



# GRAVY



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

**OCTOBER 1**

Visit SFA's shiny new website launch



◀ **OCTOBER 8**  
CELEBRATE LOUIS OSTEEN,  
A SOUTHERN CULINARY LEGEND  
6:00 p.m., The Farm at Old Edwards Inn and Spa,  
Highlands, NC

▶ **OCTOBER 11-13**  
EXPERIENCE SFA'S  
21<sup>ST</sup> FALL SYMPOSIUM  
Oxford, MS



◀ **OCTOBER 18**  
JOIN KELLY ENGLISH AND CAMRON RAZAVI  
FOR FRIENDS OF THE CAFÉ BENEFITING SFA  
6:30 p.m., Alabama Chanin @ The Factory, Florence, AL

▼ **DECEMBER 5**  
HERON'S ROOTED IN THE SOUTH  
BENEFITING SFA, 6:30 p.m.,  
The Umstead Hotel and Spa, Cary, NC



▲ **JANUARY 10-13, 2019**  
TASTE OF THE SOUTH  
Blackberry Farm,  
Walland, TN



◀ **FEBRUARY 9, 2019**  
SFA WINTER  
SYMPOSIUM  
8:30 a.m.–6:30 p.m.,  
Haven  
Birmingham, AL



# GRAVY

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Cover art by GABRIELLA DEMCZUK

Art by Gabriella Demczuk



## POETRY, IN MOTION

*Behind the scenes of Vinegar & Char*

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Julie Sola

AT THE END OF 2016, SHORTLY before I went on maternity leave, John T. Edge floated the idea of compiling an SFA poetry anthology—an idea he credited to the poet Kevin Young (a good friend of John T. and of the SFA). It would be published in the fall of 2018 to coincide with our food and literature symposium.

He asked me what I thought about the idea. What I thought was, *Books take two years, minimum. This is not happening.* What I said was, “Sure! We can do that!” I felt slightly less daunted when the wonderfully talented Sandra Beasley, a long-time SFA collaborator and frequent *Gravy* contributor, agreed to serve as the editor. Then, I became a mother and forgot the whole thing.

Toward the end of my leave, John T. texted to say that Sandra would be in town for a week at the end of April, and could we put our heads together about the poetry book? I was probably doing at least two of the following at that moment: holding Sally, strolling Sally, singing the alphabet to Sally in an unscientific attempt at fostering early literacy, folding laundry, or watching *The West Wing*. I read “April” as “August,” and again replied, “Sure!,” and again forgot the whole thing. (In my defense, I’d like to say that I put a stop to this pattern once I returned to work.)

April came around, Sally was four months old and reciting her ABCs (kidding!), Kirk and I were moving houses, and all of a sudden it was poetry week. Sandra doesn’t know this, but her visit gave me the most satisfying, energizing intellectual exercise I didn’t know I needed.

We sat on my porch and read and talked about poetry while Sally napped. Sandra brought with her sheaves of poems from dozens of poets. Some of them I knew as *Gravy* contributors or symposium presenters. Most were new

Hand-pulled linocuts by Julie Sola accompany the poetry in *Vinegar & Char*.

to me. There were female, male, and nonbinary voices. Voices from the Texas borderlands, from the hills of Appalachia, from the Cuban districts of Miami. Black voices, white voices, Latino and Asian American voices. Their poems spoke of gender. Of labor. Of class and race. They dealt with the past and the present. They were peopled with family, friends, and strangers. With one exception, these poets are all living, all still writing. Across geography and generation, two things connect their work: food and region.

It was a pleasure to work with Sandra on the selection of these poems, and a luxury to revel in their language and rhythms. Ultimately, fifty-five of them constitute *Vinegar & Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance*. Let me be clear: My role in this process was, at most, that of the little girl in the Shake ‘n Bake commercial. Sandra’s vision shaped this collection. And it shapes an expansive, inclusive view of the South—of its people and their foodways. That’s a view shared by the SFA, and it describes a place I want to live. A place I do live.

Here, we’ve gathered fourteen of those poems to share with *Gravy* readers, as well as a lagniappe: a new poem by Sandra Beasley that, for now at least, you’ll only find in these pages. *Gravy* image editor Danielle A. Scruggs commissioned Gabriella Demczuk to make the mixed-media art that accompanies the poems.

Savor this selection. Read each poem aloud. Share it with a friend, a coworker, a loved one. And when you’re finished, the rest of *Vinegar & Char* awaits at your local bookstore. 🍷

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



**SANDRA BEASLEY**

Sandra Beasley is the author of *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life*. Her essays and articles have been featured in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Oxford American*, and elsewhere. She is also the author of three poetry collections: *Count the Waves*; *I Was the Jukebox*, winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize; and *Theories of Falling*, winner of the New Issues Poetry Prize. She edited *Vinegar*

& *Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance*. Beasley lives in Washington, DC. She teaches poetry and nonfiction with the University of Tampa low-residency MFA program.

*What were the hardest and easiest aspects of compiling Vinegar & Char?*

First and foremost, I was looking for great poems in a variety of aesthetic and formal modes. That was the easy part, because there's so much talent out there. But I was also balancing in terms of identity, generation, and geographic distribution, all within a limited page count and an accelerated timeline. I'd start on a "Volume II" tomorrow if I could.

**GABRIELLA DEMCZUK**

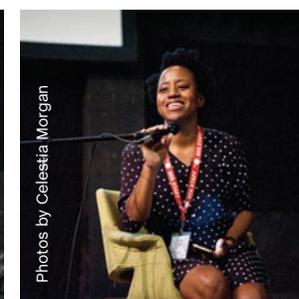
Gabriella Demczuk is a Lebanese American photographer, printmaker, and journalist based between Washington, DC, and Baltimore, Maryland. Her work looks at politics, policy, and history in shaping American identities and communities.



*How did you arrive on a concept for the images that accompany this issue's poetry feature?*

I was reading the introduction to the poems and was interested in the idea that meals are the stories and histories we share with one another at the dinner table, and so I made paper out of food, to reflect pages that we write our stories on. I was inspired by John Cage's *Edible Drawings*. I used ingredients found in each poem to create a sheet of paper, some of which came from my own leftovers and scraps from meals made with friends while in Texas, which I thought added to the idea of sharing our stories.

Top: Milly West; Bottom: Gabriella Demczuk



Photos by Celestia Morgan

WINTER SYMPOSIUM

TOPIC

FRONT OF HOUSE /BACK OF HOUSE:  
Restaurant Narratives

LOCATION

HAVEN  
Birmingham, AL

DATE

SATURDAY  
February 9, 2019

TICKETS

\$150 PER PERSON  
(includes food & drink)

THANKS TO BIRMINGHAM CVB AND ALABAMA TOURISM FOR THE SUPPORT.

Tickets go on sale Thursday, November 8 at 10 a.m. CDT.

Neither an SFA membership nor a password is required to purchase tickets.



# FALL IS AT THE DOOR

Chicken-fried redemption

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Mary Tillman Smith

I MARK EACH FALL IN OXFORD BY three arrivals.

In the weeks leading up to the first football game, I hear the University of Mississippi Pride of the South marching band practice, cymbals crashing and drums thudding as they march across a field that borders a patch of woods that borders our house. I'm not a college football obsessive (nor a college marching band obsessive), but I'm big on pomp and circumstance and pageantry.

At about that same time, my friend Lisa Howorth, the bookstore owner, novelist, and longtime night mayor of Oxford, installs a painting by the late folk artist Mary Tillman Smith in the front window of Square Books. Rendered in house paint on roofing tin, the legend FALL IS AT THE DOOR/I THANK THE LORD reads like a promise of cooler weather and a herald of the game-day crowds that will soon throng our streets.

My Instagram timeline marks the transition, too. Gone are pictures of sun-burned families on white-sand beaches. By September, every other shot shows a game-day friend, bound for their old college town, out to reenact their youth. For alums who flock to Oxford, that migration yields photo after drunken photo of late-night chicken-on-a-stick sessions.

Deep-fried and heat lamp-warmed at a Chevron three blocks north of our house, Oxford chicken-on-a-stick tastes like the spawn of a state-fair midway and a middle-school cafeteria. I'm not a big fan. Neither is my friend and neighbor Jack Pendarvis, who wrote in *The Oxford American* of the rage that burbles in him when drunk college students stumble

home, dropping Chevron refuse as they go, leaving his yard "dotted with pellucid white bags as far as the eye can see, greased to a ghostly glow."

My ire is rooted in the litter and more in the knowledge that these stick-mounted protein delivery vehicles don't satisfy. Sober, the dry flesh, threaded on a pointy piece of wood, squeaks beneath my teeth. Drunk, those battered nuggets lack the endearing grease and salt blast of pizza rolls or potato logs.

But as the oak leaves threaten to brown, hope springs equinoxal. Late this summer, hope made itself (chicken) flesh as I drove north toward home from the Mississippi Book Festival in Jackson. At the Sayle gas station and convenience store off I-55 at the Charleston exit, where the sail-shaped logo above the pediment reads RIDE WITH US, I bought a different chicken-on-a-stick, made with more than just threaded breast meat.

Stacked with rounds of potato and onion rings, laced with chicken that on prolonged contact with salty dill pickle slices had turned curiously green, and battered with a pepper-shot batter that went shatter-crisp in the deep fryer, I drizzled this chicken-on-a stick with no-name hot sauce and ate it in six greedy bites. Until I tasted the Sayle version of what a Frenchman might call *brochettes de poulet*, I feared my dislike of chicken-on-a-stick telegraphed some sort of civic self-loathing. Now I know better. I just need to convince friends who live downstate, where Sayle runs eleven locations, to mule in skewers of the good stuff on their game-day travels to Oxford. 🍗

*John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of True South on the SEC Network. His chicken-on-a-stick opinions do not reflect those of the entire SFA staff.*

# WELL VERSED, WELL FED

Lawrence Weeks honors Nikki Giovanni

BY LORA SMITH

“WHATEVER YOU DO, DON’T REMEMBER your poems. If you remember your poems you’ll try to make sure you don’t contradict yourself. If you are not willing to contradict yourself, you will spoil whatever creativity you have, because you’ll always be trying to balance. So just forget it and go on.” Nikki Giovanni, one of the most beloved poets to emerge from Appalachia, spoke those words at the forty-first annual Appalachian Writers’ Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School in July.

We might say something similar about meals. And about the texts that accompany those meals. That’s what a menu is: a text that complements a meal, words that add detail and context and narrative.

Between poems, Giovanni declared that we mountain folk were “the nicest white people in America.” Maybe the black Appalachian woman onstage wearing shiny, sherbet-green oxfords

was playing to the room. I know she wasn’t pandering.

Her talk was pointed, political, and included a memorable suggestion that male reproductive organs are now evolutionarily obsolete and should be removed, “like tonsils.” Tonsil-less novelist Robert Gipe leaned over and whispered in my ear, “I’m going to need more ice cream this time.”

