



Red Mud Review

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Editor's Note

When Rachel and I were choosing a theme for this edition of RMR, one thing that we agreed on was that we wanted to hear Southern stories. Now, that aesthetic could've taken on many forms, but whatever way our writers told their stories, we knew there needed to be a presence of magic within them.

Magic is not simply witch's brew and hexes, or fae and familiars, although it very well could be. Magic is unique to the person and their experiences through life thus far. That magic that is inherent in Southern stories is not often seen as magic at all, but rather, takes on the form of tradition, or simply generational expectation. We wanted to know those perspectives, those traditions, those habits, those expectations, that magic.

Southern magic is often unspoken; woven so deeply within the fabric of our identities, that even the tone of the writing itself belies a unique Southern voice that rings true across any barrier or label. And yet each one is so unique because Southern identity is quilted together by factors such as generational poverty, agricultural economies, and racism, to name a few. That's why, after some time, I started to look at the idea of Southern stories as the quilts of our writer's experiences, stitched together by magic and love.

We wanted see our writer's quilts, the patches of their born or transplanted Southern experiences and how their quilts have grown over time. The patches could be neatly cut into their respective shapes but the stitching ragged. The patches could be a mess of sizes and shapes, but the stitching secure. Either way, however this quilt came into existence and is being held together, this quilt is cherished and valuable and unlike any other, even if all the materials are the same.

I think we've done that with this edition. Some of these voices are as unexpected as the tales being told themselves, but that's what makes being a Southerner so special and so unique. Expect to be surprised and enamored by what you find. Maybe you, reader, will find a story like your own here in this edition. Maybe you won't. But one thing I can be sure of, is that you'll know these stories and may very well add them to your own quilt.

Thank you to our writers for sharing their stories with us and all of those that helped us start this quilt of our own with this edition of RMR.

-Deidra

Kelsey Adams

Ghosts in the Walls

At the end of Asbury Road, the oldest road in my world, sits a house. Nestled in with golden rows of corn, kissed by vines on three sides and cinched tight up front by cracked asphalt, the house waits, resting now but humming still with the stories of the lives that have been lived in it. The creaky floor is mostly quiet, though decades of footsteps live in the linoleum, phantom paths treading themselves and retracing their way back. The shelves and drawers and closets have been excavated in archaeological digs through memory and time, and each room seems deflated in some way. It's barren—but not cruelly so. It's comfortable and sad, still like home. There's a hazy human presence lingering there, benevolent ghosts floating just beyond the periphery of the room, like they just walked out to the garden and will be coming right back. The things that *were* seem to lie just beneath what now *is*—and if I close my eyes long enough, I'm there, barefoot in the soft front yard, knobby knees and stubbornness and the same sad curiosity I've always felt about the world. I can close my eyes and see it as it was, a living, breathing place, the place where we were planted, where we took root and bloomed.

**

In my mind the house is big. I perceive it always with elementary eyes, the colors of the sky outside and the sunshine slanting off the barn's red roof saturated, a little blurry and out of focus. The summers were eternal for my sister and me. We played beneath our guardians the oak trees and came inside, holy precious terrors, Oreo mouths and wasp stings and chicken noodle soup. We begged Granny to teach us the magic of flour-dusted hands, and then we napped on the floor, afternoon refrigerator Crayola Picassos. There were stacks of catalogs and magazines, library books and crossword puzzles. Entire worlds spun parallel to one another in bookcases, and Polaroids faded slowly in wooden

boxes—curled hair, red lipstick, black car, portable radio. We dug through those old treasures like explorers in exotic lands, looking for secrets and stories in the cedar chest, trying to find where we came from.

**

When Granny died, it seemed like the house grew three times its original size. Papa seemed smaller, unsure at first how to navigate the open space. We came to know him more, though, slowly, comfortable in our worn chairs and football games. We learned how beautiful things can come after devastation, the way you can burn a field to the ground one year to allow for new growth the next. There's something gracious about a splintered family trying to reset the broken bones, something honorable in the attempt, even if they heal improperly and leave a scar.

I remember waking up one morning and longing to be close to the earth, feeling flooded and awestruck by the power of that place. I found new little things to love every time I returned—brown work gloves in jacket pockets, mud on the boots tucked in the back hallway closet. I started craving black coffee and looking closely at his calloused hands. Those hands wrote the stories in the land, the land in the stories in blood and under fingernails, hands on tools in the shed, hands on steering wheels and on the heart. Family histories were laid on the table before us, the old tales mythologized and made colossal, divine and immortal in their antiquity. For the first time, we drank whiskey, too, and we talked about the things that mattered; we knew that the land was inside of us, and we were borne of it, the mud caked on the boots, and we felt proud.

