together a search party, same as they do when hunters get lost or somebody’s bass boat shows up without them down at the dam on the South Fork of the Shenandoah. By then it was too late to bring in dogs. Way too late. Even Lonzy couldn’t leave a scent that would last three months. The posse ended up being a four-wheeling and ATV party over rough terrain covering everything except the top of the ridge where Lonzy lived and the bottom of the Shenandoah

where he might damned well be at this very moment. After a day or so of articles in the *Star*, the usual amount of time when a body either is or it isn't found, they did not find Lonzy. Sheriff Mock wanted so bad to use official television style words like "presumed dead," like on the news. But when the reporter called him he resisted it.

"The case is still open and the whereabouts of Mr. Alonzo ... no middle name ma'am ... Barker, remains unknown at this time," he told the reporter.

So by now some people have come to decide Lonzy is sure enough dead. How he might have died and where the body could be brings out some brilliant ideas: "He mightta felt death coming on and crawled into a groundhog hole and buried himself. It's been done." We have Milt Jolley at the NAPA parts store to thank for that one. In fact, it's now got to where we're getting Elvis-type sightings of Lonzy. Deed honest-to-God, I'm not kidding. Of course they're all at a distance and usually come from some pea-brain about closing time.

Still though, just as many people figure Lonzy will be back. It's like they need for him to show up toting his sack of pop bottles and mumbling to about the size of the acorns and woolly worms this year.

"Mebbe he's sick and checked himself into the old soldier's home at the veterans hospital over in Martinsburg," Dalton says.

"Yeah, sure Dalton. That's perzactly what a crazy old hermit would do, go and ask the U.S-goddamned-snooping-government for help."

But I know what Dalton means in his heart. It's the same kind of feeling that keeps me from squirrel hunting on the ridge these days. And much as I dearly hate to agree with Dalton Bayles about anything mind you, if you asked me I'd have to tell you the truth:

Lonzy Barker is missing. But I wouldn't go digging his grave just yet.

### *3. Pert' Near Bit*

I SUPPOSE THAT, COMPARED TO SOME PEOPLE'S CHILDHOODS, mine were days of chocolate cake and Junebug glory. But it had its dangers. Our parents and relatives endlessly reminded us of the little girl who fell into the hog pen and was eaten, or the boy who drowned swimming in the quarry or got his hand cut off messing with the buzz saw on the tractor's power take-off. Another more real danger was snakes. Snakes were a part of life. Everyone at some point in their lives "pert' near got bit" while hoeing gardens, cutting pulpwood, pulling down hay bales or bringing up a stringer of fish at night along the Shenandoah at night. Sometimes water moccasins swallowed the fish on the stringer and you would pull up a bundle of engorged moccasins.

My pert' near bit time came while sitting up on a bank

above the cantaloupe patch with my faithful Remington .22. The copperhead snake blithely crawled into my lap and, for lack of a better term, went to sleep. I'd been there all afternoon waiting to shoot a big old silver-flecked groundhog, a grizzled 30-pounder that had been "tearing up Pap's patch" as he Maw put it ... chewing holes in the melons Pap grew for sale to the roadside fruit stands that lined the roads toward D.C., from whence people drove out into the countryside on weekends to buy fresh produce.

When a copperhead crawls into your lap everything you ever heard about snakes comes racing to mind. And that's plenty because nothing has more mountain lore attached than snakes. There is the classic copperhead that bites the rabbit dog hours after its head is severed. There are rattlers that will not die until the sun goes down, no matter how many pieces they are chopped into. Milk snakes that suck cows at night... Snakes that strike at any moving thing because they go blind during the molting season of dog days... Hoop snakes that roll up into a hoop and travel at high speeds: "Hoop snakes's got a stinger that can kill a cow, even a tree. An' if a hoop snake slings that stinger into a man, it'll drop him like a hammer." Snakes that puff themselves up inside their holes so they cannot be pulled out. The snake that spiraled up the hoe handle from amid the beans to strike Great Aunt Pearline in the face. Hundreds of snakes balled up inside sawdust piles in the winter, stiff as sticks but ready to slither away when the sun hits them... Coachwhip snakes with braided tails that whip their prey to death... Bright yellow and black bull snakes that "puff and blow and slobber like