To honor Giovanni’s visit, chef Lawrence Weeks cooked dinner. Drawing inspiration from the food in her poetry and his taste memories, Weeks proved a storyteller, too. He recalled, “My grandmother always made hot water cornbread and candied yams. When you got a plate, the cornbread was next to the yams and the cornbread had butter on it. At the end of the meal you’d suck up all the butter and syrup from the yams.” And he served hot water cornbread with candied yam butter.

Photos by Liz Terry

The poet Nikki Giovanni serves herself a dinner cooked in her honor at Hindman Settlement School.



Chef Lawrence Weeks prepares shaved catfish torchons.  
OPPOSITE: Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, KY.



Weeks identifies as Creole, Cajun, and Affrilachian with family roots that unfurl across Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas. His cooking is an attempt to marry those experiences and cultures. To explain, he cooked a whole hog with apple-sorghum jus and cracklins.

“We smoked it. Pulled off all the meat. Took the skin that was left and smoked it again for several hours. We then popped the skin in the oven to make it puffy and crispy. We chopped it up with the meat so there was a textural contrast.”

He served okra, tomato, and cucumber salad with flowers, reasoning that the acid would cut “through all the starch of cornbread, the fat of the hog. I picked the flowers that morning from Hindman’s farm. You eat meat and then you eat a pickle to refresh yourself.”

His food was thoughtful and simple and rich with contradictions. Restraint and reverence for ingredients balanced a want to show off with a dish like shaved catfish with fermented hot sauce, tartar sauce, and collard slaw.

“We sprinkled the catfish with transglutaminase and rolled it like a torchon,” Weeks wrote, speaking the language of molecular gastronomists. “I see cooking that gets overly manicured to be only about technique. I’d rather someone

know they’re eating catfish and collards and have that elicit a memory.” It’s a flight of fancy, he said, but “the idea of the dish in the end was shaved catfish with hot sauce and a side of slaw.”

The willingness to deviate from tradition and history made room for invented dishes that retell the overlapping African, Acadian, and Appalachian diasporas. That’s how Weeks came to serve sour corn maque choux. Virginia chef Travis Milton introduced him to sour corn. “I thought the flavor was nice, and it almost smelled like whiskey,” Weeks said. “It was natural to take the corn, ferment it, and add it back into the maque choux.”

Miner potatoes, the last dish on his menu, referenced the labor history of the region. “We took the skins from onions and all the tops from everything that we were using. Burned them. Mixed them with salt. We tossed the potatoes in the onion ash until they came out black. If you eat them with your hands, you get charcoal on your fingers that resembles coal dust on men coming out of the mines.”

Giovanni’s poetry and Weeks’ food entwined that night. They were invitations to let go of what we’d done before and go on. The poet seemed pleased with dinner. It’s unclear whether she will remember the menu. 🍷

*Lora Smith is the executive director of the Appalachian Impact Fund.*

# IN THE SPIRIT

What bourbon culture can learn from mezcal

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THIS PAST SUMMER, I TRAVELED through Mexico for a week as a guide for a *Los Angeles Times*-organized culinary tour. Our group of mostly middle-aged white Angelenos sampled street food in Mexico City, took cooking classes in the colonial city of Puebla, and ate our weight in mole and handmade tortillas in the southern state of Oaxaca.

The highlight of the trip was a journey to Oaxaca's mezcal country.

The spirit is tequila's smokier cousin and comes from the fermented pulp of the agave plant. It's enjoying a moment in the United States. Sales have exploded in *el Norte*, from \$10 million in 2005 to \$126 million in 2015—and 94 percent of the production comes from Oaxaca.

On a Saturday, our tour van rumbled through the hills of the Valle de Oaxaca on the government-designated Caminos del Mezcal highway. Our destination: Santa Catarina Minas, a village renowned



Photos by Sana Javeri Kadiri; Styling by Jillian Knox

for traditional mezcal production. Distilleries there use clay pot stills instead of the more common copper; the former lends an earthier flavor to the finished product.

*Mezcalero* (distiller) Felix Ángeles Arellanes, grizzled and soft-spoken, greeted us at his *palenque* (distillery). He monitored the wood-kindled furnaces that fueled his stills. His teenage sons pounded baked agave in a hole in the ground with huge sticks of black oak, then put the pulp in a vat to ferment. Behind us on the garage, a colorful mural depicted the same process.

The finished product was destined for sale in Mexico under various labels. We *yanquis* snapped photos and asked questions, and then the mezcal party really began. From plastic tanks came smoky spirits and sweet ones and spirits made with agaves that grew only in certain altitudes and one distilled by hanging a raw chicken breast in the still to let the vapors pass through. This *pechuga* (chest)

## As I sipped mezcal on the tour bus, it hit me: This was Kentucky all over again.

variety had an earthier, fruitier flavor than its peers and was the favorite of our group. The owner poured shot after shot into large *jícaras* (a dried squash shell) that we passed around and gulped.

The group bought dozens of bottles and bid farewell. Everyone loved it. But something about the experience nagged at me. As I sipped more mezcal on the bus, it hit me: This was Kentucky all over again.

TWO THOUSAND EIGHTEEN was the first summer in eleven years that my wife

and I didn't visit the Bluegrass State. I missed our annual road trip, which took us to Louisville, to the Mexican section of Lexington, and to the historic Weisenberger Mill in Midway, where we always load up on grits and hushpuppy mix.

I also missed the Bourbon Trail.

A collection of distilleries across the state first banded together in 1999 to tell the story of their product and draw tourists. The effort has proven so successful that Tennessee started its own whiskey trail last year.

Fans of bourbon should hit the Trail to learn about the history of bourbon, visit their favorite brands, and score some rare bottles. But be careful out there—the Trail is getting crowded. There are now seventy-three distilleries across Kentucky. There are sixteen in Louisville alone, with eleven licensed in just the past five years.

The state seems to be hitching its fortunes to a bourbon bubble that could pop. It's happened before. Bourbon fell out of favor during the 1970s, when vodka and tequila ascended. Dozens of distilleries shut down, and several labels disappeared altogether. What happens when bourbon-crazed consumers move on to another spirit—say, mezcal?

The Bourbon Rush has created a national perception that Kentucky's cultural zenith is whiskey. It's a disservice to the state's many other traditions: Bluegrass music. Appalachian cookery. Even chocolate (the charming tour at the Rebecca Ruth candy company in Frankfort comes with generous samples).

When tourists come, they might reduce Kentucky to what they quaff from a snifter. And after our afternoon at the *palenque*, I feared Oaxaca faced the same challenges.

"FOR AMERICANS, ALL they think about with alcohol is how to get drunk as fast as possible," our guide generalized





on the drive back to our hotel in Oaxaca City. “But in Oaxaca, alcohol is secondary to the fiesta.”

The guide wasn’t just talking about a party. Oaxaca is a state that has proudly kept its indigenous traditions alive—music, clothing, and especially food—for centuries in the face of encroaching modernity. These crafts coalesce at festivals, multiday affairs that feature the transmittal and celebration of traditions from the older generation to the new. The most famous is called the *Guelaguetza*, an

Oaxaca is a state that has proudly kept its indigenous traditions alive—**music, clothing, and especially food**—for centuries in the face of encroaching modernity.

annual fair held in July that Oaxacan villages celebrate in one form or another, in a tradition that predates Columbus.

For Oaxacans, mezcal is literally a spirit—something intangible that informs who they are but doesn’t define them.

To drive that point home, our driver detoured to other villages so we could see more Oaxacan artisans: A family who

wove their own textiles into gorgeous blouses, purses, and linens. A worker’s commune that specialized in *alebrijes*—small, colorful wooden statues. A husband-and-wife team that made black clay pottery and whose pieces fetched thousands of dollars in the United States.

By the time we got to the hotel, we all understood our guide’s takeaway about his home state: Mezcal is fun, but if the cultural conversation doesn’t extend beyond tasting notes, it’s ultimately superficial.

Booze is a good hook to bring in visitors. But imagine if Kentucky distillers really teamed up with other craftspeople of the South, the way they do in Oaxaca? Involve other cultural aspects of the state, and visitors would get a far better appreciation of Southern culture. It would bind the region’s creative economy, and make it more financially viable for people to practice crafts in danger of disappearing.

When I returned to the United States, I remembered one stop on the Bourbon Trail that already offers this: Lebanon. This small city hosts Limestone Branch Distillery, which brought back the long-dormant Yellowstone brand of bourbon three years ago. About a five-minute drive away is Kentucky Cooperage, producer of barrels. Although it’s not affiliated with the Bourbon Trail, my wife and I always stop by for its factory tour, a steampunk delight of sound, fire, and iron. The guides there point out that bourbon is not just the drink—it’s the farmers who grow the corn, the men who shape staves into barrels, and the distillers who bring the two together to create magic.

A community spirit—just like in Oaxaca. 🍷

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*Gustavo Arellano is Gravy’s columnist, as well as a columnist for the Los Angeles Times opinion section. Thirsty for more mezcal? Listen to the Agave Diplomacy episode of Gravy podcast, produced by Shanna Farrell.*

# WHAT A WAY TO MAKE A LIVING

Lessons from Dolly

BY ELIZABETH CATTE

I CLAIM AN INHERITANCE TO AN intellectual project that has sustained several generations of Appalachian writers: to write about my home not only as a living, breathing region with a distinct history and traditions, but also as an idea.

The most forceful claim to this inheritance came in 1978, in a work by Henry Shapiro called *Appalachia on Our Mind*. Shapiro wrote with great precision about the ways that powerful individuals hid their attitudes and beliefs in ideas about Appalachia, often aggrandized as a strange and peculiar place whose true character only the well-educated or entrepreneurial could deduce. As William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College, wrote of mountain people in 1899 for *The Atlantic Monthly*, “They are an anachronism, and it will require a scientific spirit and some historic sense to enable us to appreciate their situation and character.”

Local color writers, academics, missionaries, folklorists, industrialists, and social workers all had a hand in shaping the popular image of Appalachia as a place forgotten by both time and progress.

I encountered my own version of this phenomenon early in life, not in a classroom but a theme park. Henry Shapiro was a brilliant thinker, but for me nothing illustrates the invention of Appalachia better than Dollywood. I am a child of Dollywood, coming of age when the park was brand new. My childhood tasted like fudge and felt like bee stings and wet jeans. I learned how to drive as Dolly looked down upon me from billboards that advertised the growing mountain empire made in her image. As the park expanded, so did the range of tourist offerings in Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. Each new venture stayed true to brand. Commodified representations of mountain life, equal parts archaic, exciting,

Illustrations by Daniel Fishel



and humorous tugged at the longing and nostalgia of tourists to experience a simpler way of life, uncontaminated by politics, unrest, and pressing social issues

I grew up in a world of piped-in wood smoke and overalls, pancakes, ham biscuits, and anthropomorphic bears. I marked out seasons through the cycle of tourist attractions—winter meant Dolly’s Christmas village and spring was for synchronous fireflies—and the traffic they generated. I sold tickets to jamborees and clogging festivals as part of school fundraisers, and at least once my church pressed me into service weaving handmade white-birch baskets to sell to tourists. I also learned that I was allergic to white birch, a revelation that made me neurotic about living up to my mountain credentials.