**

The house went quiet then, much too fast, and Papa's solid footprints in the garden washed away. Now the cement handprints on the carport are dusty and overgrown, and the sun beats down in his old cruelty, fiercer and harsher with the oak trees gone. When I go there, I close my eyes and think about all the time we always thought there'd be, the things we didn't do because the days seemed

innumerable before us. I think of the trinkets in vanity drawers and the boxes of cassettes, all the tiny stories that lived within the big story.

The house is haunted, but the ghosts are kind. If you walk into a room fast enough, you might catch one reading a novel in the recliner, the other walking in the tomatoes with a Coors can in hand and another in the shirt pocket. The stories are alive still, stories like ghosts—stories tucked into cookbooks beside the recipe for the green bean casserole and folded into worn leather wallets, stories of the drunken dances on wedding night tables and card games in the early morning hours. These stories live in the soil, giving life to the next generation of crops and people, weaving us all together like weeds tangled on the side of the road, beautiful in our plainness and honesty.

The house is teeming with stories, the ghosts seated around the dining room table and mowing the lawn—cerebral flashbacks of fist fights in the front yard on Thanksgiving, imprints of wine-soaked giggles and cigarette smoke tendrils on the carport on a humid Tennessee July night. They replay over and over, silent movies projected on the wood-paneled walls, whispers coming from the next room. The ghosts walk through the cornfields, the stalks moving in the wind as though grazed by spectral shoulders, the soft dirt the place of rebirth.

**

At the end of Asbury Road, the oldest road in my world, sits a house. It lives in the marrow of my bony fingers, in the pulse of my muddy ancestral line. It's the place my memory intersects with mystery, the magic of the ordinary moments we string one after the other like lights on a strand to make a life. And I know I will be a ghost there, too, one day, one of the hazy memories living in the walls, and the house will keep my bones.

Bridget Yates

Pear Tree

(Inspired by William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*)

Many nights I
slinked from brick
borders to fleece
blankets damp
with fondling
and fumbling—
damp from sap and
my sap, peel and
my peel—
the pit of
my fruit, hulled.

Some Afternoon in Smalltown, USA

We were driving to nowhere and
talked about sons, daughters,

and the world—

about how we are unintentionally
woven into this grand tapestry
with other threads of star stuff,
how an omnipotent hangnail
snags some threads

but not others—

why some threads are pulled out
for being the wrong shade,
the wrong texture,
for lookin' at some other thread funny.

Dirty Picket Fence

she can recall who you are,
just barely.

you languish in the cinnamon sweet nothings
that cling to the roof of her mouth
whenever she swallows
whenever she wakes, avoiding your name.

she remembers the bonfire smell of sweat and cedar
the cicadas rattling faster than her heart
the licking of petals by the stone wall when you...

and then she's driving,
driving to you
with a tetanus lock grip on the steering wheel
a cigarette bobbing
up-down, up-down
between her lips.

she feels it now, right now.
and it's going to snap her bones
like a load of
raw iron ore
and she's still learning how to swim
she is going to do it,
do it for you and she's going to
wrap her arms around your neck and
croon with the curled lips of your
hollow polished trumpet
when you see her and...

she can't remember how she, how she,
she is standing by your picket fence and
she can't remember how she, how she,
she is standing on your white washed porch
and she can't remember how she, how she
forgot her middle name.

but she remembers yours.

Adrian Sanders

Peach

after *Flame* by C.D. Wright

the tree	the leaf	the stem
the seed	the skin	the fuzz
the plump	the bite	the juice
the sweet	the tongue	the taste
the hands	the spring	the bees
the bruise	the raw	the vine
the bite	the lush	the tart
the cheek	the farm	the sticky
the dirt	the nectar	the roots
the bite	the burst	the flesh
the chill	the pit	the peach
the ripe	the ripened	the ripening

Alina Stefanescu

Bankhead at Midnight

He stokes the fire with pine straw.
The sound of cereal crackling.
Why are you scared? he wonders.
It's not like I haven't hiked to the
heart of a big, bad forest before.
It's not like this is the first time.
Or the fifth.

The cycle of coming and going
is older than the words we use
to contain it. Older than the toxic
bleached cotton we place between
bodies and panties.

There are angry bears, I insist.
He could die laughing, building
that fire. This is not a German fairy story,
he reminds and laughs again.

It may not be a story but I am
still succulent meat. I am still
sweet dripping red blood, an
aroma feeling easy to find if
you are hungry. If you want meat
with blood. If you are a bear
who likes his girls rare.

Nicole Sadek

The Holy City

In Charleston, seafood is our gold. We speak from salted tongues and carry clouds of humidity on our shoulders—let our sand-washed hair and southern accents flow like Spartina grass on a summer’s marsh. We are a medley of Daniel Island, Mount Pleasant, West Ashley, and Isle of Palms, linked by the Emmanuel 9 and Highway 17. We are artists, musicians, the so-called liberals of the state, yet we still call our farms plantations and our tourist attractions slave markets.