a wild bull.” Black snakes that can “swallow a whole cat and can clean rats out from a corn crib quicker than you can say caddywumpus.” Joint snakes whose parts rejoin themselves when severed: “Yep, I seen a coachwhip chopped up under a disc cultivator. All its pieces got back together and crawled away at sundown.” Snakes were right up there with niggers, women and Jesus when it came to God’s mysterious creations no man will ever understand.

So you can see why the first challenge of dealing with a copperhead in your lap is trying not to piss yourself out of pure fright. After that comes the little electric rings of fear that course through you for the next half hour until your body finally slips into some form of necrotic stillness, waiting to either be bitten or just die from the pure duration of the wait. Eventually, when the sun crawled down behind the honey locust trees, the copperhead moved slowly, too slowly in my opinion, off my lap, into the dead grass and up the bank behind me. When my head cleared I tried to find the snake to beat it to death. No use.

When I got home most everybody but the women thought it was right funny. “Always stop and think before you park your tail on the ground, boy,” Pap said. “Or in some woman’s bed,” an uncle chuckled. After that I sniped at the groundhog from up in a nearby tree.

I tell you about the copperhead not as a childhood horror or cautionary tale ... though maybe as those things too ... but rather to record a time when even childhood was lived close to the quick. As close to snakebite as to the glory of chocolate cake and the amber light of a Southern morning.

## 4. *Queen of the Skies*

AS I DROVE THROUGH THE DECAYING NEIGHBORHOOD in Winchester, Virginia, the pain of growing up there came back ... the stabbing kind that only lasts a second but makes you flinch as you remember some small but stupid and brutal moment of adolescence. I have never known if everyone has them, but I've always suspected they do. Now that old neighborhood slid by my rental car window looking like it was painted by Edward Hopper, then bleakly populated with gangstas, old men with forty ounce malt liquor bottles, hard-working single moms and kids on cheap busted plastic tricycles.

Wedge between the old railroad station and the Confederate Cemetery, our neighborhood was and still is called the North End. It has gone mostly black now. But

you can see some of its families going through the same struggle for modest respectability as in 1961 when it was the poorest edge of white Winchester ... flower pots on porches, lawn edges cut crisply in the earth along sidewalks, as if the red clay pounded by the feet of neighborhood kids were going to produce enough grass to threaten the walkways ... all those things the poorest white working people did back then to proclaim: We might be poor and close to Niggertown, but we ain't niggers.

And there on the corner a block up Piccadilly stands Patti Hensley's house, where for the first time I asked a girl for a date, a memory that causes me an actual physical flinch every time it surfaces. Just about everyone at our school knew Patti Hensley was going to be an airline stewardess because: A. She said so; and B. She was excruciatingly cute, which was, far as any of us in the tenth grade knew, the only requirement for the job. And, as if we needed any further evidence, Patti was already dating seniors, proof she had the sophistication to become a globe trotting bunny of the skies like those we'd seen in *Playboy* magazine. For all I know, Patti thought of it the same way at the time. But beyond that, Patti Hensley was unarguably as sincere an individual as anyone could ever imagine. Accepted in the best cliques of girls and invited to every exclusive teen party by the boys and girls of every old name or wealthy family in town because of her beauty, she nevertheless kept her kindness intact. If she was guilty of the sin of vanity ... she never had a hair out of place and obviously spent thousands of hours at grooming ... she



most certainly kept it a private enough vice.

