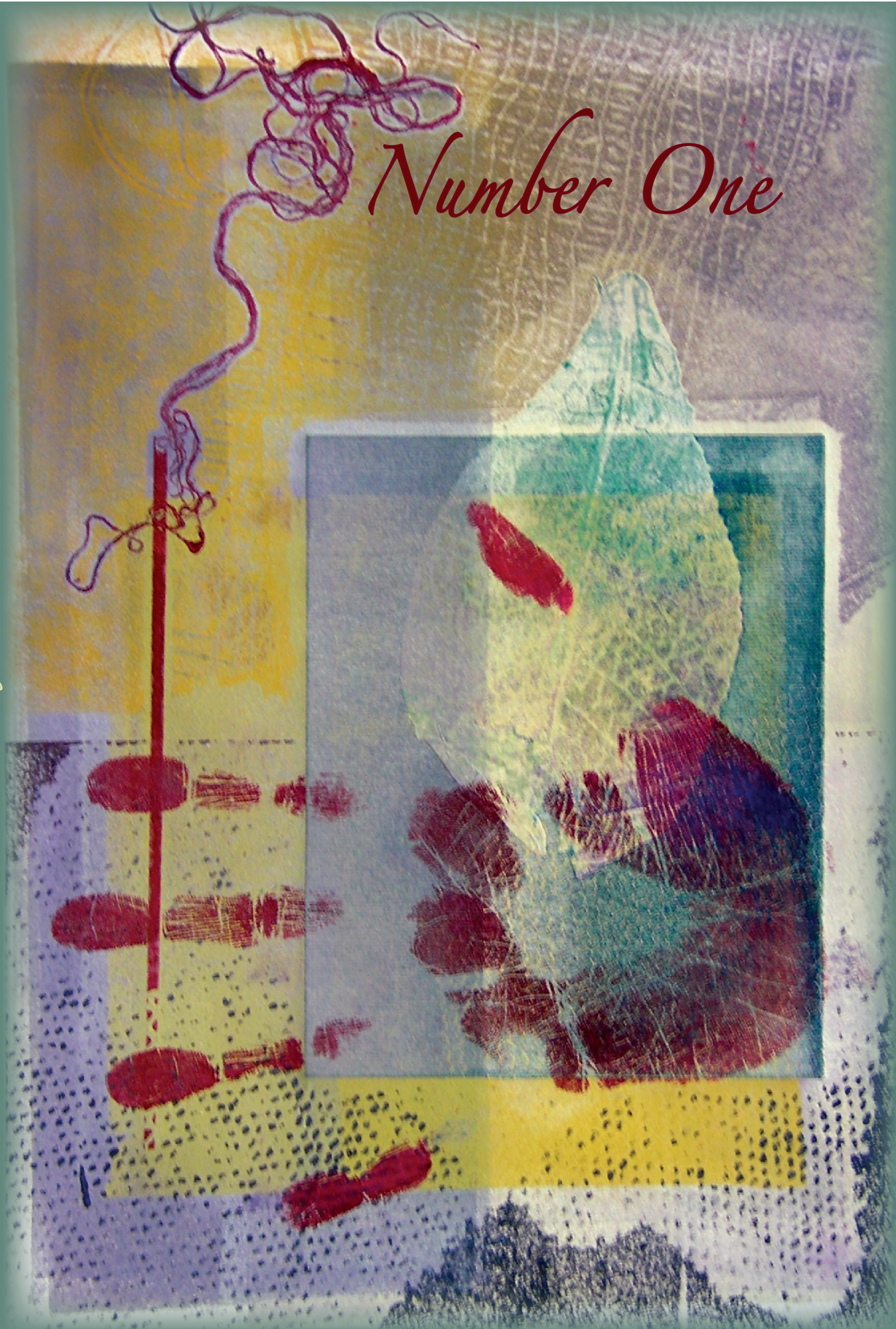
Number One

Number One

2006

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"Chapter 1: Midnight in Mooresville"

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About Number One

*Number One is a small community
(unincorporated)
two miles west of Gallatin,
Tennessee, on the Nashville Pike
(Highway 31E).*

*No one knows exactly how it got its name.
Though local theories and legends point to
several origins, the prevailing notion
is that Number One was not much more than
a dot on the Cumberland Trail.*

*Nearby Station Camp Creek,
an early trading post for 18th
and early 19th century long rifle hunters,
suggests that Number One may have been
the name given to a designated hunting ground
or a rendezvous point for traders.*

*Perhaps the name originated
in the early school system or
in the railroad lingo of the
Louisville – Nashville line,
which runs parallel to the Pike.*

*Most people believe, however, that the name
is older than the school system,
older than the railroads,
perhaps even older than Trail itself.*

*Number One remains a mystery,
a name with many possible histories
and meanings—
an appropriate symbol, don't you think?
—for literature and for our journal.*

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Featuring

2006 Poetry and Prose Contest Winners

"To My Ex-Husband on What Would Have
Been Our 31st Anniversary"
by Leslie Lytle

"Words"
by Jed Bierhaus

&

Author

Sharyn McCrumb

To My Ex-Husband

(on What Would Have Been Our 31st Anniversary)

Today the sound outside my window is rain in the leaves,
or more correctly, the sound of rain striking something.
In a world without otherness raindrops are silent.
Drops of water hurled like javelins by an impassioned wind
rip open the air, and the air hisses and whines, but not
the rain—we never really hear the rain.

Yesterday the sound was gunfire, bombs, and grenades.
I sat at the edge of my pond and listened to the war
surrounded by explosions celebrating Independence Day.
The darkness lingering at the edge of the day took a seat
beside me, the battle in full flower in the black beyond
—more explosions and still more the darker it got.

The sound I cherish from the twenty years married to you
is the sound of searching—searching for roads leading
to the river, searching for the blue swirls where the big ones
hid from our eyes (but not our hooks). What I really hear
is the sound of finding when we both wanted what we found.
In a world without otherness finding is silent.

Worship

Writing poetry is being

an innocent boy
watching
an experienced woman

slowly
enter
the bath

Snorkel

I want to snorkel with you
through expanses of cerulean,
through waters of lime,
as the sun like lemons,
like stars,
glazes the surface with gold-yellow lapping
and the stingrays
glide between our toes
like soft kites
with streamers.

At the Cemetery

There is the man who shows up
daily at his wife's grave, rain
or shine, sits all day slumped
in a folding chair brought on the bus
along with hat, sunglasses, sandwich, cookies
he will give to someone's child.
He kibbitzes with families who come
to honor their own dead, befriends
workers who daily dig the graves,
knows the names of the young guys
who drive the mowing machines
for summer pay.

He is very old in his body, this husband.
His shaking hands, his stiff fingers
complicate the transfer of bus fare
from pocket to receptacle
which tempts the driver and
others waiting to board
to say something rude.
But he is stubborn. After all those years,
they still have a life together, although
his wife might have looked forward
to a rest from his monotonous prattle
when she fell behind.

Is he the better Orpheus?
Every day, hours on end, busying himself
with the fact of her death, claiming
the place next to her as if
it was not already his own.

Reading Clifford With Miguel

Mira Miguel Aguirre Cruz,
what am I losing in you—
you who ride to school
an hour each way, your sleepy head
bumping on a bleary bus window?

From where do you come Miguel Aguirre?
What ancestors in some small village
south of here gave birth to your shining eyes?
Who smoothes your blankets at bedtime
and speaks a prayer?

¿*Que honda*, Miguel? you
who devour the pith of America
with great enthusiastic gulps. Will
Paul's blue ox replace *la llorona*
and your grandmother's black mantilla?

Will the ancient words fall
from your heaven like stars—
your language of startling shyness,
those formal constructions guarding
sentiment with a silken wrap?

Talk to me *hijo*, tell me
what to slip into the pocket
of your young life, what ingredient
to remind the sweetness of casaba,
the desert of the night. Words—
are they enough?

My Nana

This snow reminds me of my Nana
Her hair was white like the North Carolina Mountains in the winter
It smelled light like smoke from the cabins at the Christmas tree farms
Where we picked out our tree every year
These lights flicker dimly reminding me of Asheville
The deep ravines that rested just beneath the houses
And dance halls filled with stories of my Nana and her
First and only love
These smells remind me of the shops on the square
She and I sought amber beads and silks and other wares
While the candles filled the room and our coats
With cinnamon aroma
This story reminds me of her voice
As she read me tales while my toes curled up under her legs
I could see my reflection in a glass coffee table
In my nightie
The lights dance on my face and Nana's arms

Two Staring Out

two staring out
as the mountains grow
shadow-blue and shadow-
silver, shadow-gold, shadow-
violet, as the mountains turn
lavender, topaz, and aquamarine
before reaching gray.

two staring out as the sun
seems to rupture and
bleed its brilliance
over the steel-green
summer waters.

two staring out as the sun slips
into the foothills
with the grace and the
texture of a coin
into your shirt pocket.

two staring out as the sun dissolves and we
feel the grass on our naked thighs.