Other cracks in the façade emerged. I was more a fan of Britpop than bluegrass. My grandmother, and I hope she forgives me for writing this, wasn’t very good at making fried pies. I wore Doc Martens, not overalls. A fear of ticks kept me indoors. I never saw a bear in the wild, much less enticed one to drink a Coke in reenactment of a bygone tourist attraction. I can’t clog, but I can rate all drug-store shades of black lipstick on a scale of coverage and durability.

I had a special grievance against the way that attractions presented moonshining to tourists. Moonshining is a complicated industry often distilled, pun intended, into representations that yoke-ize producers past and present. The quintessential cheap souvenir of the mountains is a fridge magnet version of a hillbilly bootlegger in all his shoeless and cross-eyed glory, clutching a ceramic jug embossed with xxx. Both the federal government and licensed alcohol producers had a vested interest in mythologizing moonshiners as unsanitary and intellectually-dim poisoners because



## I grew up in a world of piped-in wood smoke and overalls, pancakes, ham biscuits, and anthropomorphic bears.

moonshining deprived these stakeholders of revenue streams. Their trade filled a practical gap in the mountain economy and sustained important regional foodways. To caricature it as sinister or hap-hazardly performed is a deep insult.

My great-grandfather made moonshine and sold it widely in southwest Virginia and east Tennessee in the 1930s and beyond, and even spent time in federal prison for the manufacture of illegal alcohol. He often did his business in suits,

not overalls. He and his associates were not only chemists, but also farmers, electricians, and mechanics—all trades that make the production of alcohol more efficient, from building a car that could outrun police to growing corn and fruit that would smooth the taste.

And yet, I was and still am drawn to this imagined homeland, this fantasy of Appalachia. The sanitized, consumable idea of it. No one hurts, and the rockslides are all staged. Our industries—mining and timber, for example—are adventurous and rugged, not exploitative. The only pain is leaving this fantasy world, and the sweet longing to return to it someday, knowing that it will be much as we left it.

Real life makes no such guarantees. In my family, things changed for the worse. Homelands vanished. The village of my grandmother’s people lies at the bottom of a man-made lake created by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the name of progress, homes forever submerged along with the bones of those who built them. When Dolly bought the park in 1986, one of her first additions was a replica of her childhood home. The recreation stands proudly near the entrance to the park and it snuggles visitors in small rooms that are portals to Dolly’s childhood. How could we begrudge her this when so many of us would do the same?

Growing up in the shadow of Dollywood taught me a number of important lessons. I learned that I was what people called a hillbilly, despite my black lipstick and boots. This designation had less to do with my ancestry or upbringing and more to do with fact that hillbillies need to exist because they are profitable. Our traditions have a market value, assigned by a system that props up cultural offerings from theme parks to memoirs.

We have a place in the world that has an economic function, and we are very

good at making other people money. No one in my family has enriched a coal boss in a generation, but the idea of my ancestors working in the mines remains lucrative, the setup for a thrill-ride. My pop-culture twin—the one who makes hand-made baskets competently, who has a delicious twang and submits to poverty knowing no difference and no oppressor—is more valuable than me.

Although I’ll always love Dolly, what I came to understand, quite painfully, was that I sulked around Dollywood (and Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg) not to look at Appalachia but away from it. The idea of Appalachia—with a benevolent system of capitalism, where only ideas and not resources are extracted, where belonging can be sold or purchased, and where we experience only joy and never sorrow—is potent.

I WROTE A BOOK about the idea of Appalachia, and the function of the region in our contemporary conversations about politics and social issues. From endless reported pieces about Trump Country to the popularity of *Hillbilly Elegy* and author J.D. Vance’s ascendancy as the region’s explainer-in-chief, I recognized the creation of new Appalachian branding when I saw it. Dolly fed me sugar-coated representations of Appalachia, but living in her world provided the fuel for recognizing aggrandizements of a less wholesome source and purpose. I knew how easy it was to remake Appalachia in one’s own image and then sell it. I knew how effortlessly Appalachia could be packaged, reinterpreted. And I knew how profitable it could be.

I wrote frankly about extraction and exploitation, and about destruction and sorrow. I wrote about who caused them and why. I did my best by Henry Shapiro, tracking the attitudes and beliefs hidden

in these new ideas about Appalachia that hinted at deficiencies in our culture. They came to us already feeling a hundred years old. I tackled questions that had long bothered me, like why Appalachia is often presented as all-white, whether the presentation comes via a theme park or election coverage or a bestseller.

I longed for more people to know the stories of resilient folks who brought their faith, labor, anger, and ideas to the fore for the good of the poor and common people.

And so I added them back. I wrote bluntly: “Since Vance and his fans have made it acceptable to remake Appalachia in one’s own image, let me do the same and create a volume with an image made in my own. Far from being monolithic, helpless, and degraded, this image of Appalachia is radical and diverse. This image of Appalachia does not deflect the problems of the region but simply recognizes the voices and actions of those who have struggled against them, often sacrificing their health, comfort, and even their lives. It is an image projected by bodies against machines and bodies on picket lines and bodies that most assuredly are not always white. This image of Appalachia won’t be coming to a theater near you courtesy of Ron Howard, and we are all better for it.”

One of the stories I often retell is about the fight against strip-mining in Eastern Kentucky. In the 1970s, almost half of all coal extracted in the United States was obtained via strip-mining. For those unaware, strip-mining is a less labor intensive, and thus cheaper, process that requires the exposure of a coal seam through the surface of rock rather than underground. Coal operators gash mountains and scrape the coal out, loosened by explosives, with industrial equipment. Erosion and flooding are common side effects of the destruction, as is environ-

mental contamination from the oil, fuel, and chemicals expelled by explosives and construction equipment. The subterranean minerals exposed during the process, like iron, are corrosive and poison vegetation and water.

“The entire region will look more and more like the flayed back of a man, the lifeless or heavily damaged pulp of a miscreant who sinned against industrial America,” *The New York Times* wrote of the process.

“Poor though the land is, the county’s chief resource for the support of its large and growing population is its farms,” the United States Department of Agriculture commented on Knott County, Kentucky, in 1937. The fuel demands of War World II and improvements in rail transportation rapidly extended the geographic boundaries of Kentucky’s coal country, transforming the economies of previously untouched areas like Knott County from subsistence farming to coal dependency over the course of a decade.

Many local farmers discovered that they did not possess exclusive rights to their own land. A provision inserted into many deeds at the time of sale or transfer separated surface and mineral rights, and farmers often owned only the former. Their family might own everything above the ground, but a coal company owned everything beneath it. Coal companies destroyed crops, ruined pasture, and rendered land barren in pursuit of mineral rights. Parts of eastern Kentucky became what residents described as a war zone, as both the statehouse and the courthouse declined to help people find relief against these abusive practices.

The people of eastern Kentucky—where strip-mining intensified in the 1960s and 1970s—challenged the practice and its legal protections in courts and through the state legislature, with little success. Such was the dominion of the

I knew how easy  
it was to remake  
Appalachia in  
one’s own image  
and then sell it.  
I knew how  
effortlessly  
Appalachia could  
be packaged,  
reinterpreted.  
And I knew how  
profitable it could be.



coal industry and its ability to purchase politicians and judges. Mining companies continued to destroy the land and the small world built upon it. Homes, stores, gardens, even graveyards. “Acts of God,” the coal operators said, as if God would make a mother watch while bulldozers sliced open the graves of her children because the shortest route to a mining site was through a cemetery.

In November 1965, an eighty-one-year-old Old Regular Baptist preacher named “Uncle” Dan Gibson from Knott County—who normally spent his free time making coffins—held off seventeen state policemen on his land. Coal companies often requested armed reinforcements when setting up operations on contested land, and this practice has a long history in the coalfields. With the dual protections of faith and firepower, he held the land. State police arrested Uncle Dan, but the coal company never came back.

Uncle Dan was a founding member of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and the People and he was not the only elder member to put his body in the path of destruction. The Widow Ollie Combs sat in front of a bulldozer on her land and forced state police officers to carry her down a mountain. The police also arrested a newspaper photographer present at the scene for good measure, although he posted bail more quickly than Combs and later photographed her solitary Thanksgiving meal in jail. The protest—and the images—helped rouse support for anti-strip-mining legislation. The governor ordered state police to refuse assistance to coal operators in nonviolent disputes. Some county courts tried to set limits on mining activities, which higher courts struck down without exception.

Some of the tactics employed by organizations like the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People, like armed resistance, now feel firmly of the past,

but others do not. The tactics of their opponents feel familiar, too. Throughout the late winter and early spring of this year, a sixty-one-year-old woman named Red Terry occupied a makeshift tree-house for over a month to halt construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline on Bent Mountain, Virginia, near where I currently live. The Mountain Valley Pipeline will carry natural gas through a region already overburdened by natural gas pipelines, and resistance to this project and the state's other planned pipeline is strong.

Federal authorities granted Mountain Valley Pipeline partners the right of eminent domain to Terry's land, forcing her to provide an easement for pipeline construction. The state police acted as a willing arm of pipeline developers and guarded her, on land that she owns, to prevent community members from bringing her food and water.

Another protestor, who uses the pseudonym Nutty, occupied a similar blockade for fifty-six days to protect the Jefferson National Forest from the pipeline. State and federal authorities also cut her off from food, water, and medical attention.

Unlike Terry, Nutty didn't lay claim to the land she protected. "This land was already stolen," she said. Her occupation took place on Haudenosaunee, Cherokee, and Shawnee land that is currently the Jefferson National Forest. "Let's dig deeper...facing the violent histories that still find their home in the present," she said, connecting forced migration of indigenous peoples to the modern seizure of land for corporate profit.

MY GRANDFATHER WAS the most important person in my life, but when I was younger I was frightened and ashamed of the community that raised him. I did not see his home the way that he saw it. He was from the southwest Virginia

coalfields. His favorite aunt, whom we visited often, lived at the top of a mountain and earned twenty-five cents per ton from coal extracted beneath her. We often had to leave our car at the base of the mountain and walk up to the house; such was the condition of roads prone to flooding and rockslides. Our trips almost always included a visit to a nursing home or hospital, to check on people too young to have bodies that old. The church where my grandfather served as a deacon still practiced line-singing. If you've never heard line-singing, I can only describe it as the sound of pure sorrow.