Patti lived around the corner a block from me, in the same working class neighborhood, but out of the shadow of the dingy round-the-clock clattering textile mill across from my house, which was a stark gray frame thing with awkwardly placed windows and a front porch that had been boxed in and converted to a bedroom. Hers was crisp and white stucco with a wraparound porch pleasantly strewn with wicker furniture and shaded by climbing wisteria that seemed like an extension of the deep green lawn and shrubs. Her father, a foreman at the mill, could be seen on Saturdays through the wisteria smoking and reading. Given the ridiculous class awareness of native Virginians, compounded by the agonizing self-consciousness of being a teenager, one block and some whitewash was the difference between Leave it to Beaverville and Hell's Kitchen. So how I ever got the idea of asking her for a date is beyond me even all these years later ... Patti with her penny loafers, pleated skirts and circle pin, me still in cheap flannel shirts and jeans from Sears like the small boys over at the elementary school. A fool could spot the chasm between us. Part of it was my just plain cluelessness. The other part was a courageous shot in the dark on the part of hope. But most of it was having absolutely no idea how the world of dating worked.

So I spent the first half of a fall Saturday getting ready, dressing as coolly attractive as a guy can in cheap woven brown nylon shoes ... made black with liquid stove polish for the occasion ... stiffly ironed blue work pants and a

fifty cent haircut from the drunkest barber in town, Mr. Schwartz. But the act of spiffing up put me in a buoyant mood and I walked out of the house into the mist of a damp fall afternoon.

It was only when Patti Hensley's screen door opened slightly and I saw her soft silhouette before me as the polished hardwood floors swept away behind her that panic struck and my head began to roar with the thundering of love's poisoned hooves. It dawned on me that I had never spoken to this girl in my life and we only knew each others' names because we were in the same grade and lived in the same neighborhood.

"Well, hello Joey!" she said with that warm, buttery smile of hers, slight confusion flashing only briefly across her face. "Would you like to sit down on the porch for a moment? Or come in?"

"Ah, no...I was just wondering if you'd want to go to the dance at the Fire Hall tomorrow." Subtle, right? Completely out of it. Yet, here she was inviting a grubby little pud who'd appeared on the front porch into her house.

"Oh, I'm sorry but I don't think that would work out for me." (Work out? What did that mean, for god's sake? My mind jammed.)

"Okay...well... I was just in the neighborhood (like I didn't live in the friggin' neighborhood!) and I thought I'd ask." It surely must be flattering to a girl to be asked out just because a guy walks by and thinks, "Huh? Oh, a female lives there, guess I'll ask her for a date." Brilliant, Bageant, brilliant, I thought to myself

“Sure you won’t sit down for a minute?”

“No, I gotta go now.”

I practically leapt from the porch to the street. On the way home I looked down to see my wet shoes starting to produce tiny black rivulets of stove polish.

At that time I was buddies with, if you could call being a sycophant being buddies, two older high school boys who lived next door in a clapboard tenement ... Jim and Dick Carby. Jim and Dick were true teenaged hillbilly hipsters whose old man kept several racehorses, despite the fact they had cost him a trucking company and lots of trouble with the IRS. But at age fourteen I couldn’t imagine anything more worldly or absolutely hip these two who were respectively two and three years older than me. Jim rode as an exercise boy at the track and I often spent evenings polishing his jockey boots and saddle, doing anything that would allow me to stick around the two older guys, listen to Carl Perkins records and feel hip. The fact that neither Jim nor Dick had a girlfriend never got in the way of me wanting to hear their expertise on women and courtship.

So when I made the mistake of telling them about asking Patti for a date. Jim howled, “My fuckin’ god! Every guy in the school wants to date Patti Hensley.” The oldest of the two brothers, Jim was tall, thin, with the kind of scooped back dark hair that made him spend hours admiring his profile in the mirror. And though they spared me the misery of teasing, they gave each other looks of utter bafflement that I could be so stupid. Surely they had quite

a laugh over it later. For years afterward, day in and day I ducked Patti Hensley in the hallways at school, avoiding her attention in every way possible. Oh crazy regret.