We are cigarette butts tightly packed between cobblestone.

We are the clogging of horse hooves. We are the thirteen steps that lead to Drayton Hall, and we are the superstitious. Limestone and granite are our only markers, those chapped walls of a Georgian Meeting Street apartment; brick, one-room quarters, dressed in moss and spider webs, bowing down to Master’s House; three-storied Italianates at the harbor’s edge; suburban homes at every bend of the Holy City.

Our skyline is the sharp incline and descent of church steeples and the diamond-shaped towers of the Ravenel Bridge. Wooden crosses adorn the horizon, casting shadows like fishing wire against downtown streets.

In the farther corners of the county, after Patriot’s Point and Waterfront Park, my home kneels in solidarity with the Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, where nine were shot dead in prayer.

My own mother likes to tell me, as we drive over railroad tracks and dead opossums, “Don’t ever take this for granted.” She speaks in broken English, an Arabic melody loose between her lips. Then she looks up at factory-made clouds and repeats, “Not ever.”

In Charleston, seafood is her gold. She speaks from a sandy tongue and carries the weight of the past on her shoulders—lets her wispy hair and Egyptian accent drift in the country she now calls home. She knows the entire history of this city, as if she lived through the days of cannons and battleships. So she takes

me to the U.S.S. Yorktown, the ship mast that pokes through the skyline, to Rainbow Row, pastel-painted homes along old roads, to the marshes that decorate the county, to the ocean, to the Hunley submarine, to the Spoleto Festival, to Magnolia Gardens, to watch baseball games, to watch students kayak the floods of downtown streets—to school, in one of the most dangerous town's in the country.

Sea salt does not run through wind here, nor does it hide behind fingernails. Instead, the air is smoke and the language is anything but sweet grass. Here, people remember the name Walter Scott on a spring morning. They remember eight shots, five strikes, and a video camera.

We are the wooden shacks against the highway, the small structures made of ten russet planks, set up at an intersection. We are selling our art, but our skin is golden brown, and this city was not built for us.

My hometown is a place cradled between two languages. For my mother, it is the quiet, lush, and green. For me, it is where waves bend and crash and floods are far too common, where people light candles atop the stairs of a large white church, where deer and geese and alligators live freely among the children.

...a place so rich with history that Confederate descendants choke on the smog of their ancestors, where every drum beat from the Citadel's procession is the echo of a Carolina's insecurities, a residual of white robes and Jim Crow.

Charleston is speckled with birds and gunshots.

Our seafood is gold, and color is everything.

Jeanna Padan

Of Earth

(after "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes)

I've known the earth's dust:
I've known the congenial coolness,
easily moved atop the solid ground, easy to take with you
in the clefts of your bones

I've learned how to move
like dust.

I sunk into the ease of the land when I was still in my mother's womb.
I walked along the desert floor under the moon rays
with the company of travelers
singing lullabies beside me.

I have pull my inking body strongly out of the mountain's side,
felt the calves of my legs brush the stubble of the hill
allowed my knee caps to write their names in the dirt.

I have known the earth:
an old, old earth.

I have learned to move like the dust of the earth.

Abby Lewis

Snakes and Stones

She was a wild child, my sister. At four,
she hopped on her red and yellow tricycle
and peddled halfway around the block, naked
as the day she arrived. Grandmother phoned,
demanded how Mother could let Chelsea ride bare,
on full display for the entire neighborhood. Mother
let the gust of grandmother's words pass over her ear,
calm as ever. She didn't even go after my sister,
let her return the same way she left.

Mother knew the house was a crib Chelsea
would not be confined to; its intolerable
prison bar view kept her from making friends—
until the day she found a gardener snake
hidden in the rock garden out front.
It was no longer than the space
between her wrist and the tip of her pinky.
My sister understood a house of rocks
was not the same as a house of flowers,
so she kept it by her bed—in a shoe box
filled with grass—until Mother had a dream
the snake offered Chelsea a killing bite.

We let it go the next morning. It took a week
before my sister's eyes dried completely.
In the months after, she was often found curled
asleep against the belly of the Golden Retriever,
her fine honey-blond hair splayed over the dog's coat
like an added shawl.

Peter Hogan

Dandelion

When downtown moss sprung
from moonlit sidewalk cracks,
I fell in love first with the smell
of her hair, daffodil petals,
then, her voice, dandelion
in drawl; rooted and unplucked,
I dreamed of puffing strands
of wishes into wind. I dreamed
of yellow gardens and not
the bones of what followed.