"I have no promise of tomorrow," the congregation sang, and I believed it.

**I was and still am  
drawn to this imagined  
homeland, this  
fantasy of Appalachia.  
No one hurts, and  
the rockslides  
are all staged.**

Even as a child, I saw my family through the pages of *Life* magazine. I imagined how diligent photographers, working in that iconic 1960s War on Poverty style, would see us, and I felt ashamed. Over time, as I learned how that poverty, destruction, and sickness came to be, I realized that I had internalized attitudes that were both unfair and widely held. It is true that the sins of corporate greed and truths of hardship are contained in those images, but to consume them is to consume a parade of bodies and land that could not withstand destruction. How many people have come to resent our kin, our homes, because the lens loves the drama of failure? Because the shutter clicks for

sorrow, not joy? Because those images are of us but never for us?

When I started graduate school, I came across an image of my grandfather's community in a cache of photographs taken by New Deal photographers in the 1930s. It's a wonderful image, my absolute favorite. It shows interior of a café in Haysi, Virginia.

There's a couple sitting inside a photo booth, having their pictures made. Their faces are aglow with warm light. A young woman is watching. Perhaps she is waiting her turn, or just interested in the workings of a machine that would feel very futuristic in a town like Haysi. What I like best is that no one is looking at the government photographer. This isn't a poverty portrait. It telegraphs, strongly, that "the image we are making of ourselves is more interesting than yours."

I yielded to obsession with this image, because it conveyed a reality about the region that I had long struggled with: How we see ourselves is often at odds with the way that others see us. This reality is unavoidable, but we must be honest that the most exploitative images are often the most popular and enduring.

When my grandfather died, just before my book came out, I allowed myself the briefest of daydreams that I would find in his papers or photographs an image of him taken in that photo booth, young and with his life ahead of him. I didn't, of course, and we said goodbye to him with line-singing that still sounded sorrowful but also tender, a language that belonged to us.

I get a lot of mail now. People write to me, just to share. They tell me about how they were called to ministry or why they left home, how they could fix things,

how they lost their accents and got them back. Sometimes my partner and I go and see them, and sometimes they come and visit us.

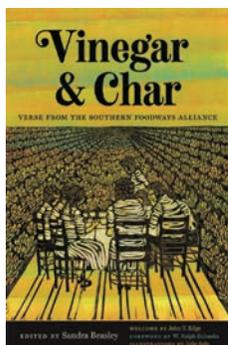
And then one day I received a note from a woman named Summer Runyon. The subject line read: "Haysi Photo Booth." She had written because she'd read my book, which contains a section that talks about the photo booth image and how it liberated me from some of the shame I carried. It made her remember an image of her ninety-four-year-old grandmother, taken when she was a young woman, and her grandmother's brother, who would soon die in World War II. They were not the couple in the New Deal photographer's image, but came to be photographed several years later. Summer told me that she loved the image but always found its origins puzzling—how did her grandmother obtain these photographs in Haysi, Virginia, with very little money to spend? I solved the mystery for her, but she gave me something far more important.

I couldn't have the image that I wanted of my grandfather, but I now had one of her grandmother, young and with her life ahead of her. "I will be keeping the picture and this story in your book for my daughter to find when she inherits my Appalachian books one day," she let me know.

In making a new inheritance, we practiced resurrection. I move forward in this region with the love my grandfather had for his community. And although it is not possible for me to see it how he saw it, I can see it in my favorite image, now with a twin: Layered, complicated, containing stories within stories that invite us to look more closely, not away. 🐦

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*Elizabeth Catte is a public historian and the author of What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia. She delivered a version of this essay at the SFA Summer Symposium in Lexington, Kentucky.*



**VINEGAR & CHAR**

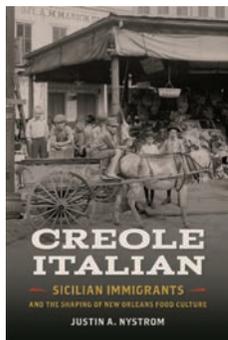
*Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance*

Edited by Sandra Beasley  
 Welcome by John T. Edge  
 Foreword by W. Ralph Eubanks  
 Illustrated by Julie Sola

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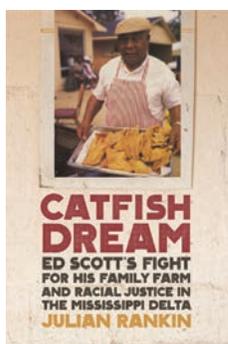
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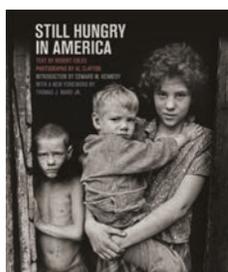
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Photographs by Al Clayton

Text by Robert Coles

Introduction by Edward M. Kennedy

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“I am so grateful for the reissue of this extraordinary book—yet devastated that its message is still necessary today as it was fifty years ago.”

– Marian Wright Edelman, president, Children’s Defense Fund

**Vinegar and Char:**

Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance

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# Cook

kitchen  
out back

a  
way from buckra  
who saunter  
where he please  
inside up and down  
me

a  
way from his wife  
who scratch out fancy menus  
seasoned with my tongue  
hand  
and tenderness

the only real pleasure  
be my babies,  
a small patch of something  
where I grow okra and tomatoes,  
and the name I will give myself  
when I'm free  
Mariah  
Cook(e)

—KELLY NORMAN ELLIS





## Shucking

My father lets down  
The little drawbridge of his pickup truck,  
A span of plywood planks on the back gate  
Held level by hook and chain,  
And dumps from the damp burlap  
A load of locked doors  
We've bought to break and enter,  
Taking our spade-shaped knives  
To the sharp and silted ridges of the oyster shells.

Almost safe inside the heavy canvas gloves,  
*Mule*-brand, the fingers chewed through  
By snags of ragged metal his acetylene  
Cut back from the junked bodies of cars,  
We look for leeways in the trap,  
Any edge the blade can pry and widen,  
Leverage to spring the hinge. I set aside  
The hard ones for my father's savvy hands.  
From the lusters of the bottom lid,  
We split the raw attachments  
And pour it all in a plastic pail—  
Brine and gill plates and mantle—  
My mother's turn now to turn  
This plump meat seasoned by the sea  
Into soups and stews and po-boy loaves  
(Dredged in cornmeal, drowned in deep fat).

It's one more long Sunday when dinner waits  
For my brother to drive down, late,  
Through the pinesap airs of Hammond,  
And for my sister to bring herself, late,  
Across the white bridges, twin humps  
On the billowed back of Lake Pontchartrain.

And so my father and I stand opening  
The closed chambers, the cold valves,  
And from these cups of calcium  
Drink to each other a liquid  
Of salt and grit, the oysters  
Easing down like lumps in the throat.

—ELTON GLASER

## Boy

Boy, let me have a taste of that Mister Misty.  
No, they brought it out around the time you  
were born in sixty. I like the way it swish  
in the cup. Sound like Sammy Davis Jr.  
doing the soft shoe shuffle. They call  
that the sand dance. Sound like shifting grains  
or a fast train. Them little bits of ice  
tap your teeth, and you can chew on that sweet  
mouthful of cold melting to nothing before  
you swallow it down. First time I had one  
of these, I drank it too fast, crystals in syrup  
dancing around and down my throat chilled  
like Christmas and New Year's cold breath moving  
down to my chest. And if that wasn't enough,  
then I felt like my head was about to split  
right open. Thought my forehead was gon look  
like that Dairy Queen sign red and wide  
like a gash. You know, they ice cream got nothing  
on your mama's pineapple ice cream. Theirs  
ain't nothing but soft light ice milk. They build  
it high like a steeple, but ain't nothing  
to that either. You see your mama puts  
a dozen eggs in her custard to make  
it rich. The sound of the ice and salt shifting  
in that bucket as it melts with that electric  
churn's whining motor groaning as that ice  
cream stiffens up sure is pleasing cause I know  
the ice cream about ready. You know, there are  
folks getting they heads split so we don't have  
to go around to that side window no more.

—SEAN HILL





## Fanny Says How to Make Potato Salad

Alright now. What you got to do is get some potatoes, I used to buy them big bags of Idaho potatoes, and you need to wursh them real good and boil them whole. Now, you know how your mama cooks, like this—*plom, plom, plom*—so just drop those fuckers in the water and don't worry about them till they get soft enough to just peel with your thumbs, but not too soft, cause we're making salad here, not mashed potatoes.

So then you've got to get you one stalk a celery, the whole thing now, and peel back them big strings, cause nobody wants to have to pick their teeth while they trying to smile at you telling you your salad's any good. And chop up that celery, and then you do the same to one green pepper, not the green onion, now, but the pepper, round-like and overpriced in the grocery store.

Boil and chop you four eggs. Also need you about six a them sweet pickles I love so much at Thanksgiving on the Lazy Susan. You can chop them up, or if you want, you can use a bit of that canned pickle relish your uncle always slopped on them nasty-ass hot dogs of his.

Also add one onion, chopped, and try to use a white one, especially them good old Vidalia onions, they not nearly as strong as the yella. Besides, you don't want to blow nobody out with your breath.

You need one a them big bowls, you know, about this big around, and mix it all real good with your hands. Now you know you got to have a little salt and pepper, and three tablespoons or so a mayonnaise, or if you want to make it the real way I used to like, use Miracle Whip. Now, be careful now with that mayo, make sure that shit's fresh or you'll ruin the whole batch and have everybody in the house running to the bathroom. Also add in about the same amount a plain yella mustard. You know, the kind that's yella as a gourd and comes in one a them round bottles.

While you're mixing it with your hands, bring the bottom to the top. You might even want to add a jar a pimentos for color. Now, be sure and take a bite in your mouth before you serve it—it's gotta have a little wang in it, it can't be dull. If it is, add a little bit a sugar or vinegar to it.

Cover it up and let it sit in the fridge for one hour. It should be enough to last you three or four nights, and of course, if your husband's coming home, you might want to make it all pretty by putting it all on top a some lettuce leaves and dusting it with a little a that paprika.