Three decades later when the class of 63 Hadley High School reunion rolled around, I was up for it. I'd never been to a high school reunion, but from the other side of fifty they start to take on new significance. Particularly if you've been away for thirty years. I felt it was bound to be a moving experience just to see what time and its river does or doesn't do to us all. Beyond that, I wanted to be around a few people whose very presence verified that I was young once and devoid of the fatigue and cynicism that now looms in the background of my days.

The Hadley reunion was held in the main room of a colonial era inn now called the Fox Tavern, a heavily timbered and dark catacomb of rooms highlighted with oil paintings of fox hunts, red linen topped tables, blue flow ware and antique silver. Naturally there were the shriveled old teachers escorted by graying former pupils who'd become psychiatrists and CPAs and teachers themselves. Watching as each person or couple entered the front door, I was absorbed in that warm recognition of faces once young, now mostly discernable by their eyes.

The attendees were all the movers and shakers of those high school days, because, after all, it is those who had near perfect high school experiences and who stay in their hometowns living lives of unadventurous continuity who organize and go to these things. And as sure as God made little green apples, there was not one person there I could

say had been a friend of mine at Hadley. Certainly not Jim Carby, who died in a motorcycle accident or Dick Carby, now retired from the Virginia State Highway Department and a born-again Christian who wouldn't go anyplace where alcohol was served. It disappointed me a bit, but I was still excited to see these changed, yet deeply familiar faces go by in the cottony world martinis create. It was also pleasant to discover that some of the most arrogant had warmed and improved with age. And hell, after all, I'd had a pretty exciting career by local standards, met all sorts of famous people and traveled the world more than I ever really wanted to. There were lots of reasons to feel confident and excited.

I wasn't looking for Patti Hensley when she introduced herself to someone standing near me at the bar in the Fox that night. Despite what I might have expected, there was no embarrassing memory of that day on her front porch. Nor was there any of the normal writer's interest to hear about what had become of her life. Because there she stood in a black designer cocktail dress, thin, almost deathly looking, with that purple lesion across her arm which spells AIDS. For once in my life as a writer I did not want to know the story. I still don't.

Accompanying her was a large heavy well-groomed man with a silver mustache who was, as I gathered from their conversation, her husband, a retired airline pilot. Patti's haggard glance caught me staring at her. But like most extremely attractive women, having had a lifetime of men staring, she took it to be the plain ogling of a fool, not

recognizing me in the slightest. All I could think of was what good fortune forty unwanted pounds, thinning hair and an Italian suit can sometimes be.

## 5. *Whiskey, Snakes and Voltaire*

I CALLED THE OLD MAN GRANDPAP. BUT MOST OF MY mother's family called him a son of a bitch. Which never bothered me. I still liked him.

During the summers when I visited him in North Carolina I'd sit with the old man on the front porch of his cabin and plink away with a .22 rifle at whatever critters crawled out of the swamp. Sometimes if I got lucky it was a water moccasin snake. But more often it was a feral cat, a plain old housecat gone wild in the swamp – which the old man pronounced to rhyme with stamp. *Swaamp*.

The swamp was a nearly supernatural place wherein the water turned a different color each morning. Some days it was blood red. Others it was electric green or cobalt blue because the nearby textile mill dumped its waste dyes

upriver.

Grandpap Miles' kids called him a son of a bitch because he ran off to live with the Seminole Indians after the ninth one, my mother, was born. Then at age 70 he came back and bought a shack conveniently located between the swamp and the edge-of-town grocery/liquor store to sip cheap whiskey and read for the rest of his life.

Which is why I loved spending summers with him. The reading. I remember one summer when I was 13 he read much of Françoise Voltaire to me while I plinked away with that "cat rifle," as he called it. Around dusk he'd wash up in a basin, put on his white cotton dress jacket and Panama hat and hobble down the gravel road to the store, where he'd mumble back and forth with the other old men who came there every evening for the same reason he did. An hour later he'd return home with his bottle, plus a new box of .22 cartridges and we'd watch the sun go down together. After that he'd light the kerosene lanterns, cook some hominy and pork, then read silently until we both fell asleep.