New Growth

When April sun draws close enough to warm
The tilted stones which stand, a regiment
Of time-worn soldiers; beneath the locust thorns
A brighter hue infuses winter's remnants.
Across the brittle hill of ochre grass
Tender knives of green upheave the thawed
Sod. Tissue thin remains of cast
Off leaves, hole-worn by twigs and beetle-sawed
Are churned into the earth. Just down the road
My father had his roots. The houses stand
Much as they were; this pale that doesn't grow,
Indeed declines and turns back to the land.
Old wealth lies here; against the rock, spears
Of peony which bloom in May appear.

Rose

The red rose has grown to bloom in the peach tree.
There will be peaches this year: offerings
to raccoon and groundhog. Jays will peck them;
wasps will sip their meaty juice.
The last two summers of your life you harvested
them green. Peeled, cut up in a bowl with lots of sugar,
no one but you would eat them. Now my mother makes
a path to the mid-yard garden, with caution
bends to pick up a stick, tugs at a tuft of grass,
cuts a handful of lilies. She says the tree needs pruning;
it crowds the red rose that blooms there.

If I Had Been Ophelia

If I had been Ophelia
I would have told them all
To keep their opinions to themselves
I would have told my meddling brother
To return to France and
I would have told my meddling father
To stop hiding behind curtains and
I would have told my insecure boyfriend
To get himself a job so he could
Buy me more expensive remembrances or
I would have told him
To write his annoying letters to someone else or
To get himself to a nunnery
If I had been Ophelia
I would have used those flowers
That I picked to make essential oils
So that I could have started my own
Cosmetics business
If I had been Ophelia
I would definitely have taken
Swimming lessons

Tall

My heart nested in your tallest tree. It had
forgotten how to sing. In spring the rays of the newborn
sun kissed its pretty little pericardium, summer rain
brought it nectar and tried to interest the endocardium
in honey, fall winds tried to whisper a melody
to its stuck valves, winter storms thrummed a base-line
to the sinoatrial node. Still, Oklahoma, this Annie
Oakley kept her piece. After all, it was her concert.
She was ready to call her own score. Ribbit. Ribbit.
Don’t you realize the heart is a frog you swallow?
Ah, Capistrano. The swallows come back.
They make a saint of adobe. The Holy Mud
of History. Of Sacrifice. Of Youth. How lovely
as it dries in the sun. She would bathe in clay.
Then let it bake to a bottle she could sing inside.
Her lovely whistle—red hen cackling corn
into joy. And tomorrow. If wind skims the mouth
of the bottle we will hear the conclusion of our
warfare. Skipping battle. Vici. Vanquish. Victoire.
Yes, that dry heart fallen into mud will sing out
a rallying cry to her secret nation. The forgotten
mothers who weave the roots of heavy winds.

Fear and Favor

In the summer of '49 the polio epidemic hit the Midwest.
No more swimming at the pool with my friends
Or staying up to watch our new TV until ten.
"Bedtime," my mother would say with a little frown
To remind me that times were dangerous
And disease on the rampage.
We traveled to my aunt's wedding in Minneapolis
Where children were dropping like flies.
I remember covering my mouth and nose
With my dad's hankie as we drove through the streets.
Back safely home, I now and then
Dipped my head to my chest as a test to see
If paralysis was creeping up on me unbeknownst.

But all seemed well for me and my friends
Until one August evening, when my mother,
After a hushed conversation on the phone,
Sat me down in the kitchen and told me
That my friend Marilyn had been taken by ambulance
To the hospital, with polio, the bad kind, too—
Bulbar, which sometimes killed.
She went into an iron lung, a horrifying machine
That would save her life, I understood.
We later heard a strange thing;
Her sister had kissed her goodbye on the lips,
And hadn't gotten sick, so we wondered
About the curious nature of this disease.
I was too young to visit her until she came home
Months later, from a place in Oklahoma
Where great strides had been made to keep limbs
From twisting and shrinking beyond use.

Marilyn did recover with only a slight limp that
Got better until it was unnoticed by most folks.
Yet she went to a school for the handicapped
Because she hadn't the stamina for regular school.
I haven't seen her for fifty years but I knew
She'd married and had a family of her own.
Lately I have heard the symptoms may return
Years later when victims thought themselves cured.
Again, fear must be stalking Marilyn
And I remember the summer of '49.

Bee Champion

when I was young I thought Bees
were toys, and they were.
I would crouch in the grass and
measure them as a Buddhist warrior
would measure swiftness
and the freeze of time.

I would watch their mannerisms,
observe for a bit
then, Snag! and set loose
before their stingers
could react.

my bee-swipe-then-set-free-quick career
lasted about one full afternoon.

the problem was I became cocky:
I thought certainly that a bee
could be held for an instant longer
before the release
but I was wrong.

little did I know that,
in the case of bees,
as well as most other things in life,
an instant can be an age and
the slightest
hesitation
put an end to a near-perfect record
for a world class
bare hand bee champion.

of course, my grandmother
thought even less than the bees did
of this
revolutionary new pastime,
saying,
"Why on earth would anyone
try to pick up a Bee?"

bees, Grandma,
bees,
I told her,
as she sprayed Bactine
in the center of my palm and
dug out the stinger.

Mexican Boy

I saw a little Mexican boy in the laundromat.
Everything about him was black, except for his skin; it was tan like the
desert.
Black shorts, black hair, black eyes.
He had a red ball.

That little Mexican boy, his black eyes were of the warmest tones,
containing hope, youth, innocence, and everything I've lost in the past
five years that I
wish I could regain. But that won't happen because I'm not a little
Mexican boy.

He was playing with his father, faces smiling as they
threw the red plastic ball, bouncing it against the dirty, tile floor
until the ball got away, and even though I was watching the boy play,
the ball still hit me in the face.

I used to play catch with my father too,
except our ball was white with red stitches, and he never smiled.
If the ball got away, he just got angry.

The boy's mother was folding their clothes.
Tube socks, blue jeans, work shirts, and He-Man underwear,
I didn't know they still made He-Man underwear.
I used to have some, but I lost them.

I'm sure my mother still folds clothes,
but I haven't seen her do it in a long time.
I only know she isn't folding my He-Man underwear,
because I lost them

Or maybe I just grew out of them.

Red Hat Man

When he took the moth-eaten red hat
off the closet shelf, brushed it till the
nap had a satin sheen, stuck a feather
from a game rooster's tail in the brim,
I knew he was moving away already,
me not even dead yet. I saw him
eyeing that blonde with big tits, heard
people snicker at the "red hat man,"
"no fool like an old fool." He was
always partial to busty blondes. That's
why he married me, that and father's
broad acres, the money in the bank.

No doubt I was dying, thin as a gnat's
eyelash, pale as a moonflower. Death
rose with me each morning, dragged
around with me all day, lay her head
on my pillow at night. We clung to
him, Death and I, wherever he went.
He couldn't escape us, though he
thought he would soon, me breathing
Death's air, exhaling her fumes.

Standing here by my grave, false tears
dripping, he does not know I've fixed
his wagon. Even from the beyond,
my weight will fetter his arms, hamper
his feet. He's not seen the new will,
which binds him to me forever. If
the will fails to do it, I'll rise up out
of the grave, snatch him and his
painted blonde baldheaded. The
feather will droop, the hat mildew on
its shelf, the "old fool" fooled at last.

A Christmas Age

In-between my eyes
The snow flirts softly with my shivering lashes
Bouncing off the curves of my nose
Sliding down my upper lip to melt in my mouth
It tastes like childhood
Like my brother and me
Sliding down the big hill together on a sled
The flurries landing in my hair
Teeth camouflaged behind white lacey flakes
Falling on my breast
It nestles there proving I am a woman now
Gripping my winter coat's woolen threads
Unable to penetrate my protection
The barrier I put up for it
Like mittens and hats and gloves from the age
When I did not know that cold was like burglary
That it would steal the warmth in my smile
And glow of my cheeks if I was not covered properly
Breezing past my ears
The whistles in the air like sleigh bells
Wind singing
Merry yuletide every year about this town
It sounds like Christmas

Driving Home

Driving back to West Tennessee,
flat wetlands and cotton fields,
giant gourds strung from barn
to house for swallows,
and this time no poem
will come. Hollow feelings
rise in the stomach: nostalgic
loss of childhood, teen loves,
dead parents—all still there
but similes seem empty,
nothing worth comparing
to the loss, just the names
of things strung together
like gourds for birds,
or dead snakes hung
on fences, or crows shot
and lynched on pecan limbs
to warn others. Somewhere
in my memory a child
abandons broken toys
to make a fort with sticks,
always building walls
to hide behind, and an openness
in the sky cracks a place in me,
part hollow, part whole.