—NICKOLE BROWN

## Backbone

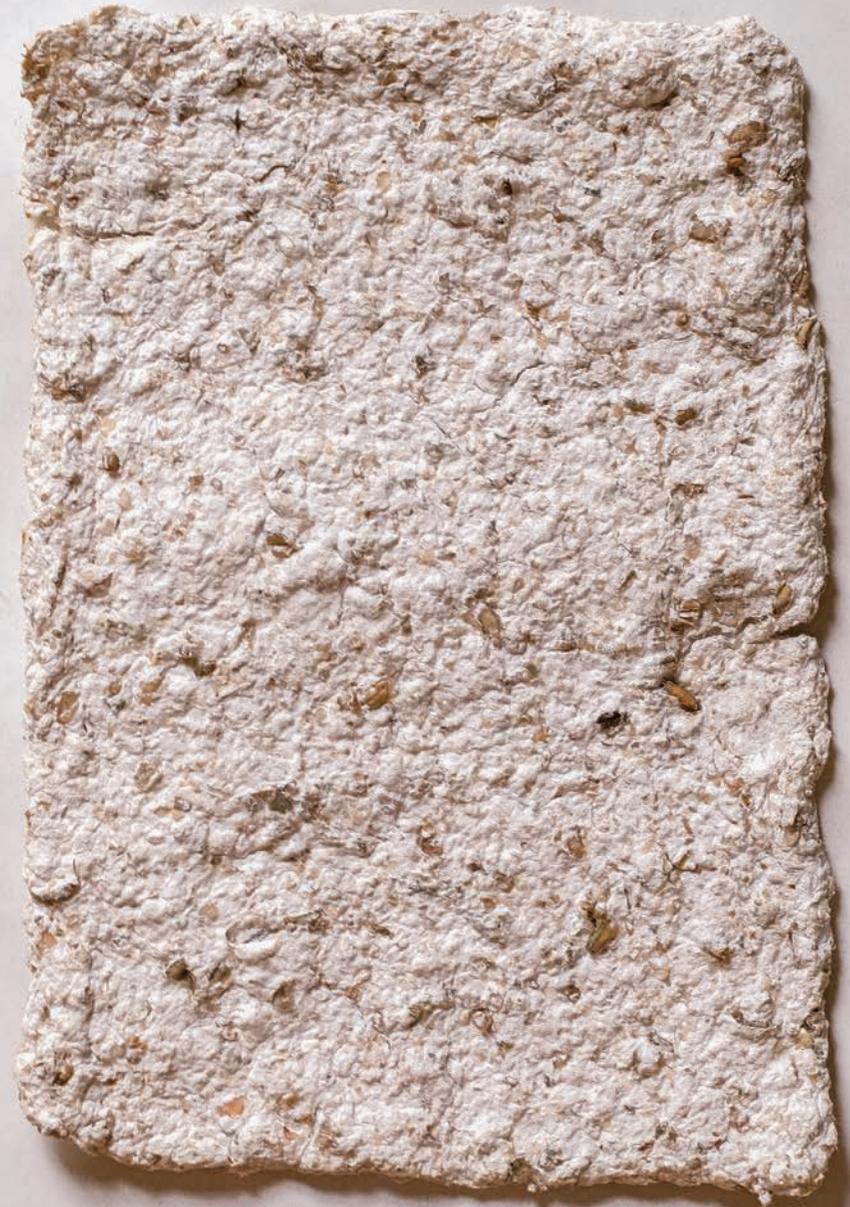
Nana would say, *Come here child. What kind of comb does you mother use?* And then I would sit between her legs, where the bluish, flowery dressing gown spread over the reddish, flowery wingback. Howl as she dragged that paddle brush through my naps and rounds. *Hush girl.* I would grimace and spit and let tears itch up the corners of my eyes, staying still though, as she smoothed my scalp with the sweat off her highball—Glenlivet, 11:00 am, every day, come breast or bone, brain or lung—and wove the tufts into a fluffy braid half down my back. *Cancer? Hell.*

She'd turn on the Vivaldi, pat her chemo bag, teach me Spades. Aunt Wendy curled her hair for late church, and Daddy looked on, long faced, at us all. I would reach for a card and, *Ashy. Turn around and let me get some of this on you.* The Vaseline was always in a jar next to the lamp, behind the whiskey and the remote control. *It looks like you've been crawling around in flour on your knees and elbows.* Nana made those joint bones glisten, she did,

died, and my cousin, out loud  
she wrote a menu, said—  
*I know how to make cheesecake,  
I know how to make shrimp,  
I can fix corn pone, potatoes.*

But me, I knew in secret  
how to make a shiny elbow  
out of flour and Vaseline,  
how to make a rope hang  
from my head  
with screams and scotch sweat.

— CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS



## Drill

Mama talks in this one.

Here's us, backing down our driveway's maze of red-dirt dog-legs, her at the wheel (with a fresh-forged license), me turned aroundnavigating, the yard black-dark but flushed now (and now) and nowwith brake-lights, her Kool-tip flaring on every hard in-breath, river-reek and oil-scorch and marsh-gas mingling, our under-chassis (andrear axle, eyeteeth) chattering due to roots and rain-ruts, our rust-crusting Rambler swerving and fishtailing and near-missing trees.

At the mailbox, gears knock, gnaw, grind, find Forward eventually: we're missile-heading straight (more or less) for the LowCountry fairgrounds; here's us, late, loud, breaknecking her blue-ribbon hoard to the Fair.

Everything is home-made.

Not just our back-seat freight of gem-flame jelly-jars (slip-skin grape, beet, black- and blueberry, brunt-apple, seed-splacked fig) and payload of pressure-torqued pickle-jars (wrick-kinked banana-peppers, lethal hot-hat peppers, (green) tear-tomatoes, hairy okra, baby-dills in brine), but also the crazy quilt safe-swaddling them, the gummed saliva-labels neat-naming them, my mama's name —hieroglyphical, grease-penciled, 'KAY' (KAZUE) HUTTO—branding lids.

*Do you reckon tomorrow they'll put my picture in the paper?*

*Will somebody do a write-up when I win?*

—ATSURO RILEY



## When My Mother Is Away

My father, who hasn't cooked since they were married,  
since he came up to the mountains from the coast,  
makes red beans sweating with andouille,  
leaves them all day to soak, then simmer on the stove.

When I call, he is too busy for the telephone.  
The baseball game is on, the rice is on,  
and if he lets it cook too long it goes to glue.  
*You know, sweetheart, he says, I have to pay attention to the stove.*

My father goes home when our house is empty.  
The days he spends alone: that false blank pulse  
of the hurricane's eye on his boyhood city. Inside  
his mother bends and dices celery beside the stove

and cooks it to invisible. You have to take it slow  
and gentle if you want to get it right, and boil  
the beans low to keep the skin from breaking.  
She had patience for the heat and for the stove

and nothing else. This one accumulation she could take.  
My father likes the whole mess peppered strong, one bite  
enough to manufacture weather on his face: the moment  
when he brings it to his mouth, the moment the storm breaks.

—MOLLY McCULLY BROWN





## Ode

my Spanish is an itchy phantom limb;  
it is reaching for words and only finding air.

—Melissa Lozada-Oliva, “My Spanish”

We are disappointments—we cannot make good of grief by giving it back to the tortilla, like my grandmother, burning it off her fingertips & into the dough, the front burner, a novela in flames. We are unlit pilot light—she, Virginia Slim. We eat her smoke, we landscape the hot discs with butter that glistens & pearls like the way *rr* leaves her mouth. We melt cheddar cheese. We add bacon & eggs, beans soaked overnight like her stubbornness. She cooks the bacon only to save the grease for the beans. She cooks the beans, then cooks the beans. *Tortilla* isn't a word that sounds like it lives anywhere near loss, but its location is *mano, brazo*, two places that have left the map of her. She tells us this is the last time she'll make them for us—she doesn't think she'll make it through many more nights of walking on water. The rolling pin hits the counter in its urgency, & we can't put love back where it came from like she does.

—ILIANA ROCHA

## Acceptance Speech

The radio's replaying last night's winners  
and the gratitude of the glamorous,  
everyone thanking everybody for making everything  
so possible, until I want to shush  
the faucet, dry my hands, join in right here  
at the cluttered podium of the sink, and thank

my mother for teaching me the true meaning of okra,  
my children for putting back the growl in hunger,  
my husband, primo uomo of dinner, for not  
begrudging me this starring role—

without all of them, I know this soup  
would not be here tonight.

And let me just add that I could not  
have made it without the marrow bone, that blood-  
brother to the broth, and the tomatoes  
who opened up their hearts, and the self-effacing limas,  
the blonde sorority of corn, the cayenne  
and oregano who dashed in  
in the nick of time.

Special thanks, as always, to the salt—  
you know who you are—and to the knife,  
who revealed the ripe beneath the rind,  
the clean truth underneath the dirty peel.

—I hope I've not forgotten anyone—  
oh, yes, to the celery and the parsnip,  
those bit players only there to swell the scene,  
let me just say: sometimes I know exactly how you feel.

But not tonight, not when it's all  
coming to something and the heat is on and  
I'm basking in another round  
of blue applause.

—LYNN POWELL





## Salat Behind Al's Mediterranean and American Food

This evening, in Birmingham,  
when I'm meeting a friend  
for fried chicken  
and poetry,  
you prostrate before God  
on a piece of cardboard box  
in the back alley.  
Beside you, there is a dumpster  
whispering styrofoam  
and onion skins.  
The shells of dead cockroaches  
bend and crackle  
under your knees. Even they pray.  
The backdoor of the restaurant  
and the towering  
University Parking Deck  
shelter you in shadow.  
Fifteen minutes from now,  
you will bring me cheap fries  
and fingers,  
and when you ask me  
if I'd like ketchup,  
your accent heavy as oil,  
it sounds like a proverb—  
clean tomato,  
sovereign God.

—ASHLEY M. JONES

## Jubilee

Come down to the water. Bring your snare drum,  
your hubcaps, the trash can lid. Bring every  
joyful noise you've held at bay so long.  
The fish have risen to the surface this early  
morning: flounder, shrimp, and every blue crab  
this side of Mobile. Bottom feeders? Please.  
They shine like your Grandpa Les' Cadillac,  
the one you rode in, slow so all the girls  
could see. They called to you like katydids.  
And the springs in that car sounded like tubas  
as you moved up and down. Make a soulful sound  
unto the leather and the wheel, praise the man  
who had the good sense to build a front seat  
like a bed, who knew you'd never buy a car  
that big if you only meant to drive it.

—GABRIELLE CALVOCORESSI



## Why I Can't Cook for Your Self-Centered Architect Cousin

Because to me a dinner table's like a bed—  
without love, it's all appetite and stains. Let's buy  
take-out for your cousin, or order pizza—his toppings—

but I can't lift a spatula to serve him what I am.  
Instead, invite our favorite misfits over: I'll feed  
shaggy Otis who, after filet mignon, raised his plate

and sipped merlot sauce with such pleasure  
my ego pardoned his manners. Or I'll call Mimi,  
the chubby librarian, who paused over tiramisu—

"I haven't felt so satisfied since . . ." then cried  
into its curls of chocolate. Or Randolph might stop by,  
who once, celebrating his breakup with the vegetarian,

so packed the purse seine of his wiry body with shrimp  
he unbuttoned his jeans and spent the evening  
couched, "waiting for the swelling to go down."