Once he'd been an overseer on a big cotton plantation, owned a smart looking white Ford coupe and made a good living for his family, even during the Depression. He was fast and wild and knew how to turn a dollar when he bothered to. But after the drunken night he spit tobacco juice up against the woodstove and left for Florida, Grandaw and all those kids had to move into a two-room pine board shack you could see daylight through.

Worse yet, they had to pick cotton, every able-bodied one of them, for a penny a pound. If you've never torn up your



hands on the rough pod of a cotton bol under the unforgiving Dixie sun you ain't missed much, no matter how romantic it looks in the movies with all the black folks singing *Go Down Old Hannah*. It takes a damned lot of cotton to fill a 100-pound sack and when Old Hanna does go down behind the tight, flat line of the horizon, you're ready to sing out of pure gratitude you didn't drop dead in that cruel red dirt. So it's no wonder my mama always said "Maybe I ain't give my kids much, but by God they never picked cotton." You can see why they hated Grandpap Miles. Of course by the time the old man came back "just so we'd have to bury his sorry ass" as uncle Garland put it, there weren't as many of his kids left to hate him. Two got killed in WW II's South Pacific campaign, one froze to death in Korea and Uncle Frankie – who was as wild and fast as Granddaddy Miles – got his head snapped off when he ran his Indian motorcycle under an oncoming truck in 1949. Once I asked Pappy Miles why he went to live with the Seminole Indians and left Grandmaw with all those kids. He said: "Folks left behind can only see a man running off. If they ain't willing to run alongside they can't see what he's running toward, which might be something finer than their tiny minds can imagine."

This touched me somewhere inside because he always called me his "little running buddy." I liked the old man even more after that. And I like his memory especially now, when I stop to consider that I stayed away from my family for more than ten years after leaving home at age 18. A couple of wives, thousands of books and a cotton sack full of

troubles later, I suspect I got a little of his blood somewhere in the deal.

When Old Miles died he shook the ground. He got hit by a car on his dusky walk to the liquor store. I was 13. He was deader than a saw log. He was so mean he never even bled. But the whiskey ran from the broken bottle in the brown paper sack alongside the road. Cops came. Relatives came. Thankfully I was overlooked in the first few minutes of confusion. So I left with the newest box of .22 cartridges in my pocket.

Before he was even on the cooling board folks were saying how shameful it was, the way he died. But as I sat on his porch and knocked that cottonmouth off a cypress limb with the cat rifle, his way of dying seemed fit enough to me.

And someday when I don't have a boss riding my back and a woman riding my heart I'll have time on my hands just like he did. Time to pour two slugs of whiskey. One for me and one for him. Then I'll drink them both.

Maybe even read a little Voltaire.

## *6. The Panther in the Sycamore*

IT HAPPENS PERHAPS ONCE OR TWICE EVERY AUGUST. A violent red Virginia sundown drapes the land, the kind that bathes the farmhouses and ponds in reflected blood. It is as if the heat absorbed during dog days will erupt from the earth to set all the fields afire. Distant cars raise threatening dust clouds on the horizon that settle on the backs of copperhead snakes in wait of the night's coolness and the hunt. Eternity flashes in the eyes of old farmers setting out salt blocks for white-faced cattle.

It is at exactly such a dusk in 1951 that Uncle Nelson and I saw the panther. In the meadow sycamore, a panther so black it is almost blue. Neither Nelson nor I have ever seen a panther. Never expected to in our lives. But there it is. Big as life. Nelson's face shows almost holy amazement in the red light. He takes his pipe away from his quivering lip. Not

that fear was a part of it, only awe at this beast. The panther drops weightlessly to the ground and glides into the loblolly pines with all its lithe power. We let out our breath. We gesture at each other for a minute, then trot for home. By the time we reach the house twilight had settled.

“Maw,” I blurt. “We seen a panther down by the big sycamore. Black as night. Long and black as night.”