What I'm saying is a flower
can also be a weed, a skeleton
of its former yellowness in a city
stripped of green. What I'm
saying is I don't dream much
anymore, but I learn
the curl of a dandelion
to concrete, alone now
as I am, barred by
eyes in drifts of wishes in wind
and bare stems and skyline windows.

Talia Green

Orange Crayon

If I were placed inside a box of crayons
I'd fit between the yellow and the red,
a niche for wildfire in my head,
an orange scaled to brilliance of dawn -
I'd streak across the skies of Vietnam,
cast sunset on the mountains up ahead
to outline mountaintops with golden thread -
ignite their peaks before the evening's gone.

I wouldn't be sweetest tangerine;
I like my fruit with quite a little kick,
a sour, natural antihistamine
to clear the sinus, strong and doublequick -

Though some prefer a softer yellow-green,
I'd draw a vibrant orange for the sceptic.

From a Growing Garden in April

*“You have no place in this garden
thinking such things...” - Louise Gluck*

The chrysanthemums cringe from
your thoughts, as I do.

The brushes blush in
distrust of you,
the grass fades dead-brown
around your feet -
only the weeds
welcome you into this Eden.

You gulp sunlight
like all your parts need it
to survive
but you exhale, exhale
herbicide -

Before the rest of us die
from your darkened, chemical mind
we kindly ask you
to uproot yourself
and photosynthesize elsewhere.

Red Mud Review Contributor Bios

Kelsey Adams recently graduated from Austin Peay State University with a BS in English and a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. A concert junkie, avid sports fan, and Tennessee native, she is looking forward to experiencing post-graduation life by napping in the sunshine and reading as many books of her own choosing as she possibly can. She plans to continue her work as a freelance copyeditor while collecting experiences she hopes to one day turn into stories.

Native to Texas, **Chloe Hooks** is an English Major at Duke University and a Los Angeles-based actress and writer. Chloe is pursuing an Honors Distinction in Poetry, advised by Dr. Joseph Donahue, and is currently a member of Dr. Nathaniel Mackey's Advanced Poetry Workshop. Much of her work focuses on combined mythic power of Southern idiom and feminine speech.

Peter Hogan Peter Hogan is a third year MFA candidate in Poetry at the University of Memphis. He is a past Poetry Editor and Senior Poetry Editor at The Pinch Literary Journal. He is a 2016 AWP Intro to Journals Contest school finalist as well as the recipient of the 2016 Deborah Talbot Poetry Award sponsored by The Academy of American Poets. He has publications in *Mulberry Fork Review*, *Yemassee*, and *New Plains Review*.

Abby N. Lewis is a senior at East Tennessee State University. She plans to embark on a years of internships after graduating in May before pursuing an MA. Her first collection of poetry, *Reticent*, was published by Grateful Steps in 2016. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gallery*, *Tennessee Mosaic*, and *Timber*, among others.

Jeanna Padan is a poet from the Memphis area and a graduate of the University of Memphis creative writing program. She works as a publishing assistant for BelleBooks and hopes to pursue teaching in the future. Her work is forthcoming in *Foothill Journal* and *The Pinch*.

Nicole Sadek is a first-year student at Emory University studying creative writing and international studies. She was born in Egypt and raised in Charleston, South Carolina. She currently serves as the social media editor for *The Emory Wheel*, Emory University's student-run newspaper.

Adrian Sanders is a Creative Writing major at Western Kentucky University. Raised in Clarkson, Kentucky, she now resides an hour south in Bowling Green. Her work has appeared in *Jelly Bucket* and *Zephyrus*; she is also the third place recipient of the 2017 Flo Gault Poetry Contest.

Cat Sar is a junior at the University of Louisville. She studies philosophy and English literature. Sar is a winner of the 2016 Sonnets on a Sunday Competition, and a Creative Writing Scholarship from the University of Louisville. Her work can be found in the 2016 and 2017 editions of *Shale*, the University of Kentucky's literary magazine. She works as a poetry editor for the University of Louisville's literary magazine, *The White Squirrel*.

Alina Stefanescu was born in Romania, raised in Alabama, and reared by various friendly ghosts. She won the 2015 Ryan R. Gibbs Flash Fiction Award and was a finalist for the 2015 Robert Dana Poetry Award. *Objects In Vases*, a poetry chapbook, was published by Anchor & Plume in March 2016. A poem from this chapbook, "Oscar Dees, No Apologetics Please," has been nominated for 2017 Pushcart Prize. Alina currently lives in Tuscaloosa with her partner and four friendly mammals.

Bridget Yates is a Kentucky native and Creative Writing undergraduate at Western Kentucky University. Her work has been published in *Zephyrus* and acknowledged by the Flo Gault Poetry Prize in 2016 and 2017.