Questions About Hair

After combing her hair each night
My grandmother would collect
The soft tightly curled strands
From her comb and brush
Then burn them in the metal top
Of an empty jar

Fleeing the stench of burning hair
I would scoff at her fears and
Laugh at her admonitions that birds
Carry off the hair to put
In their nests giving folks headaches

Over the years since
I have been loose with life and hair
Unafraid of aches
I have let the strands of my hair
Drift in all directions

But now the aches
Are here to collect and
I wonder if my hair
Is woven around the twigs
And leaves of abandoned nests
Or does it linger in the dust
Of rooms where other women
Comb their hair

Acolyte In the Graveyard

She was old Gertie Aita
Ninety if she was a day,
Light as plainsong
In her heavy coffin
Carried slowly along beneath the maples and oaks
To her perfect hand dug grave
On the hillside
Behind the churchhouse.

I was twelve, with
Cassock black and surplice bright,
Covering jeans and sneakers
Censer chain in one hand;
The other clutched my chest.

Old John Aita cried,
Softly at first,
For his seventy two years
With her
Now gone
He quavered again and again,
"I'll have to
Go home without her.
I'll have to
Go home without her."

Sight

First a bird, then a gnarl of old leaves
pearled by webwork and snagged on a green stem, so
not a bird at all. Then the whole branch slips under
some gypsy wind and bird is there again, sleek and quirky,
nothing at all like dead leaf. Which was which?
Do leaves have black eyes? Or do birds have
a tinge of death upon them for a moment's distraction,
an idle gaze. The learnéd calls, the sweeps

across the ridge with showy wings, the shy flitterings
entreat us only when our thoughts wander out
to the air in which such beings (as we take them for) dwell.
Whatever we look for, we will probably see, hold in our sight

as if still there, but whatever allows itself to be seen
will have already gone on without us.

Report

Alcohol on her breath. Sunglasses. Bruise.
Her daughters are huddling against the door;
Precious is three, Treasure has just turned four.
She tells me she's worried; she didn't choose
this life. The girls giggle. They are holding
hands. Their sweaters match. Birds, flowers, and hearts.
History of injuries in their charts:
fractures, sprains, stitches; I heard her scolding
the oldest in the waiting room. Spilled juice.
The slapped hand stung me, heard through the closed door.
Precious is three, Treasure has just turned four.
I'll have to report it as child abuse—
but who has struck this mother?

Brothers in the Dark

Leaves sift the rain behind the back porch
where I sit with my black dog at midnight,
drinking beer, holding in my lap
a closed book of poems by some man I don't know.
This poet would fit in here, I think,
on my porch in the dark
holding a bottle of Corona, his back to the wall
as always.

Neither of us has much to say because we have been there
more or less together; veterans of our own wars.
We know the world is burning.
We know everything has been said.
It took us a while to get there and back,
to become brothers in the dark
in the cult of knowing everything
worth knowing.

So we sit here without speaking,
listening to the rain,
to the sounds of darkness,
while the dog snores in her sleep.

Finally, he says he likes the sound of the rain.
He will find a poem for it.
I nod, finish my beer, move back into the house,
find my way up the stairs to my woman.
Finally, it's enough.

Remote Control

The constant clicking drove
her into the cold
bedroom. That nervous stutter
down the plastic ridges, the hot
sizzle shuttle of gunshot
to burning village to weeping
father to race

car out of control. She built
a space in the guest room,
books, desk, straight-backed
chair, brought his meals
on a metal tray. Kept
her back turned against
the sharp startle of shark
to scorpion, striking
snake to severed

limb. She shut
her door on the heat
from the house, let icicles
form on her inner
windows. His long
anticipated departure
appeared unexpectedly. She found

she needed noise
to make up their silence. She took
his place in the lounge chair
snapping cards
click click click against
his empty tray, hand after hand
of solitaire and the station
never changed.

Tamar

I'm sick of the way men arrange
affairs to suit themselves,
women mere tools to their needs
and fancies. Judah sought me for Er,
his firstborn, an amulet to ward off
evil; but Er, misbegotten savage,
whoreson to his mother's Canaanite
gods, hated me and my chaste bed.
A pretty little slave, mauled
and raped, dying in my arms,
I cursed Er and his bestial deeds.
Enraged, he scourged me
with the horsewhip, vaulted
into his chariot and fled,
roaring, lashing the steeds.
They stampeded, dragged him
miles across the bloody rocks.
Once my senses awakened, I sang
praises to God for killing him.

Custom (ordered by God, Judah said,
though I read man's will in it)
decreed I marry Onan, Er's brother.
Onan, who'd always leered at me,
came eagerly to my bed, but laughed
in my face, in Judah's face,
in the face of Judah's god when
his seed spurted onto the ground.
God, knowing Onan's heinous lusts,
strangled him in a brothel bed.

Judah fears I was somehow cause
of his sons' deaths, fears Shelah,
his last born, might die, too.
He, the preacher of custom, has
delayed giving me to Shelah, though
Shelah's a great lout of a boy,
old enough to father a child.
I don't care a jot for Judah's
custom. God created women
with an ache for children.
Men value sons, pay little heed
to daughters, kitchen maids
and waterbearers. I just want
a child who'll come to me
with the mysteries of life.

Judah's wife is dead. He's
traveling to Timnah for the
sheepshearing. With this veil
and a scarlet robe, with cheer
in my voice, Judah'll come wherever
I lead. Next year, a babe
will sleep in these aging arms.

Hand

(for an ill uncle)

I will imagine. You've seen more than I.
At times I pass one by the dark road's edge,
A farm cat with running in its eye;
My headlights scrutinizing nature's hedge.
It will not come when asked into a house.
In the shadows of the grass will stay,
Return retreating to the barn to mouse
A territory known; a niche away
From conversation and the picket fence.
What is caught is glimpsed with cornered eye.
Its skittish young forever find a distance;
Tiptoe down the path with starry sky
Seeking other than the offered hand.
Shelter's in the tameness that's let in.

Like a Photograph

She sat in the wrought-iron chair, alone,
At a table for two smoking reds
White breath billowing out from her pretty lips
Painfully lonely; her expression screamed it.
The hours she spent in that spot
Soaking in the salty air in her tiny tank and billowy skirt
Her dark brown hair loosely put up, as she was every night.
The tube lights lined the window of the Flying Pig,
A coffee shop that made her backdrop sing
Illuminated the gorgeous blank face, as she sat like a painting on the patio.
She was motionless when I passed
Except when her hands moved to meet her mouth
Seven or nine or eleven PM every evening
She never looked anywhere, her eyes locked on nothing.
I longed to ask
What life could make her so still?
Or what dream are you lost in?
But her black and white eyes let me only clear my throat.

Good Rabbit Dogs

Shotgun cradled in the crook of his arm,
my father waved from the snow covered rise;
his canvas hunting jacket bulged with unlucky rabbits.
He turned to whistle the beagles from the field.

With a sharp pocket knife I met him outside the shed.
He handed me the jacket.
While he penned the hounds, I reached in,
withdrew the limp warm cloths of fur.

The bowl of salty water turned red.
For a few minutes, smoking his pipe,
he stood beside me. "Here, like this," he'd say—
grim, but somehow joyful.

We weren't poor people, but he was raised that way,
and this was only right.
When I asked about it, he looked across the field,
wiped his hands on his pants and said,
"Every morning the world is created new,"
and he strode into the house to my mother.

Good summers of rain, high grasses
meant fat rabbits at the edge of winter.
The hounds wailed happiness
every time my father neared their pen.

Readiness

A fluffed-up brown-backed hawk
on an interstate power-pole watches
for his livelihood. It's not the stream
of vehicles or the asphalt but the altitude itself
and acres of pasture in all directions
that keep him there. Something will
scurry, will dart, will flit, and he
is ready to outdo us all for speed.

Miles later, a dead buck on the left shoulder,
his rack a surprise, as elegant as ballet,
and a pick-up stopped on the right,
its two men striding across the road
with a chain saw, looking pleased.

Perhaps a later driver saw
what I imagine.

Readiness, said the prince.
— But what of the sparrow?

Cottonwood

for Clay

Squeal of wood ducks,
alarm of crows
and the ticking song
of a king fisher's
journey along the shore
drift through years.
I stare down at the dock
in the river cove
and see my father steer a boat
with my sister and me
across the open water
to spend the morning
pole fishing from
a stone out-crop
while he trotlines
off the channel.
The sky owned the river then
and the bluff where
my mother fussed over lunch
in my grandparents' cabin.
What's lost, recalled
in little fictions I make
to shape the shadows:
my sister's bright face
whispering songs
to the complexities
of girlish solitude,
and me, a child of moments,
content to hold the next one
and the next, my eyes and ears
filled with river, sky
and the hum a boat makes
puttering against the tension
of the distant channel.
What love brings me here
still holds with the drift of years
like cottonwood fluff
I catch in my hand, let fly.