Maw turns away from the hand pump by the galvanized sink where she had been drawing dishwater. “Never been a panther in these parts I know of,” she says. But the set of Nelson’s wide dark face tells her this is a true thing. “Hear that Pap?” she asks. “The boys seen a panther. A panther is a sign of war and troubles of war.”

My grandfather frowns, says nothing in reply. Then he raises up his lanky frame from the kitchen chair, picks up the kitchen slop bucket and heads for the hog pen.

What about the sign of war? I wanted to know. Silence from Maw. Well, if it was a sign, I figured, Maw would sure as hell know about it. Maw knew her signs. Maw knew what poultices cured chicken pox, how to plant and reap by the almanac.

“If talk was corn that old man couldn’t buy grain,” Maw grumbled at Pap’s non-response.

And that was all I ever got in the way of answers about the panther and the sign of war. I would one day learn that panthers were among the first beasts killed off by the English and German settlers in our region, along with red wolves and the eastern woodland bison. And that black is just one of the color possibilities of panthers anywhere on

the planet. But in that day and in our world on Shanghai Road along the drains of Sleepy Creek panthers inhabited their place alongside witches, wolf trees, milk drinking snakes such other creatures as prowled the subconscious and gave explanation to the greater unknown. Life for some last few of us was still animated on interior levels by the idea of such spirits. Things both tangible and impalpable lived alongside one another with equal importance and the panther, sign of the devil's favorite anvil, war, was an augury waiting to be fulfilled. Indeed, the Korean War was going on strong at the time, though I did not know it. Yet, much as some part of my heart still wants to find truthfulness in a sign divined by my long-dead grandmother, I cannot. Our family, which has been birthing hard-eyed and willing soldiers for every American war since Lord Braddock's fatal march on the French and Indians, was never touched by the conflict that scorched Korea from 1950 to 1953. So I am left with no meaning for the sign, just its awesome impression. And even that impression is slipping away to the faintly aching netherworld now that old enough to know the true meaning of the word "past."

## *7. Prince of a Different Peace*

IN AN ANCIENT RURAL COUNTY IN WEST VIRGINIA ON Christmas morning, a bent old man with a face like gentle twisted wildwood will raise the American flag in the frost. Then he will go back indoors, sit down quietly amid the smells of cooking, light his pipe and dream.

My Uncle Nelson raises the flag every morning at the secluded nursing home in the hills of Morgan County, West Virginia. If anyone in this world should have that right, it is he. Because Uncle Nelson, whom we called Nels, never left Morgan County in his life. Not even once.

You see, when he was born a deaf mute over 80 years ago on that lonesome Blue Ridge Mountain farm, there were not handicapped programs available as there are today.

So, my grandparents kept him at home in the belief that

was the safest, best path for Nelson's happiness. He grew up splitting wood, gardening, watching the turning of three-quarters of a century of Christmases with a purity of heart I've never seen in another soul. Limiting as their decision may sound today, it was apparently the right one. Because for more than two decades after they were gone, he lived a free, independent and rich life on that farm.

When I was 24, my grandparents died. And Nels did a strange thing. He grieved wildly and openly – for one day. He then went upstairs to his bedroom in the old farmhouse – the one he was born in – and rearranged all the furniture that had been in the same spot for more than 50 years.

And that was it. Period. He came back down, lit his pipe and sat down to wait for the cold January funeral to happen.

Then he went on farming and cooking for himself and was just as happy alone as with people. I don't know many folks who could spend a month alone without restlessness or need for approval or need or something, but he can, and did, for years.

I know now he's the embodiment of the Buddhist "chop wood, carry water" road to grace. Which is ironic for me, because during the 1960s I ran all over the country listening to gurus and studying eastern paths, not knowing I'd already met a man who was a master of his own.

Neither do the people at the nursing home where he lives. They often treat him as if he were mentally handicapped.

"We let him raise the flag," smiles one nurse. No one ever "let" Nels do anything. He just does such things with

willing grace, that's all. Yet, the direction of his intelligence is clearly different from ours. He doesn't know about Iraq or Paris Hilton or the corporatization of our nation. What he does know is the feel of the first snowfall on his face, the powerful steady calm of plain work done with strong old hands.