Or maybe I'll just cook for us. I'll crush pine nuts  
unhinged from the cones' prickly shingles.  
I'll whittle the parmesan, and if I grate a knuckle

it's just more of me in my cooking. I'll disrobe  
garlic cloves of rosy sheaths, thresh the basil  
till moist, and liberate the oil. Then I'll dance

that green joy through the fettuccine, a tumbling,  
leggy dish we'll imitate, after dessert.  
If my embrace detects the five pounds you win

each year, you will merely seem a generous  
portion. And if you bring my hand to your lips  
and smell the garlic that lingers, that scents

the sweat you lick from the hollows of my clavicles,  
you're tasting the reason that I can't cook  
for your cousin—my saucy, my strongly seasoned love.

—BETH ANN FENNELLY



# A Theory of Pole Beans

(for Ethel and Rice)

that must have been the tail end of the Depression  
as well as the depression of coming war  
there certainly was segregation and hatred and fear

these small towns and small minded people  
trying to bend taller spirits down  
were unable to succeed

there couldn't have been too much fun  
assuming fun equates with irresponsibility

there was always food to be put on the table  
clothes to be washed and ironed  
hair to be pressed  
gardens to be weeded

and children to talk to and teach  
each other to love  
and tend to

pole beans are not everyone's favorite  
they make you think of pieces of fat back  
cornbread  
and maybe a piece of fried chicken

they are the staples of things unquestioned  
they are broken and boiled

no one would say life handed you  
a silver spoon or golden parachute  
but you still  
met married  
bought a home reared a family  
supported a church and kept a mighty faith  
in your God and each other

they say love/is a many splendored thing  
but maybe that's because we recognize  
you loved no matter what the burden  
you laughed no matter for the tears  
you persevered in your love

and your garden remains in full bloom

—NIKKI GIOVANNI





## Because Men Do What They Want to Do

and we do what has to be done. That's what *that's* about, Aunt Gwen said. My arms heavy with corn

for shucking. The sink filled with plucked greens for cleaning. Aunt Ethel, arms akimbo, hands in bright yellow

gloves just nodded in my direction before she tended the collards again. And I'll tell you what else—Aunt Dot

had been silent; we all paused as she punctuated her chopping with words—Yes, get the plate when he asks you. String up the linens,

turn down the beds. But once in a while, pick up a plate, like so. Throw it down. Oh yes, said Aunt Bebe, leaning

out to the screen porch, blowing smoke out of doors. *Frequency may vary.* The kitchen erupted. While the

men had been cheering the football game in the parlor, the laughter tipped the house—every ear fled a body,

collected against that kitchen's closed door. Bebe flicked out her cigarette, rinsed her hands, went back to breaking up chickens.

Ethel furiously scrubbed the greens. Gwen, to the boiling potatoes on the stove and Dot, her chopping. Too new to know better,

J—my husband—peered around the door then darted out. I grinned with teeth, tore at the silk. Yes, Ethel whispered. *Just like that.*

*Show him any old hand can make a fist.*

—TJ JARRETT

## Little Love Poem

At 6 a.m. the sun considers everything,  
humming its way past the Capitol.

I reheat yesterday's coffee,  
put lima beans into a pot:

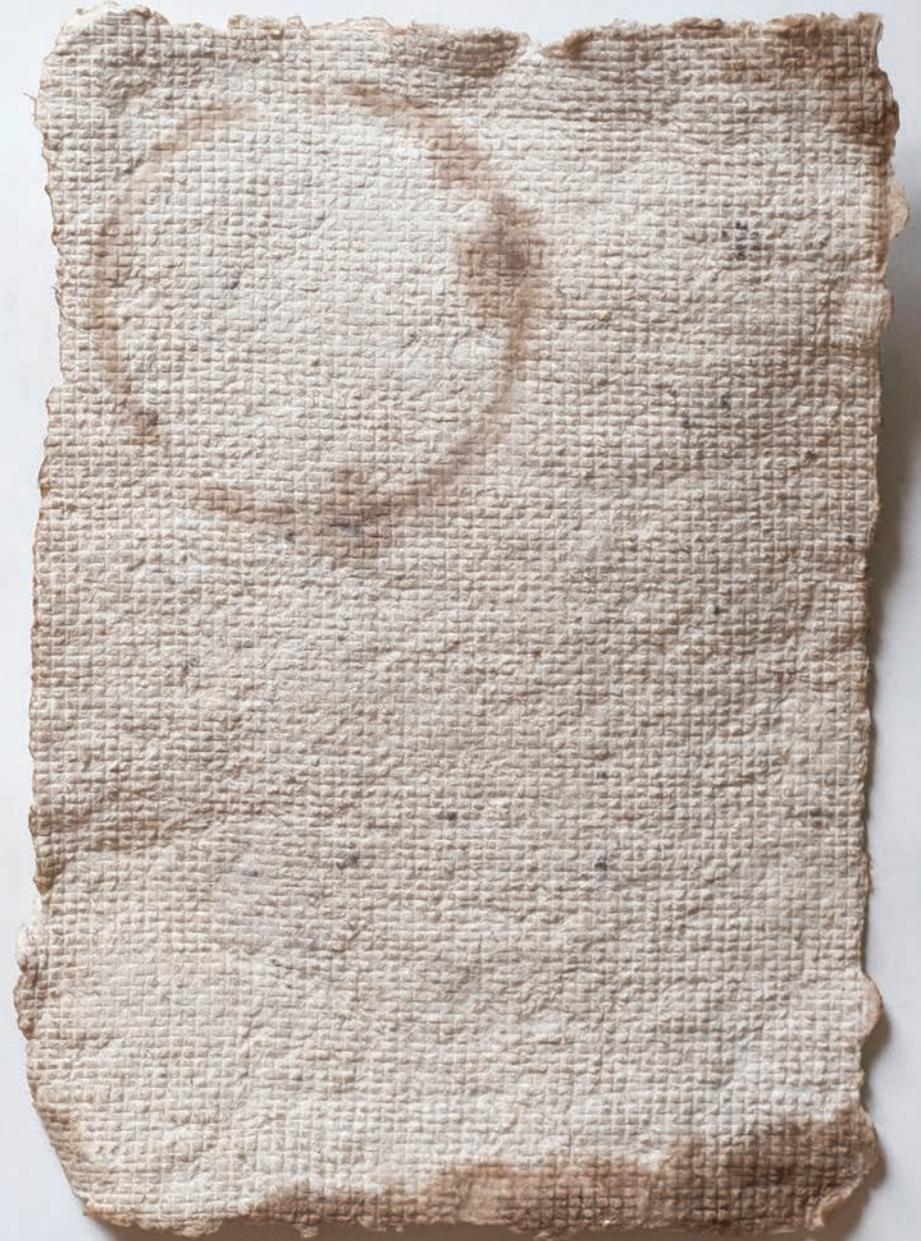
Fordhook, always Fordhook,  
drizzled olive oil, pinch of salt, shake

of chili flakes. The chicken broth  
comes to boil for a minute

before I cover, simmer. Soon he'll wake,  
and I'll ask him to put a record on,

something with no words;  
bowls, spoons, a single twist of pepper.

— SANDRA BEASLEY



## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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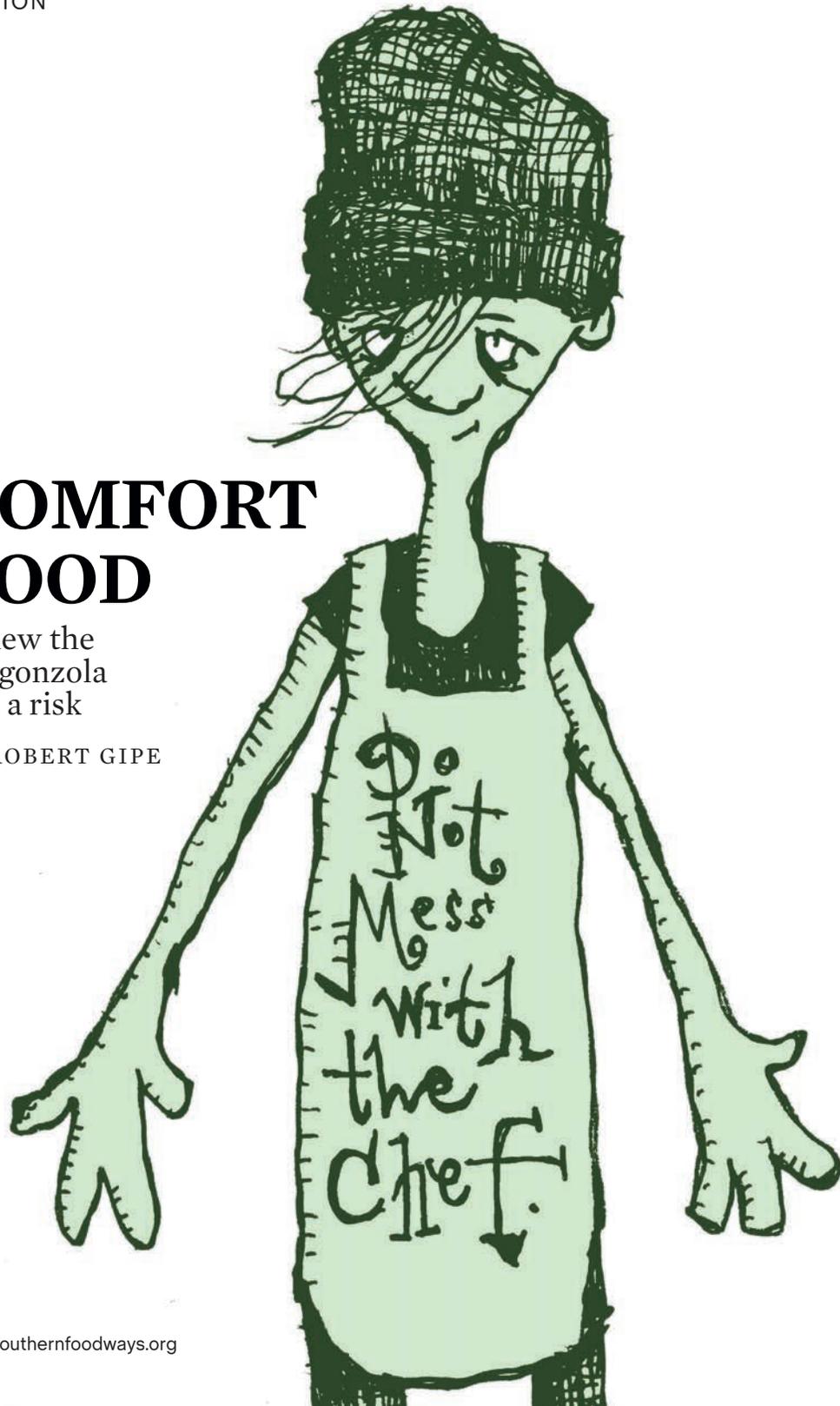
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# COMFORT FOOD

I knew the  
Gorgonzola  
was a risk

BY ROBERT GIPE



Illustrations by Robert Gipe





MY MOTHER SAT IN THE FRONT seat of an Oldsmobile Alero in the carport of my great-granny Cora's brick house on the Long Ridge Trail, at the crest of Long Mountain, looking out over Blue Bear Valley and the town of Canard, a mountain community of rich heritage and crowded court docket.