To an Editor

You ask me to put aside feelings
in order to see, but the wind
in the maple still sprinkles
the lawn with shadows,
glint on water is as magic
as alchemy, and everyone
I ever love will die too soon.
I know that my language
isn't really about how language
rises from pre-language
or whether feelings are based on
the urge of words or vice-versa.
I can write about a persona
in a taxi arriving at an address
where his lost daughter lives
with strangers, and he looks
in the window at people laughing
at a story she tells, so he orders
the taxi back to the airport,
flies home to a life of solitude.
I can jam syntax together so
the story can be deconstructed
and retold in, oh, so many ways:
how I heard the pileated laugh
through the forest while my
daughter in another city stares
out at traffic as my mother heats
milk at bedtime, never thinking
of my future heart attack, and
somewhere a child coughs
in a dark room and contemplates
her life, the lives of others,
their sorrows and joys, tries
to find words to fit them
before she is taught to hate
poetry.

Dross

Was it a dream as the wind might dream
or a nightmare: A weeping flower,

a black scheme, with a stormy night
raging it to revelation?

The winter was long and the Spring
floods let icy waters strew the dross

Everywhere overland—
Then there were only small rivulets

to run in the sun on the river banks.
The wind whispered over what was

left behind—twig and leaf debris
swirled together, with a snake-skin,

a rat carcass, the hard-black remains
of a bat, flattened paper-thin,

and discarded remnants of other life
in winter's aftermath—

bits of flies, beetles, tadpoles,
crayfish, maybe

even a turtle and other sundry beings,
no life in them now, all mixed together.

A waste after the orgy of winter's
Will asserting itself? All that dross?

Heart Pause

That emptiness of feeling, that heart-pause,
In which we could have vanished . . .
Rilke

After the vast airy Russian steppes,
And a Nietzschean spiritual rift,
He endured a descent into himself.
He heard echoes deep in his being,
The nights murmuring dark dreams.

Like Orpehus, come up from Hades,
He offered up his spirit to the light,
And a ghostly bell-ringing ensued—
As old as Moscow, beauty and terror
Lingered in the after-stillness.

He went to Worpswede for respite,
And there were two beautiful women,
Both to love and to love him.
He absorbed himself in the rhythm,
The art, its music and mood—

He expressed it in himself solely
As poetry—"*Wo du auch seist.*"
Espoused to one lover in the flesh,
He wrote the other a requiem—

His soul entered the deep void again,
And grief entered his heart
Like the dark, his words already
A dialectic in a stark mortal sense.

Two Dreams Out

Down into the dark brown mother—
warm enough
to feel like love, dark enough
to blind my thoughts
from arguing with one another—
too old
to speak of any invention,
life is joy at being anchored in
colloidal suspension.

Up unto the bright blue father—
cool enough
to fan my brow, bright enough
to show me the crazy quilt
of scrapping social fabrics
and give me to wonder why they bother—
too young
to know of any doom,
too infinite to entertain the thought
of ever running out of room.

So neither works for you, you say, and
your dream is of walking that
straight and narrow concrete,
eyes cemented on the prize—
your bunions at long-last cosseted
by golden slippers?

Fair enough, I guess, but all the same
my feet feel much better bare and mud kissed,
and my eyes grow much less tired
in panning
if not scanning
the horizon, and if
what I do in waking
helps me all the more in sleep, well,
these days, at least, is that not a miracle?

Caught in It

Biting my ankles
This cold knows where it hurts
Where I'm bare
Like men blowing on my neck
This wind is enough to kill a girl—
To color her white

In this expired park
The temperature suffocates green
As it spreads
Like cracks on an empty wall
These trees stand against an antique sky
A photograph of sleep

This is home
I remember as my cheeks and nose burn red
Standing out against the gray
Just my eyes and face and hands
I'm in it
In the scene of shades and shadow and I can't
See why winter thinks she's pretty
That if my features fade away
The red still shows

Chapped skin and figure
Even so, the dripping has stopped
With the frost
Like comfort comes when you're astray
And you've got nowhere to be on time
No place important

Ears a ripe orange
Underneath my dark, limp locks
Out of season
Like goldenrods at this time of year
Children's songs carry over a chimney top—
As if smoke sang.

NYC: Home

When you come through the Holland Tunnel
It all hits you very softly.
You'd probably been driving for at least two hours,
and you expect Manhattan to explode,
but it doesn't.

When you walk up the subway stairs on Times Square
it hits you like a boot in the face.
A very bright, crowded boot.
But that's no secret.

The colors in this city are great.
Everything seems to be illuminated in shades of neon,
which creates a peculiar cast about the street.

Here's the thing about New York:

Nobody cares.

You can buy Prada bags and A/X clothes.
You can curl your hair and make-up your face until my eyes bleed,
but no one will notice.
Well, no one except us and all the other tourists.

I want to lay my head on a Manhattan bedrail.
I want to ride trains and walk, everywhere.
I want to leave Robert Penn Warren and all the other Southern
(Make sure you capitalize that 'S' because you're using the word to
name a genre)
aficionados and failed poets behind.
I'll wash dishes and walk dogs
just to make ends meet if I could be a Gothamite.

The ground dwelling pigeons and the fat Central Park squirrels
shouldn't be fed,
but no one can help themselves.
Just like they can't help themselves when they see Ozzy Osbourne, of
all people, leaving Rockefeller Center,
and they have to mob him for his name.
Just like they can't help the beggars on the trains,
even the one who was selling the indie newspaper.

New York keeps you looking up,
not like Kentucky, which begs you to look at the grass.
I'm far away from where I live but I've never felt this much at home.

The Diviner's Hand

Enter my secret cave, where I wait, stung and angry. Come, you humans with your modern devices, and let me see if you have a heart.

Jaguar Saying

It is her birthday,
the woman across
the table from me. A Leo,
a jaguar of a girl
once, picking shells
at low tide as earth
turns away from sun.
Now her eyes stare intently
as she shuffles a deck of cards,
the rearrangement arcing
into her hands, then
spilling back with a whirl.
She lays down four cards, face up,
three diamonds and a heart.

Every mountain has its jaguar
they say.

The woman covers the red cards
with others. A face
card comes up—a jack.
She sighs, lays down a black
nine and reshuffles.
The rules of her game
are not apparent. She deals
four fresh cards—all
low numbers. In the dying
light she leans forward
to read the characters.

Beyond the room a saguaro opens its petals to the moth.
A gull rises from the slow surface of sea.
Yaguara wakens to deadly rounds.
A bell rings out at midnight.
Jaguar girl is dreaming.

Ahee Ahee

Zenith

Something in seeing a bird straight overhead
creates for an instant a
shocking disbelief –
conjures warm weight plummeting through air.

Is it something in the blue-framed silhouette,
the sight of the wings pushing away *you*
across an impossible distance?
Or is it in the angle of the head,
the eyes for an instant losing the horizon,
devoid of bearings apart from bird
yet knowing, strongly, *up*?

Our reason, which day after day lightly accepts
the distant gull circling above the bay,
the impossible hops of the nuthatch tree to tree,
the smooth sweep of the crow gently to land—
our reason, in that single, stunning moment
as the bird achieves zenith, the head bends back,
succumbs to the feel of feathers on the cheek,
to the push of wings seeking separation.

Spring Flood

March is when it all lets go
Vaulting rock and ice-bound earth
Carving, quick, through soiled snow
Sucking up through maple bark and
Bursting the scales from the fattening buds.

As I stand astride the cataract
It comes crashing through beneath me
Catches my gaze
Like so much flotsam in the racing tide.
I watch, mute, the moving roar of spring.

Follow the moil that buckets through the rocks
Swerves without pausing to plunge in a weighty sheet
Heaving downward into the swelling pool
To melt beneath the surface, double back
And then that churn of
Froth and foam
Bellying up and spreading, spreading.

Featured Author

Sharyn McCrumb

Chapter 1: Midnight in Mooresville

An excerpt from Sharyn McCrumb's latest book, a parody entitled:
St. Dale

It was not the end of the world, but you could see it from there. She was an educated woman with a career and a social position to think of, so she lived in fear that people would somehow hear about what had happened to her in April, 2002, on the road to Mooresville. A supermarket tabloid might shanghai her into the role of prophetess of a new religious cult, and people she didn't even know would point and stare at her, and think she was a fool. The thought made her shudder. So she only told a few friends about the peculiar incident, and those to whom she did mention it heard it in the guise of a funny story, open to some logical explanation. Of course, Justine had accepted it without batting an eye. Had been *expecting* it, she said. But then Justine's vision of reality was pretty much at right angles to everybody else's anyhow. She herself had stopped trying to make sense out of it, because she had the terrible feeling that Justine was right, and that what really happened was. . . what really happened.

"It was not the road to Damascus," she would say, invoking Biblical precedent, "because I had just come from there. Damascus. Virginia, that is, a little town on the Tennessee line, a couple of hours north of where I ended up that night, broken down on the side of a country road en route to Charlotte."