Nels' feelings are "close to the surface," the psychologist at the care center tells me. This was not exactly news, since his feelings have been written all over his face his entire life. He cries freely, and seldom out of sadness. When I last visited him he came limping across the lawn of the care center, his broad face streaming tears of joy.

Here before him was a 55-year-old nephew he'd not seen in a decade.

And I remembered how he used to babysit me when I was a kid. Often for days at a time. Which meant giving me rides in the wheelbarrow on the green farmhouse lawn in the summer dusk, happy feedcorn battles in the granary, and long laughing slides down through the hay mow.

And his calm tears were about all that.

In a season allegedly dedicated to the Prince of Peace across a violent planet I take comfort in having seen the inner landscape of at least one great soul – a silent prince of our forgotten peace.



## 8. *Vituperation*

SOME PEOPLE JUST CANNOT LET A THING DROP. SOME people will sashay right in here with that smart mouth of theirs and run a subject right into the ground while other people are doing their level best to make this chicken house a home. Run a thing right into the ground and break it off at the nub! Mama Love and I were putting up contact paper on all the cabinets when Sister Ony marches in and throws herself down on a dinette chair. She says in that mouthy righteous tone of hers: “If Papa John hadn’t a dug up old Colonel Davison from back yard so he could put is the new septic tank we wouldn’t be living in the chicken house today. And if Papa John hadn’t a dug up his old Confederate bones Papa John wouldn’t have incurred God’s wrath and our house would never have burned down,” she says.

That's the kind of vituperation Sister Ony heaps on this family. She will vitupe at the drop of a hat because she is a Pentecostal. We've always been Methodists but she went Pentecostal for stubbornness sake; God's wrath is the Pentecostal explanation for everything.

But even if there's one gnat's eyelash of truth in it, which there is not, I've told her time and again that Papa John surely did not move Colonel Davison's bones out of pure meanness and even the Pentecostal God only punishes meanness, not honest mistakes. Never mind that it was for a septic tank that Colonel Davison gave up his eternal resting-place. Papa John could have just as well put the tank right next to Colonel Davison's grave. Then where would Colonel Davison be with you-know-what flooding his coffin day and night? It would be entirely too vulgar to contemplate. If you look at it that way, moving Colonel Davison was the only right thing to do. And if I were Colonel Davison I'd much rather be behind a nice aluminum building like our tool shed, out of sight, out of mind, which is where Papa John put the Colonel. Besides that, who wants moldy old Confederate bones buried too close to their domicile of residence?

Colonel Davison is the man who built our house after the Civil War. Now to an imaginative person like Sister Ony, that could be a good enough reason the Colonel might want to stay smack in our back yard and not want to be moved up by the tool shed. And a person as imaginative as Ony might just point out how our house burned down just one week after the Colonel was moved. Oh, but we

all know about Sister Ony's imagination, don't we? Wasn't it Ony who used to twirl her baton all day in front of the cornrows pretending they were her marching band? And it is Ony who believes her Lilt permanent wave will only hold if she sets it in a waxing moon. I rest my case.

But Ony just sits there in the kitchen gnawing at the subject like a rat on a corn cob: "How would you like your grave to be marked with nothing but a big yellow heating oil drum?" she says.

"Well Miss Priss," I said, "it's not Papa John's fault the Colonel's gravestone was all shot up and not worth moving because Brother Melvin used it for target practice last deer season." And it's not Papa John's fault that Brother Melvin's dog carried off Colonel Davison's leg bone while Papa John was digging on the new grave, either.

"It's simple cause and effect that has brought God's wrath upon this house," says Ony.