My mother cried her eyes out, beat her hands against the Alero steering wheel, stopped every few minutes to scream. I was in the kitchen looking out the window over the sink, across the patio through the big fat mint and basil and rosemary I had growing in concrete planters, lining the edge of the cement slab of the carport.

I was sixteen years old. My skin was spotty. I was bony. I had on an apron my mother had made me in a class at the community college with **DO NOT MESS WITH THE CHEF. SHE DOES NOT CARE TO KNIFE YOU** silkscreened in Gothic letters. My mother cried because she thought I

was going to leave her. She cried because she was worried I was not safe. She worried I was betraying all that was sacred and dear. She worried that her only child was a thoughtless, shameless heathen about to kill herself on a lake many counties away, on a jet ski owned by a drug dealer from Hazard, knocked up and high on heroin. She worried about these things not because I was doing any of them but because I put Gorgonzola in the macaroni and cheese.

"It tastes like ass, Nicolette," my mother said after she spit the first mouthful into her hand. She threw the only protein she'd still eat to the floor, wiped her hand on her hoodie, and stomped out the storm door. "Like goat's ass," she said from the patio, and hightailed it to the Alero to drown her sorrows listening to Heart and Pat Benatar and eating barbecue potato chips.

I knew the gorgonzola was a risk. My mother depends on macaroni and cheese.

She has depended on macaroni and cheese since 2004, the year her mother, grandmother, and best friend all three died in the same July. Her best friend was a confidential informant who died driving home drunk from Dollywood. She was trying to get a tape of somebody talking about their drug deals when her tape player messed up and she flipped her truck trying to fix it. Momma's momma died from an overdose when the Tennessee man shooting her up put too much in the needle and when he seen what he done, dumped my grandmother's body by the river like she was a bag of garbage. Granny Cora—who was who raised my mother—she was the one made my mother go to school, took her with her where she went—to her anti-strip-mining meetings and visiting people in the hospital and sitting up with people at their houses when they were blue from losing their jobs or their husbands losing their jobs. Momma and Granny Cora sat up with people scared of getting robbed by druggies, or their check getting cut off, or bad ex-husbands and shitty ex-boyfriends showing up, or cops serving warrants or landlords wanting sex for rent or irate nephews-in-law demanding to see nieces hid in upstairs bedrooms—Granny Cora would go to all them people and take my momma with her.

Granny Cora didn't make the macaroni. She didn't much cook at all, but what she would do is take a brownie pie to people, when the emergency wasn't too time sensitive, and she had time to make it. Granny Cora loved sweet stuff. She'd take brownie pie.

Granny Cora was also the one drug my mom through the mountains, and named all the wildflowers and plants to her and showed her how to know the trees not just by their leaves but by their bark, too. And that stuff didn't much stick with

Momma, the names of things wasn't her thing, but she sure knew after her daddy got crushed by a piece of mine machinery run by a man out of his head on drugs, and after her mom crawled up in a liquor bottle and then got her life ended with the push of a syringe plunger, that her Granny Cora cared about her, and would be there for her. Until she wasn't. Until she died in a cave where she'd took me and Momma to talk about what we were going to do about Momma's momma, and wade in the water of underground lakes.

The only time my mother ever let her mother-in-law in Tennessee be nice to her was right after them three died. My father's mother was named Dorothy Bilson. She had a big smile, bright like Christmas toys under the tree, and she smiled it a lot, thought you could solve most problems with a bright smile, and sometimes, not for me, but for Momma, Dot's smile was too much.

I called my grandmother Bilson Dot. Dot lived in Tennessee, in a big house on a street full of hundred-foot trees in Kingsport, a factory town where she grew up her whole life. Her husband worked in the factory and died of cancer when I was real little and Dot was alone like that for years and years, which made her sad but also gave her lots of time to worry about her only son, my daddy Willett Bilson, which wore on Momma.

Dot was all the time saying she would love for us to move in with her, that that would suit her fine, and me and Daddy, we stayed there from time to time, and a lot of my growing up, I went to school in Tennessee, at the same city school in Kingsport where Daddy went. We lived on the edge of town, with Momma mostly, in a trailer by a creek with a bunch of other trailers.

Us living in a trailer park was not Dot's favorite thing we did, and she let me know from the time I was little that it

made her nervous and that she would worry a lot less if my daddy would let her help us find a place closer to her and her giant tree-lined street with its school-sized houses and its truck tire-sized Christmas wreaths made of real tree branches in every window with big red bows on them.

Momma went to Dot's house when she had to, but they didn't hang out and they didn't chitchat on the phone by the hour like sometimes Dot did with others. But when Momma lost all them people, she got so broke down she did let Dot put her up in her quiet quiet house with its good thick walls and its ancient creaky beds, and she let Dot feed her, which is where the macaroni and cheese comes in.

Dot liked to feed us, but she didn't much like to cook, but she did cook, and she used lots of butter and lots of cheddar cheese pre-shredded in ziplock bags and she fixed lots of Pyrex dish stuff from recipes she got off her friends and relations at book club and bridge club and Christmas parties and Fourth of July picnics, and so her refrigerator always had at least fifteen sticks of butter in it, and both crisper drawers crammed full of bag cheese.

Sometimes all that butter and cheese ended up making Dot's cooking kind of heavy, and sometimes it wound all of us up in the bathroom, which Dot's house had many of. But all that butter and cheese worked out perfect when it came to Dot's macaroni and cheese, which she prepared in layers and baked crispy brown on top and which tasted even better the next day out of the microwave. It was simple and pure and one of the first things I learned to fix when I started cooking. And simple as it was, Momma acted like it was magic, and made me make it for her. Momma said she liked my macaroni way better than Dot's.

When Momma came to stay at Dot's

in her sadness, she wasn't talking, which not talking was something she sometimes did, but that was the start of Momma going days when you couldn't even get her talking by provoking her. You could say her music sucked or make fun of her hair and she wouldn't even look at you. In them days she'd stay in the bed even when she wasn't sleeping. She just rolled over and faced the wall in this old bed Daddy's great-great-grandpa made, and she did that straight through Christmas and New Year's. And all she'd eat was a saltine cracker, one saltine cracker, and nibble it like a rabbit, staring off into something a thousand miles inside her mind.

When she did finally come out it was almost Valentine's Day, and me and Daddy were sitting at the little table in Dot's kitchen, the one with all the family pictures under glass, and we were eating ham and green beans and macaroni and cheese. And Momma come sit down in a Molly Hatchet T-shirt and her Foghorn Leghorn pajama pants, and she ate three quarters of a Pyrex of that macaroni and cheese and Dot rustled out another Pyrex and started making another one and for about two weeks, there was always macaroni and cheese fixed in Dot's refrigerator and Momma was always eating it.

And Momma gradually started coming back to herself and things got decently normal until I was in the fourth grade. We were living in Kentucky then, and I was going to the Pine Knot School in Canard County. That year they had a contest at Pine Knot School and every person in my grade had to dress up like an important product of the state of Kentucky. That year, Momma was involved in what I was doing in school. Me and her were sitting in the front seat of her Sentra in the dollar store parking lot when I told her about the contest. She thought for about a minute and said, "I

One of the assistant principals said, "Ma'am, Grippo's are not a Kentucky product. They come from Cincinnati."



think you ought to be a bag of Grippo's." She said, "What do you think?"

I saw how happy her face looked, so I said that was fine with me.

She went in the dollar store and got a bag of Grippo's barbecue potato chips and come out and sat in the car and crinkled the bag in her hands, turned it over and over. Then she went back in the dollar store and got glitter paint and white spray paint and a pack of markers and we went down to the Sears store at the old mall and found a nice refrigerator box which she used a big long piece of plastic wrap to strap to the top of the Sentra, and she brought me back to the house and we spread out a painter's drop-cloth and then that cardboard in the carport and had me lay down on it and she stared at me and pondered, and then she had me slip inside the box like it was a sleeping bag. Then she told me, "Get out of there," and spray-painted the whole box white. Then she sketched out with a pencil that whole Grippo's bag onto the refrigerator box. She got that

little dude with the skillet and the barbecue grill and the cursive Grippo's letters just right. Then she took out the masking tape and masked stuff before she got with it with the glitter paint.

Once she got it painted, she took the masking tape, and used a big fat marker to put the black line in and all the fine print on front and back sides and when she got done, I looked down inside her giant cardboard Grippo's bag, sure there were going to be giant potato chips inside. That's how good it looked.

There were seventeen kids in my fourth-grade class. When I got to school the next day, fourteen of them were dressed up as pieces of coal. One girl who lived with her big sister dressed up as a bag of pot. The other boy was strapped in a wheelchair and didn't know they were having a great products of Kentucky costume day. So I was pretty sure I was going to win that contest—especially after they sent the bag of pot girl home. Momma, who came with me to school, was sure I was going to win too, and

brought six yellow dollar store bags full of little bags of Grippo's, so she could give one to every person in class, all the students, and the teacher, and the teacher's aide, and everybody else their own bag of potato chips when I won that contest.

They had two assistant principals and one of the sixth-grade teachers judge us, and when this one lump of coal, not even the best lump of coal—he had gaps in his paint job on the half-wadded newspaper they'd used to make the coal—won, Momma went apeshit.

She said, "That right there is fucking bullshit," loud enough for all of them to hear it.

And when she asked how in the hell a wad of black newspaper could win over her daughter's beautiful and totally creative homemade potato chip bag, one of the assistant principals said, "Ma'am, Grippo's are not a Kentucky product. They come from Cincinnati."

Momma said, "What in the hell are you talking about?"

I turned around and bent over and showed Momma the fine print on my butt said Grippo's come from Cincinnati.

Momma said, "Bullshit. My aunt sent Grippo's every week to her son in Iraq and every week to her nephew in Afghanistan. And she had her whole house painted UK blue. Inside and out."

And when they all just looked at Momma, she said, "Come on, Nicolette," and took me by the hand and got her six yellow dollar store bags of Grippo's in the other and went out to the car, told me she wasn't never going back to that school. And she never did. She didn't go the next year when we had another costume contest, where we dressed up as famous Kentuckians. She just put me in an old man's suit and put gray shoe polish on my cheeks and told me to tell them I was Harry Dean Stanton and dare

them to say a word about it. She didn't come when my group won the young problem solvers competition in eighth grade. She didn't come when I won the quick recall contest in ninth grade. She didn't come when I won the pastry-making competition or the entrée competition or the pumpkin roll competition this past year in culinary. She didn't come this past spring when I went to prom with a girl from Tennessee and puked my toenails up and got my ass kicked by some boys from Turtletop.