It was not the end of the world, but you could see it from there. She had pulled over to the side of the road and flipped on the visor light to look at the map. Now the engine wouldn't start, her cell phone had no signal, and the dark road was deserted. She hadn't seen a house for miles. In this landscape of pine woods and barbed-wired pastures, streetlights were nonexistent, which was part of the problem. She must have missed a road sign somewhere back there when she got off I-77.

She was pretty sure she was somewhere north of the city, maybe in Iredell County, which wasn't where she was supposed to be at all. By now she ought to be closer to the city limits of Charlotte, but the sky was dark—no bleed-in

of artificial light from the sprawling city—so that was past praying for. It was her own fault, though. What kind of an idiot would have taken Justine's advice about a shortcut in the middle of the night? *Justine*, for heaven's sake, who could get lost in a revolving door. Now here she was, trying to follow a set of directions that were vague at best. *"Turn left after the yellow house, only I think they painted it."* Oh, why had she listened? There wasn't much traffic on I-77 in the middle of the night, for heaven's sake. If she'd stayed on the Interstate, she'd be home by now.

Well, at least Justine had been right about that Oriental rug outlet in Virginia. It had been a great place, cheaper than any place she'd found in Charlotte. Of course, that was exactly the sort of thing that Justine invariably was right about. They called Justine *"The Shopping Fairy,"* because if you wanted designer purses, Italian tile for your bathroom, or an 18th century American candlestand, Justine could tell you three places to find it and which one was the best deal. Just don't ask her about more mundane matters, like how much to tip the waitress, the name of the Speaker of the House, or how to find Charlotte when it's too dark to read road signs.

She ought to turn off the radio to save the battery, but Garth Brooks was singing "The Dance," and she couldn't bear to cut it short. Another two minutes wouldn't matter. Later, Justine would marvel that she didn't know it already, but she didn't. That intersection of those two roads of pop culture was simply not on her radar screen. She had not been thinking about *him*. She was sure of that.

She had not been afraid, because she'd always considered country roads, even dark ones, infinitely safer than cities, and also because she didn't see herself as the sort of person who was likely to be attacked by a crazed killer lurching out of the woods. Unfortunately, she was exactly the sort of person whose car broke down just when she became good and lost. She didn't suppose Justine could be blamed for that. Now it looked as though she could either spend a long night in the car or ruin her Ferragamos hiking up a country road.

She had cast her eyes up to the closed sunroof of her Chevy and said to no one in particular, "Please get me out of this."

She did not remember hearing the other car drive up. She had been too busy seething and working out the withering remarks about shortcuts that she would make to Justine the next time she saw her, while in the back of her mind she was trying to decide whether to walk or wait in the car until sunup.

The tap on her driver's side window startled her so much that she dropped the useless phone. In the rearview mirror she saw a black car parked close behind her bumper, its headlights illuminating the scene so that she could see the shadow of the man at her car door. She lowered the fogged-up window, half expecting to see a baby-faced highway patrolman certainly not expecting to see that eerily familiar face: mustache, sunglasses and all, (*sunglasses?*) beneath the red and black "Number 3" Goodwrench cap.

She was so startled that she said the first thing that popped into her head, which was, "I thought y'all's headlights were just decals."

He nodded. "Yep. Sure are."

She glanced out the back windshield into the glare of headlights bright enough to illuminate the road, "But—"

"Your car died?" he asked.

She stared up at him, so detached from the experience that she found herself thinking, *You're one to talk.*

He nodded, no trace of a smile. "Okay, then. Flip the hood latch and I'll take a look."

"Are you—"

But he ambled around to the front of the car without giving her time to finish and raised the hood while she peered out through the windshield, thinking that it was a good thing she was driving a Chevrolet. He probably *would* know how to fix it.

As he poked around in the engine, she sat there, her mind full of so many simultaneous thoughts that she forgot to get out of the car to actually voice any of them: *I don't think it's the battery, because the power windows still work . . . Excuse me, sir, are you who I think you are? . . . Justine, it was him. Hat, white firesuit, everything. Of course, I'm sure! I saw his face plain as day in the headlights . . . Listen, I have half a tank of gas, so it's not that . . . The Reverend Billy Graham, Dear Sir: Can dead people come back from heaven or wherever and fix cars? . . . Hey, I was a big fan of yours . . . well, my friend was anyhow . . . and I just wanted to say how sorry I am . . .*

The roar of the engine interrupted the flow of her thoughts.

He slammed the hood and walked back, dusting off his hands, one against the other. "It ought to get you home," he said.

"What was wrong with it?" she called out above the noise.

He gave her a look that said *Do you know anything about cars?* and shook his head. "It runs fine now, Wanna race? I'll spot you a quarter mile."

She shook her head. "I don't think so . . . sir. Besides, I'm lost."

"Oh. Well, the Interstate's ahead a few miles. Keep on going. You're on Route 136 in Iredell County"

"Oh. Okay. But I think it's Route 3 now. They renamed it."

A smile flickered across his face, and she thought, *He hadn't heard about that*, which emboldened her to say, "Well, thank you. Um— Thanks for your help. And—Look, before I go— do you have any messages for—well, for anybody?"

Again the smile. "Yeah," he had said after a moment's consideration. "For Mike Waltrip." As he walked away, the man in the white firesuit said, "Tell him: next February, pray for rain." ≠

An Interview with Sharyn McCrumb

When nationally acclaimed novelist Sharyn McCrumb visited the Southern Festival of Books in Nashville last October, we had the good fortune of discussing her beliefs about literature and how it can make a difference in society. Sharyn McCrumb is an Appalachian novelist. In her compelling, carefully woven stories, she campaigns against prejudice and argues for the nobility and integrity of the Appalachian mountain culture, so often belittled in popular media.

Her nineteen books have been long-term residents of the *New York Times* best seller list and she travels two to three times a month to speak and teach at colleges, conferences, and such cultural citadels as the Smithsonian Institution, Oxford University and The University of Bonn-Germany. How has she arrived at such success? By writing what she wants to write, the way she wants to write it: with a moral purpose.

She discussed *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, the story of the first woman hanged in North Carolina for allegedly murdering her husband, and her most recent book, *St. Dale*, a modern day "Canterbury Tales" about pilgrims traveling to the shrine of legendary race-car driver, Dale Earnhardt.

Cynthia Wyatt (CW): You have said that you want your stories to have "an overlay of significance about the issues and ambiguities that we face in Appalachia today." What would those issues and ambiguities be?

Sharon McCrumb (SM): One of the things I was doing with the ballad novels was trying to explain a culture that is a maligned and stereotyped culture.

CW: The Appalachian south. What in a nutshell do you want people to know?

SM: Well, first of all, you have to know that if you want to understand the flatland south, you have to read *Gone with the Wind, Steel Magnolias, Ya Ya Sisterhood*. If you want to understand the mountain south, you have to see *Braveheart*.

CW: The Mel Gibson movie about the Scots, about William —

SM: William Wallace, yes. *Braveheart*, which is about a thousand years ago, but that schism between the English and the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh goes back well beyond that, and so even back that far you have people on the English side —and the English wrote the history books — who are their enemies. When they came to this country, the English settled on the Eastern seaboard where it looks right—it's the flatlands—and the Irish, Scots, Welsh, and Cornishmen all went to the mountains because that's where they lived back home, and they settled from North Alabama where the mountains begin all the way through Alberta, Canada, right through New York, by the way, and Vermont. That's all Celtic America. So that sort of cultural divide was maintained. The people had the same opinions that they always had.

One thing that struck me when I was in Ireland, I went to this museum … the Famine Museum. Twenty percent of Ireland either died or immigrated as a result [of the potato famine] but here's the kicker: during the years of the potato famine, when 20% of the people were lost, Ireland was exporting food. *Exporting!* In the museum, there's a cartoon taken from the British humor magazine "Punch," which is published in London … accompanying an editorial which was explaining why Ireland should not receive aid, because [the Irish] were so lazy they would get even more shiftless. The cartoon showed a wooden cabin with a porch, and on the porch were two guys in overalls and great big hats and between them was a bloodhound, asleep, and a jug. That's the hillbilly image, but it was 1840, and it was Ireland! And the purpose of the cartoon essentially was genocide.

CW: Wow.

SM: Yeah. When you realize where the stereotype came from and how it was used, then you realize what you're dealing with.

CW. In *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, you make us think about the court's prejudice against mountain people, and you also make us think about capital punishment.

SM: Yes, that's why I had to have a modern component to the story, to remind you that this is not just an historical story.

CW: The innocent man on death row. What an indictment of modern justice.

SM: Yeah. My books are studied in colleges all across the country, and the most interesting one to me was a fellow in Colorado who taught *Frankie Silver* to his Hispanic Studies class, because Hispanics can identify with the mountain people. They don't wonder why Frankie Silver didn't tell her lawyer what happened — she didn't trust the Suits!

CW: Tell us about how you came to write your latest, *St. Dale*.