God's wrath or not, that still leaves us all living here in the chicken house with low ceilings and a scratch pen for a back yard. Mama Love is so mad about it that Papa John could not even buy her off with the new Congolium. Mama Love says even Congoleum won't stop chicken lice from crawling out of the floors the first warm day comes along. Never mind we haven't kept chickens since Papa John went broke on eggs ten years ago and vocated to the backhoe business. And Mama says she did not marry Papa John to end up her days living in a henhouse or a doghouse or any other kind of house fit for any kind of animal whatsoever. Then Mama Love goes into her windup:

“All for the sake of a septic tank we can’t even use because Papa John hit clay and now the septic won’t perk and the county won’t even let us use it!”

Mama Love always winds up things with such resounding finality, I said to Ony. I’ve always appreciated that about Mama Love – her resounding finality.

“Resounding finality my foot!” says sister Ony. “Nobody but you talks like that.”

“Mama Love, will you please do something about this illiterate heathen child?” I said.

“Sister Ony!” Mama Love barked.

“And please do try to appreciate Mama Love’s sense of resounding finality,” I said. “or you’ll be sorry some day when she’s dead and gone.”

“Papa John will probably put her up there under the heating oil drum like he did the Colonel!” Sister Ony snapped back in that mouthy self-righteous way of hers. That’s right. Snapped back just like some ill-tempered beast.

Well I’m here to tell you that Papa John came right up out of his La-Z-Boy on that one. Then he moved his television and his miniature John Deere tractor collection into the camper truck and that’s where he stays now. Sister Ony has driven that poor man from hearth and home with her bitter Pentecostal tongue. Mama Love says Ony gets her ways honest. She says Ony was marked at birth by Reverend Orvin Dill, because Brother Melvin shot the radio antenna ball off the top of the house when she was carrying Sister Ony. After that, all we could get was “Salvation Station,” because it is only half a mile away. Reverend Orvin Dill

broadcasts it out of his dairy barn between milking times and after dinner for two more hours. The day Sister Ony was born Mama Love kept it on real loud to take her mind off the nausea and cramps. So Ony is indeed a tragically marked child. That's exactly how Mama Love tells it and I believe every word.

Sister Ony is not going to let up on this thing. She has painted on the heating oil drum in big blacks letters:

I AM PORED OUT LIKE WATER MY BONES  
ARE OUT OF JOINT MY HEART IS LIKE WAX  
IT IS MELTED IN THE MIST OF MY BOWELLS -  
WHERE IS MY LEGBONE? PSALMS 22:14

And that's where it stands right now, dear hearts. Sister Ony prays Papa John will repent and put the Colonel back in his old spot. Also that Colonel Davison will find eternal peace and his leg bones too. Brother Melvin's deer gun has been confiscated after a ricochet passed through the camper while Papa John was on the stool.

I have written a major work about this whole incident. It's fifty-one pages long and it is called *Consummate Vituperation*. Believe me, Sister Ony will not be pleased when it's published. I hand delivered it to the *Evening Star* and included a picture of the author. It is my graduation picture, the eight by ten, not just one of the little ones. The editor assures me my major work will receive "appropriate consideration." That's exactly what he said, "appropriate consideration."

I have also subscribed to the *Evening Star* with my mad money. Today the paper carrier put up a red newspaper

tube next to the “BACKHOE WORK DONE” sign at the front of our driveway. It’s only a matter of time now until the world hears the truth about Sister Ony and how she is a snake at the bosom of this family. Also about the moon and the Lilt permanent foolishness.

By the way, I looked up Psalms 22:14. I told Sister Ony about her poor spelling and how there is nothing about legbones in Psalms 22.

She just looked at me in that high headed way of hers and said, “My savior understands what I mean.”

“You will live to regret your vituperation,” I told her. Just you wait and see.

When that day comes, and it won’t be long now, I will not act biggety. The full truth will be my just reward. The newspaper carrier will probably walk the paper right up to this door. I won’t even unfold it. I’ll put it right down on the dinette then sit and wait. And when they read it out loud to one another, I will not smirk. I’ll be the picture of Christian forgiveness. The absolute living picture.

Cover Photograph: Dorothea Lange (Library of Congress)

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