And none of that bothered me. Until it did. Until this past spring, when I made it all the way to the state culinary championships in baking. I'd turned the apple stack cake recipe my aunt Tilda gave me into a lemon curd poppyseed stack cake that was pure beautiful, and once again I was sure I was going to win, but then a girl from my own school accused me of stealing her recipe which I know for a fact she got everything she ever made off television, but they took her word over mine cause her daddy was a bigshot at the plant and her mother went to Nashville to pay three hundred dollars to get their hair cut. Three hundred for herself, and three hundred for that girl, and three hundred for that girl's sister. Every time they got a haircut.

And when I went home and told Mom, she said, "I don't know why you fool with that stuff," and unwrapped another oatmeal creme pie and went back in her room to watch Japanese cartoon movies.

And that made me so mad. And that was yesterday. But I swallowed my mad and got up early this morning cause these women in Berea had heard about me and my cooking and they had introduced me to this hot woman who was making her own Gorgonzola cheese from her own cows somewhere down that way and they were having a big dinner and there were going to be cookbook writers and

chefs from big restaurants there, and all of them would be talking about how Appalachian food had been under appreciated and how now was our time to step right into the light, right onto the center of the world food stage. And the Berea women who were organizing this thing wanted me to be a part of it, and not just me, but some of the others who were in my culinary club. And they acted like this thing might lead to jobs for us, or at least work, and maybe in time the chance for us to do our own thing, maybe the chance to make Canard County a food mecca, a place where people who knew the difference came to eat—come to our town to eat our cooking to see what the new face of Appalachian cookery looked like.

I thought about all that looking at the gob of spit-out macaroni and cheese my mother had left on Granny Cora's kitchen floor and I marched out to the carport and banged on the car window and when Momma wouldn't roll it down, I banged on it some more, and when she still wouldn't roll it down, I banged on it some more, and when she did finally roll it down and said, "What?" like she didn't have no idea what I was doing out there, I told her what I just told you all—about the Berea women and about the woman making her own Gorgonzola cheese and how this might lead to a job for me and how it might make Canard County a place where the leading industry was something besides jury duty, and I worked myself up pretty good, thought I give a pretty good speech, and at the end of it, I said, "And all you got to say about it is that my macaroni and cheese tastes like ass?"

Momma started the Alero. She rested her arm in the open window said, "How much does that dinner cost? I might want to go."

I said, "I can get you a ticket, Momma." Momma said, "That ain't what I asked." I said, "I don't know how much it costs." Momma said, "It's on their website." Momma backed the Alero out of the carport.

I grabbed hold of the door handle. I said, "Momma, where you going?"

Momma said, "That garglezola macaroni, or whatever—it's real tasty. That cake—it was awesome. But baby, I don't know who you're fixing for. I don't know them."

I said, "Momma, you don't know who fixes hardly any of your food."

Momma said, "Cooking for strangers is fine. I don't have a problem with that."

I said, "What then?"

Momma said, "Who you cook for is who you are. Even snooty Dot knew that."

I said, "I know that, Momma. You think I don't have sense."

Momma said, "I think you got more sense than the rest of us put together."

Momma rolled up her window. Then she rolled it back down.

She said, "What's that girl's name said you stole that recipe?"

I told her.

"And her momma's name?"

I told her. And when she asked where they live, I told her that too.

Momma said, "You care if I go beat their ass?"

I said no.

Momma said, "Give me twenty dollars." I did.

"All right then," Momma said. "Have fun in Berea. Leave me some of that macaroni."

And then Momma was gone. And I went back in Granny Cora's house and cleaned up the floor and put tinfoil on my macaroni. And then I called my friend Pinky to take me to Berea. 🍷

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*Robert Gipe is the author of the novels Trampoline and Weedeater. He read this story at the SFA Summer Symposium in Lexington, Kentucky.*

# TEX-MEX KASHMIRA

In the kitchen with my mother

BY VISHWESH BHATT

WHILE I WAS AWAY FOR COLLEGE, my father took a sabbatical from teaching at the University of Mississippi and returned to Austin, Texas, to do research. That summer, I went to visit my parents at the newest of their homes. Crunching gravel underfoot, I walked past a patch of herbs and flowers and saw my mother by the kitchen sink, looking out the window into the backyard. As I drew closer, she waved, turned off *Days of our Lives*, and refocused her attention to the stove.

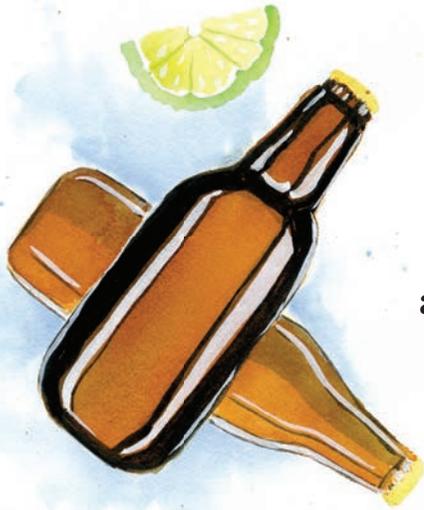
I could smell the spices before I reached the kitchen. In Ahmedabad, and later in Oxford (where we all once lived and I now live with my wife), curry leaves, asafetida, and garam masala usually wafted through her kitchen. This was different. “Your father has invited some colleagues over for supper,” she explained. “I wanted to make something new, something Texan.”

BORN IN BHAVNAGAR, Gujarat, Dad had studied physics at the University of Chicago. Early in his career, he worked in the National Laboratory at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Recruited with other young and talented scientists to set up a research laboratory in Ahmedabad, he and Mom left a promising future in the States and sailed back to Bombay on the *Queen Elizabeth I*. As I was finishing high school, my parents decided they wanted to give my sister and me the opportunity to study in the United States. So back we came. He accepted a position at the University of Texas-Austin as an instructor in the physics department, a job well below his qualifications and customary pay rate.

Long before the house on Elm Street, our first home in Austin was a rental apartment on East Riverside Drive. That apartment complex—with its gray brick buildings and brown roofs—seemed a



Illustrations by Patricia Jacques



**In Austin, my mother's visits with our diverse community of neighbors added to her pantry and to her box of recipes.**

downscale move. But the place proved a gift. Those first months in that apartment complex opened my eyes to the true diversity of America. I got to know a community that worked all sorts of jobs and came from seemingly every ethnicity and background. Looking back, those eleven months in Travis Heights would shape my view of what America is and what it might be. That time would change my mother, too. Her afternoon visits with the neighbors added to her pantry and to her box of recipes.

I SHOWERED AND came downstairs. Mom handed me a cup of chai and three Pepperidge Farm cookies and removed the lid to the pressure cooker. I peered over her shoulder. Through the wafting steam I saw black-eyed peas bobbing with a stick of cinnamon, some bay leaves, a few garlic cloves, and a couple of deep maroon chili pods.

My mother didn't know the term *mise en place*, but she knew how to lay out a proper kitchen. On the butcher-block island arced a rainbow of carrots, radishes, purple onions, tomatoes, tomatillos, serrano chilies, limes, green garlic,

cilantro, and mint. Next to them was a white slab of jack cheese. Her trusty Mouli tripod grater stood ready on the counter; her Oster blender was plugged in and ready to go. Mom's instructions were clear and firm: "I want the carrots shredded, radishes sliced thin into circles, chilies minced. Please make the pico de gallo from the Diana Kennedy book."

She toasted cumin in a skillet, quickly pounded the seeds in a mortar, and slid the coarse powder into the peas. She heated oil in the same skillet, sautéed onions and garlic, and added chopped tomatoes, chili powder, salt, lime juice, and cilantro. When the tomatoes began to sweat, she dumped the mixture into the beans, added salt, and gave them a good stir. She worked the mix with a potato masher before replacing the pot lid.

She handed me a bowl for the pico de gallo and started making what she called "tomatillo (rhymes with armadillo) chutney," flavored with green garlic, mint, serranos, and onions. She gave the mix a good whirl in her Oster blender, poured out the loveliest jade-green sauce into a light blue bowl, and instructed me, "Please clean up the dirty dishes and go

get some proper beer. Mrs. Godinez said to serve chilled Lone Star and Modelo with lime wedges."

As I turned toward the door, my mother lifted the checkered kitchen towel from the familiar terra cotta dough bowl, revealing a pile of pale yellow balls. I watched as she pulled her rolling pin out and maneuvered the concave griddle into place over the gas fire. For decades, my mother, a native of Jafarabad on the Gujarati coast, skilled in the cooking of okra and lentils, had made chapatis over this fire. That day, she rolled and griddled tortillas. They ballooned and blistered from the heat of the fire. She looked at me and smiled. She knew that for the first time in my life, I grasped something she had known for decades—that the magic of this place called Texas, this nation called America, lies in the diversity of her people and their foodways. 🍷

*Vishwesh Bhatt, the chef at SnackBar in Oxford, MS, is at work on his first book.*



**RHYMES-WITH-ARMADILLO CHUTNEY**

- 12-15 medium tomatillos, husks removed, washed, and quartered**
- 2 serrano chilies, chopped**
- 1 yellow onion, diced**
- 1/3 cup golden raisins**
- 2 stalks green garlic (or 6 cloves garlic, sliced)**
- 1/3 cup mint leaves**
- 10-12 cilantro sprigs, chopped**
- 2 Tablespoons brown sugar**
- 1 Tablespoon cumin seeds**
- 2 Tablespoons cider vinegar**
- 1 cup water**
- 1 teaspoon black pepper**
- Salt**
- 3 Tablespoons vegetable oil**

Soak the raisins in one cup water with 2 Tablespoons of vinegar and set aside to plump. Heat the oil in a heavy bottom pot until shimmering. Add cumin, serranos, onions and garlic and cook until the onions start to sweat. Add the tomatillos and cook until they soften and blister just a little bit. Turn off the heat and add the herbs, brown sugar, raisin mixture, salt, and pepper. Give everything a good stir. Once the mixture cools to room temperature, blend in a blender until smooth. Adjust the seasoning to your liking and serve.



My grandfather, Roosevelt Crowder, owned and operated a farm near Kenbridge, Virginia, from the 1950s through the 1970s. He farmed tobacco, raised livestock, and grew fruits and vegetables. The tobacco was their cash crop; they often gave away the produce and meat to friends, neighbors, and strangers. During a summer break from college in 2009, I began documenting his life and that of my grandmother, Easter Crowder, as they worked their 20 acre farm in Lunenburg County. I had an instinct to catalog their voices, their daily routines, the wrinkles of their hands and faces. I wanted to regard the lives they built for themselves and their children. I wanted to pay attention to these people who meant so much to me and document for a larger audience how their lives mattered. —Nicole Crowder, *photographer*



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The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

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