SM: New York thought that was a frivolous book, but it wasn't at all, because stock car racing originated in North Carolina. It is a southern sport, and it is the most maligned sport, and probably one of the most maligned … by the culturally elite [who] think it's not a sport; they think it's running around in circles for three and half hours, which is kind of like saying that modern art is a paint spill.

CW: The case could be made that it is. (Laughter)

SM: But if people think modern art is a paint spill, most of the time they are careful not to admit it, because people would look down on you for being a barbarian, but they boast about not understanding NASCAR.

CW: You're saying that people within a given culture look down on another culture and take pride in doing so?

SM: Society always wants to have a scapegoat. When we instigated political correctness, we didn't get rid of the scapegoats, we just outlawed the traditional scapegoats … but there was a vacuum … and it was filled by white southerners and particularly mountain people … Personally, I am sick of it, and would like to become the Toni Morrison of Appalachia.

CW: Her *Song of Solomon* presents us with mountain culture, too, from the African-American point of view.

SM: My job is to preserve this culture. You've got to give the young people something to be proud of, so I say, hey, you know, your ancestors were the pioneers. Your ancestors fought the battle that turned the American Revolution.

At King's Mountain … Washington was losing the American Revolution, and it took mountain men to turn around that battle. So when you give them something to be proud of, at least it can counteract *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Deliverance*. It's the politics of culture.

You ask someone where they are from, and they say "San Francisco," you automatically assume that they are cool and hip and all that. Well, they can live in a piano crate in an alley. When they say they are from West Virginia, you probably picture a shanty.

There's a story. About seven years ago there was a plane crash in the Philippines, and everybody was okay but there was a fire and people had to be gotten out of that airliner real fast … there was this one guy from West Virginia who took it upon himself to get people out, and everybody was saved. And they asked him how he did it, and he said, "What you really need is a calm, authoritative voice that people would obey without question, so I put on a British accent." He saved a hundred people and twenty people, but if he had spoken in his normal [way], like I speak, it wouldn't work.

CW: That's a great story.

SM: That's the politics of culture.

CW: We're interested in knowing more about what you call "moral fiction."

SM: I think culturally … there is a split in this country. I am speaking of southern writers here. There's the flatland writers and the mountain writers. The flatland writers went with the British model, and they're the ones who went for minimalist fiction in which not much happens to people we don't care about anyway. But the mountain writers always went with the Celtic tradition of "barding."

CW: Barding. What a great word!

SM: They believe that a story is a communication between the writer and a reader. Sometimes when I read people's experimental fiction and their "literary fiction," I get the feeling that what I'm watching is a verbal form of Mary Lou Retton's floor routine. They just want the reader to "watch me do a triple

axel with this subordinate clause." . . . (laughter) I'm not about that … I'm here to tell a story, and I'm not going to waste your time. The rules for barding go all the way back because the Celts were an oral culture and they had five rules: Define a people, so your clan, your tribe, knows who they are; describe a place, because place was so integral—they belonged to a place; record history so you know who you can trust and who you can't; transmit cultural values — what do we honor? Loyalty, bravery, endurance, and the last thing is entertain … While people are enjoying themselves listening to the story, they're getting those first four painlessly. Like a Flintstone vitamin.

CW: And that's what you mean by moral fiction.

SM: I get letters. When I wrote *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, I did meticulous research to find out what happens when paper companies dump toxic chemicals into a river. They put in dioxins, mercury, which cause birth defects, and I got letters from all over the country with people saying, okay, what should I say to my congressman? There have been decades of scholarly papers and books about the effects of polluted water on public health, but the average person won't read those because they're difficult, they're dull, and they're depressing, but I put it in a story, and they read it.

CW: That's wonderful.

SM: And I made them cry over two fictional characters. And they were really upset. It's like [Charles Dickens'] *David Copperfield* inspiring the [British] child labor laws … You have to personalize it.

CW: You really establish a strong sense of place in your novels, how much "home" means to a poor young woman in a 19th century jail cell and a modern man on death row, both dreaming of their beloved mountains. In one of your essays, you point out that a vein of serpentine in our Appalachian mountains matches one found in the Scottish mountains. That's why the sense of place in the mountains for the Scots was so right.

SM: They just discovered twenty years ago that they are the same mountains.

CW: Like the spider who, every year builds her web on my back porch in the exact spot as her predecessor.

SM: Yes, it's the same … There's that thing where salmon find exactly the same stream, butterflies migrate from Canada. They've never made the trip before, and there might even be a generation in between, but return to the birthplace of their parents, their grandparents, and I wonder—it seems to be prevalent in nature.

CW: One of the characters in *Frankie Silver* is a woman with "sight." She can "see" how Frankie's husband was really killed. You write about the mystical sense of "betwixt and between" in the old Appalachian traditions. Do you think we are losing our sense of the mystical?

SM: No, we're hungry for it. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church chose the saints, but in the 20th Century they started getting elected. We have the same feelings for them as we did for St. Theresa, but it's Elvis, it's Princess Diane, it's Dale Earnhardt. Something is playing right now on NBC called "Ghost Whisperer." … they jazz it up—the ghost has to solve a crime or something—but people still have a need to believe in things they can't see.

CW: People need to feel something is watching out for them.

SM: Even playing lucky numbers. People need to believe in something.

CW: The mountain culture seems to have its violent side.

SM: The mountain people are all about resilience. It kills them to ask anyone for a favor. New York wanted me to get a NASCAR driver for a cover quote. Which puts one in a situation of asking a stranger for [a favor]. The flatlanders just network all the time and party because they all know each other. If someone does us a favor, we will lie awake nights thinking of ways to repay the favor.

CW: That's why you have a woman character carry a jar of jam when she visits a neighbor, so she won't be beholden for the hospitality.

SM: It's really amazing how that works. I'm that way, very much. The first driver who gave me a cover quote … that was probably five minutes work for him. And now I'm writing a book with him. He wanted the story of his life. I really adore the guy [Ward Burton] but to repay him for a cover quote which he didn't write down with a year of my life . . .

When we parted later in the evening, Sharyn McCrumb had been very generous with her time and given me great insight into the admirable motivation behind those many "entertaining" books she has written. Sharyn McCrumb is a detective, stalking history, geology, folk music, medical journals and folklore to solve the case before her: What is great about Appalachian culture? What she discovers turns out to be what is great about human beings at their best: resilience of spirit, love of place, loyalty to the truth, which is why her books have resonance all over the country. Charles Dickens and Toni Morrison should be proud of their sister in battle against the small minds and mean-spirited attitudes that spoil our journey through life. ≠

Words

Little girls in Myanmar remember old men. It's tradition, really, since grandfathers are the head of the family. Our fathers work the fields; our mothers weave and nurse their babies. Everyone has a job. Mine was goatherder. Since goat-herding is solitary, I was often also. I remember the American with the white beard because he came to see our new school the day Daw Thent Nwe asked me to do the Nasty. Daw Thent has a broad, acned face, and watchful, shrewd eyes. He was fourteen then, four years older than I, and big for his age. I'm small, with big eyes and high cheekbones and hair down to my waist. He said please. I said no. And there the matter ended. Four years later, Daw Thent didn't ask permission. He carried a gun, but gave presents afterwards. Fortunately, he was afraid of my grandfather. I never had to argue with him or accept his cheap perfume. When he disappeared from the village, all the girls felt safer. I might have married his bother Mie Mie, who had dimples and a silent merriment in his eyes, but he died. The monks who buried him said he had a bullet through the heart.

We were playing by the Irrawaddy River the day the riverboat stopped for the Americans to see our school. The old man with the beard got off last because he walked with a cane. After inspecting the school, he lined us children on the steps and taught us to speak English. "Hello." "How are you?" "I am fine." "What's your name?" "My name is ________." I remember each word he said, but I especially remember "love" and "freedom." They go together, he said. You can't have one without the other. That was the day I discovered words. This was fifteen years ago, but I think of it now because I wish I hadn't said no to Daw Thent Nwe. If I'd done the Nasty with him then, he wouldn't want to marry me now. "You are lucky," my father writes to me at the United Nations. "Daw Thent is an important man." Important men have secrets, I write back. I have to watch what I say because my father can't read. The schoolmaster reads him my letters, and Daw Thent Nwe's father is the richest man in the village.

If it hadn't been for the American with the white beard, I wouldn't know that words make a sentence, sentences make a paragraph, paragraphs make a story, and stories make a life. We are told to be patient in Myanmar.

The monks remind us to meet suffering with respect. Our lives and the reality they live in change constantly. There's no such thing as a permanent identity, Buddha says. Reality is an appearance. We must release the mind from the toils of self-seeking so when love ploughs the heart our karma will go around. Who is to say what balances the universe? For every hope there is a lie. For every Buddha, there is a Daw Thent Nwe. Can it be that karma transformed the lies of Daw Thent into love? Perhaps. For I love Festes Oragamu.

In an elevator at the UN I hear a Swedish lady tell a British man that youth is wasted on the young. I think to myself, no, not true. Words are giants when they speak of Festes Oragamu. I am twenty-five, Festes twenty-seven. We work as translators. I speak Vietnamese, Mein (the language of Laos), and Chinese. He speaks German—Namibia was originally a German colony—Shona, and more dialects than I can count. We both speak English. Festes is the type of man who volunteers for uncomfortable hours. He needs no gun. His confidence springs from understanding human action. He says being a translator is his way of becoming a man, and to become a man, his father said, is serious business. He works in the African section of the UN; I work in the Asian. We met in the cafeteria where there are many Hellos and Thank yous, and Where are you froms? Best of all, there is the freedom to love a man who loves you back.

No one notices Festes and me in New York. We are young, if different colors. Festes has curly hair and black skin that shines in the sun; my hair is straight, my skin dull, unless I perspire. "Your skin is varnished," Festes, tells me. "Are you responsible for the impressions of others?" I shake my head. If reality changes constantly, as Buddha teaches, will my skin turn black? My hair curly? I think not. If words enable us to write stories, what will be the story of a Myanmar girl who marries a Namibian man? Deeds have consequences we can't predict, just as words become dwarves when they speak of Daw Thent Nwe. In Myanmar I shall bear his name and nurse his children. What kind of story is this?

I was welcomed into the perceiving self of a strong man. And I welcomed him back. Never again will I have such a friend as Festes or talk as freely with such a knowledgeable man. As a married woman in Myanmar, my

words will be guarded. I shall talk of cooking and children and whether tomatoes grown on the floating islands of Lake Inle are better than those grown on the mainland, but never of change or polities, or of freedom or love. The actions of Daw Thent Nwe are governed by motives I cannot understand. I believe no one can. Those who keep secrets don't understand that freedom and love are footprints of wisdom, that life is serious because it is cruel.

Some memories, especially those of rage and loss, are so ruinous and transforming that you carry them to your grave. I sometimes think that all the misery in the world is mine. When Festes was kicked in the head in a soccer game, I knew he was hurt, not that he was dead. I learned this at the hospital. The next day a letter arrived from my father. A week later Daw Thent Nwe presented himself at the UN. Three weeks later I returned to Myanmar. A month later I married.

Hello. How are you? What's your name? I am ashamed to say it. I have a son. He has a narrow face, like mine. This pleases me. So do my memories. Of freedom and love, of loss and longing. Change is rooted in time, and words describe its history. Surely, I am not the only woman in Myanmar who can count to three in German—*ein, zwei, drei*—but just as surely I *am* the only woman in Myanmar who can count to three in Shona: *potsi, piri, tatu.* And while I believe that everyone understands the language of regret, I alone in Myanmar understand it in Mien: *Nye Hau Mei*, Chinese: *Wo Ai Ni*, and Vietnamese: *Em il An.* When I nurse my son, I smile at him and sing. If my husband hears me, he shouts, "My son favors me, yes?" I nod. I don't tell him that I once knew a man from Namibia who volunteered for uncomfortable hours to make love and freedom one. We shall grow old together, this wonderful man and I, because where the heart is, there your treasure is also. ≠

The Pledge

Nobody thought that I would live, nobody except my mother. I had so many problems as a baby that my prognosis looked hopeless, but I will not annoy you, reader, with a long, boring list of clinical details because I'm not the protagonist of this story. It will suffice to know that I obviously survived, and I'm now able to narrate the anecdote of my grandmother's pledge to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the holy protector and benefactor of all Mexicans, the divine being with infinite mercy and compassion, the universal mother who provides relief in the most distressful times. Need I say more?

Be it as it may, the pledge story began like this. When I was just a few weeks old, at the climax of my poor health, every one of my relatives said after paying a visit to my family, "He will not live through the night."

Naturally, my relatives were cautious to whisper these comments only when my mother was absent. My mother firmly believed that I would survive, and she was relentless and implacable in her fight. Her experience as a medical doctor and her unyielding determination allowed her to oversee even the most trivial detail. She did not sleep, she did not rest, and she did not surrender.

The following day, my relatives whispered again, "He will not live through the night," but their comments began changing by the third day. Gradually, a strange optimism filled their spirits. It seemed that my mother's positive attitude transmitted this feeling to the others.

As I improved, my mother received full recognition for the outcome. "She performed a miracle," my relatives said.

My grandmother, however, also gave some credit to the Virgin of Guadalupe. This was because she had prayed with tremendous fervor to the Virgin and promised to visit her shrine if I survived. The only problem was that my grandmother promised to make the trip from our home to the shrine on her knees, a distance of approximately five miles.

As years passed, my family still chatted after dinner once in a while about my past ordeal. I heard the story so many times that I could repeat numerous medical terms and clinical reasoning without understanding a word.

Also, without exception, my elder brothers teased my grandmother by indicating that she had made a promise, to no other than the Virgin of Guadalupe, and it remained unfulfilled.

My grandmother was approximately seventy-five years old. How could she possibly travel five miles on her knees? How could anybody perform with such prowess? When she heard these comments, she just presented a fake smile and added, “God will forgive me.”

Then my mother would say, “Don’t pay attention to them, Mama. God only cares about your intentions.”

My grandmother never seemed completely convinced. The conversation usually moved to another topic, but she would still look perturbed and somewhat agitated. Once, she was still upset after everybody retired from the table, and I told her repeating my mother’s words, “God knows your intentions.”

A few days after this incident, my grandmother came to dinner with a wide smile. She was wearing a light blue dress and looked radiant. Her hazel eyes shone a secretive happiness.

“I fulfilled my promise! I went to the Basilica of Guadalupe on my knees,” she exclaimed abruptly.

Everybody was stunned. My grandmother smiled and slowly sat down on her chair. She then explained that, instead of going to my uncle’s house for lunch as she usually did on Tuesdays, she stopped a taxi on the street. My grandmother then knelt on the back seat of the taxi and ordered the driver to take her to the shrine of the Virgin de Guadalupe. In this way, she did actually go from our home to the famous basilica on her knees!

“That doesn’t count; that doesn’t count!” my brothers yelled.

My father promptly spanked them and promised that he would do the same if they ever bothered my grandmother again. Mama Elenita, as I often called my grandmother, just patted my cheek. ≠

Jubie

His name was John, the same as his father’s, but he had been called Jubie since anyone could remember. Exactly how his nickname had been transformed from Junior to Jubie neither of his parents could quite recall. He was sixteen, and he kept a close watch on himself.

Most mornings before he left for school, Jubie would stand and inspect himself in the decorator mirror in the living room. He had a curious look in his blue eyes, but a lean young face and a mane of blond hair, which went into a handsome mien. Yet he didn’t see himself that way. He saw himself as awkward and gawky. He felt he had a problem other boys his age didn’t have. A serious one.

He was much better looking than the boys in his high school, and the girls were crazy about him, but he kept them at a distance. He was too unsure of himself. He was aloof and fixated on an imaginary life. He spent most of his time daydreaming, alone.

Jubie was training his hair to stand up in spikes, the current fad around the country, and he would stare at himself in the mirror, reaching up and twisting a spike here, one there. Turning his head this way and that, sometimes with disdainful looks, he would stare at his image until it pained him. And then, after all that, he would slink off to himself, feeling ugly and nervous. In his baggy denims and overlong pullover, which he wore with strict care, he would always inspect how he looked in store windows and mirrors he passed, wherever he went in town, and then would hitch himself up and head off to himself again, trying to forget what he saw, wherever he went to spend his time. Mostly alone.

Jubie was growing up in bad times, not particularly economic bad times, but moral bad times. Yet it was neither his, nor his parents’ fault. It was just an anomaly of the American culture. Good times and bad times came and went, depending on the philosophical or economic climates—but no one knew how long the present bad times would last.

When Jubie came down to breakfast some mornings he would lunge into the dining groom with a clumsy thump, all twisted up in his feet, and his father would often blow up at him, but then afterward would grimace at himself, realizing that his son was only a boy. With fatherly reticence, he would turn again to whatever he had been doing, hoping for the best.

Jubie would often take such blowups more seriously than his father expected, and then would brood about it. His father would look moody and glum for a day or two himself, but then would snap back into his old self. Then he would feign punches at Jubie or tussle with him in a friendly way until he felt that everything was all right again.

Jubie's father, John Woodley, worked for a company which manufactured vending machines. He was a salesman, on the road most days of the week. One day when he came home from work, Jubie was slouched on the couch in the living room, in front of a blaring television, but more or less just staring at the wall. As soon as his father came in through the front door, Jubie said, "Dad?" in a strange voice. But his father called out to Jubie's mother, "Donna, I'm home."

When she answered him, he put down his briefcase and plopped his lean, tired body in the nearest chair, loosened his necktie, took up the newspaper and opened it.

Jubie said again, "Dad?"

Woodley said, "Turn that TV down!"

Jubie turned it down. Then, "Dad?"

"What?" his father said, not really paying attention. He was intent, scanning the newspaper's headlines.

Jubie got up and went over to the mirror, looked at himself in it, then turned to his father. "Dad, what's wrong with me?"

"Hmmmm? What, son?"

"Dad, I think something's wrong with me. I'm not like other kids.

They go and do things and don't worry about it. I always worry. The other kids have a good time. They don't get nervous about things. Dad . . ."

"Mmmmm," Woodley mumbled, only half listening.

"Dad, Dad . . ."

"What, Jubie?" Woodley dropped the paper impatiently onto his lap and looked at him harshly. "What are you mumbling about?"

"Dad, I'd just like to know—"

"What?"

"What's wrong with me?"

Woodley was frustrated. "There's nothing wrong with you, boy." He raised the paper to his eyes and tried to read again.

"Dad?" Jubie said.

Woodley had started reading an article about taxes, which was always a peeve with him, since he was a working man. He ignored Jubie.

"Dad?"

Woodley slammed the paper down on his knees again. "What, Jubie! Can't you see I'm trying to read?"

"I—I—"

"Jubie, why don't you go and find something to do with yourself until dinner. I'd like to read the paper. I've been working all day—and I'm tired. Can't you find something to do with yourself?"

Jubie jerked his head aside, grimacing, looking askance at his father, and went slouching out as fast as he could.

Woodley watched him, his heart plummeting, realizing what he had done.

He sat a moment in the after-silence. He wondered why he always blew up at the boy that way. But why couldn't Jubie be like other boys? He wondered. I've told him again and again, he thought. Grow up, go out and find yourself a girl, get a job or something!

Woodley thought of himself when he was that age. He had kept out of his own father's way. He had gone out and done what other boys did. Played basketball, spent time with his friends. Why couldn't Jubie be a little more independent, a little more manly?

He picked up the paper and tried to read it again, but it was futile. He thought of Jubie. What was he always brooding about? Always asking questions? Woodley had never had such problems himself. At least, he didn't think so.

He looked into the distance, seeing Jubie's hurt eyes. I've told him often enough, he thought, "Go out and do what other boys do." When I was his age, I didn't hang around the house, worrying my father. I had a car, a girlfriend. I took my girl out. I had fun. Woodley looked at the paper again—but, it was useless! He got up and went upstairs to wash up.

* * *

About a week later, on a Tuesday night, late, someone knocked on the door. Woodley, watching television, got up from the couch and looked at Donna.

"Who can that be?"

She shrugged, sitting on the other side of the couch, concentrating on what she was watching on television. He went to the door and opened it.

There were two police officers on the porch.

"Mr. Woodley?"

"Yes?"

"Sorry, sir, but—" They asked to come inside. They had something to tell him. About Jubie. The one officer, an officious young man, not much older than Jubie, kept clearing his throat, looking at him awkwardly.

"You're John Woodley?"

"Yes," he said, wondering what this was all about.

"Your son is Jubie Woodley?"

"Yes."

After a sight pause, the officer said, "Your son was out drinking with two other boys tonight. I'm sorry," he said, "but—"

Woodley stared at him, waiting.

"Your boy was killed tonight."

"My God!" Woodley was suddenly rocked back on his heels and he lost all consciousness of anything but the thought, killed? Jubie killed? How can that be?

Donna came to the door with him, and he held onto her, but he only half listened as the officer went on. According to him, Jubie had been with two other boys in a car. They had all been drinking beer, perhaps using drugs. Jubie had jumped out of the car at a train crossing, just as the diesel engine was nearing the barrier. The boys had said he ducked under the barrier and ran out in front of the train and just stood there. They said they thought "he was just goofing around." They thought he would jump out of the way of the oncoming train, but he just stood there till the engine hit him. ≠

Contributors

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Jed Bierhaus taught thirty years at Warren Wilson College where he established the undergraduate Creative Writing Program. His A.B. is from Sewanee, his S.T.M. from The General Theological Seminary (he is an Episcopal priest), and he wrote his dissertation for Yale at Oxford. He is retired and lives on the Warren Wilson campus.

Bill Brown a long-time contributor to *Number One*, directed the writing program at Hume-Fogg Academic Magnet School in Nashville for 20 years and is currently teaching at George Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. He has been a Scholar in Poetry at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, a Fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and twice the recipient of the Poetry Fellowship from the Tennessee Arts Commission. His new chapbook, *Yesterday's Hay*, was just released from Pudding House Publications, and he has new work forth-coming in *CrossRoads*, *Eclipse*, *The English Journal*, *Karamu*, *North American Review*, *Poem*, *Slant* and *Tar River Poetry.*

Elkin Brown has taught English for twenty years, a goodly amount of them at Volunteer State Community College, where he is faculty co-advisor for *Squatter's Rites*, the student literary magazine, and the Student Creative

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Andrew Burson a senior at Western Kentucky University, is pursuing a degree in English, enjoying sunny days and groggy nights. He leads a simple life and gets giddy when he sees animals. He wants to own a dog, but his landlord says "No!" He graduates May, 2006 and will move "the hell out of Kentucky" shortly there after.

Marion Davidson is the author of *Closeness of Ice*, a chapbook of poems released by Finishing Line Press in November, 2004. Recent poems have appeared in *Sunday Oregonian*, *Hubbub*, *Ellipsis*, *Firefly*, *RATTLE*, *Troubadour*, *Cascade Reader*, *Signpost* and several anthologies. A retired attorney, she lives in Bend, Oregon.

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Brad King is an Army veteran and former student at Volunteer State Community College, where he studied art and and covered sports for *The Settler*, Volunteer State's student magazine.

Leslie Lytle lives in Winchester, Tennessee. Her poems have appeared in past issues of *Number One*, as well as in other journals including *The George Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and the *Literary Review.*

Dan Powers has published work in several college and literary journals since having his first poem published in *Number One* several years ago. He has published four books of poetry, edited an anthology of Nashville poets, and appeared in the *United States of Poetry*, a documentary film produced by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He appears somewhat reluctantly and sporadically at various readings around the Nashville, Tennessee area. His latest collection, *Mighty Good Land*, was published last fall. He lives with his wife, two dogs and a cat in a cabin above the Caney Fork River in Buffalo Valley, Tennessee.

Jamie Sanchez is a native from Mexico who has lived in Tennessee for the last twenty-two years and is a Professor of English and Spanish at Volunteer State Community College. He received his M.A. in Modern Languages from the National University of Mexico and His D.A. at Middle Tennessee State University.

Mike Shelton formerly a science teacher, is serving in his first year as principal of Hendersonville High School and his seventeenth year as an administrator in Sumner County Schools, with stints at Hawkins Middle School, Ellis Middle School, and Beech High School. He has degrees from The University of Dallas and The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His wife, Vicki, is principal of Lakeside Park Elementary School. The graveyard mentioned in his poem, "Acolyte in the Graveyard," is in Joelton, Tennessee.

John Stigall is retired from Chattanooga State Technical College's Humanities Department, where he was an associate professor of English and poet-in-residence. He has four books and three CDs.

Kelley Jean White has degrees from Dartmouth College and Harvard Medical School. She has been a pediatrician in inner city Philadelphia for more than twenty years and is an active Quaker and the mother of three. She has recently become a "public" poet and has had over 1300 poems published by nearly 250 journals including *Nimrod, Rattle, Poet Lore* and *the Journal of the American Medical Association*. She has published two collections, *The Patient Presents* and *Late* (People's Press) and a chapbook, *I am Going to Walk Toward the Sanctuary* (Via Dolorsa Press). Another chapbook, *Rule of Thumb*, was recently awarded the Cynic Prize by Cynic Press, Philadelphia.

Cynthia Wyatt is an Instructor of English at Volunteer State Community College. Her work has been published in *Chelsea, Shenandoah*, the *Nebraska Review*, *River Oak Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Kalliope*, and the *Cumberland Review*. Her work has been awarded the Nebraska Review Prize for Poetry, the Sue Saniel Elkind Prize, and the River Oak Review Prize. She is a professional harpist and works as a recording artist, mostly in the studios of Nashville, Tennessee.

Diana Young began writing poetry when she was seven years old. Surrounded by creative family members, she has followed her passion with vigor, and is now an aspiring author and poet, attempting to publish as many personal journals, poems and short stories as possible. A senior at Hendersonville High School in Tennessee, she wrote, photographed, and edited for the school's newspaper. After graduation, she hopes to pursue a career in magazine journalism, which she intends to study at Fordham University in New York.

Submissions

Submissions deadline for the 2007 edition is **December 15, 2006**.
If selected, upon publication, you will receive two contributor's copies.

To submit by mail, please include the following:
- No more than three poems or six pages of prose (double-spaced).
- Four copies of each page of work: one copy with your name, three without.
- A cover sheet with your name, address, and a brief biography to be used if your work is selected.
- A SASE only if you wish to be notified of acceptance by mail. No work will be returned.

Mail entries to:

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Or digital submissions will be accepted:

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Please use the words "Number One Submission" in your subject line.