



speculative fiction FOR THE REST OF US

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The Lynching by Stafford L. Battle

"Dirty South! Ninety-nine good ole Confederate descendants hanging like rotting fruit from an 100-year-old, ivy-choked tree; their battered, mutilated bodies leaking blood, piss and other nasty tidbits; in the middle of a snake-infested Great Dismal Swamp; land cursed by Native Americans, but formerly used as a secret haven for escaped slaves; now a suspected hideout for an illegal meth production facility created by international dope distributors. YES!! That's a kick ass story we can sell and maybe raise from the dead your miserable writing career; if you can verify the crime scene and upload the story to our publishers before some pesky, local yokel high school reporter steals your headline and twitters it away. Also, include stock images of half-naked female crack addicts and a drooling posse of violent Jamaican drug lords. Clients online and print will pay big, Big, BIG for rights. But the editors need an eyewitness, some background color, some grit, Grit, lots of grit. Of course, a few dead bodies always helps. And, of course, be sure to not get shot by desperate drug dealers or nervous cops BEFORE you submit the story. Timing is critical!"

"I got a woman who can help me," said Quinton on his Blackberry as he speeded recklessly through a

lonely cornfield along the North Carolina/Virginia border. The needle on the rental car's fuel gauge floated a hair's width above the red line; earlier, he had hoped to find a gas station with the help of some of the locals before he stalled but he saw few people inhabiting this area of the south. "I should be there a few minutes before sunset. I need to get in and out."

"Write first, fornicate later. That's why your career is circling down the toilet bowl," warned his agent.

"Just a joke, asshole." Quinton slammed his foot down hard on the gas pedal to bounce over a deep pothole on the dirt road.

"Focus on business. It's been two years since your last paycheck. Get productive. Think! Spooky, North Carolina swamp. Dead white people. Be sure to email high rez images suitable for print reproduction. Who's the babe? Get a few sleazy photos with that expensive, hi-tech digital recorder I lent you . . . maybe her standing by an outhouse. Skinny dipping in a gator contaminated pond. Daisy dukes. Fat, freckled boobs. Rusty shotgun. Polka dot underwear. Missing front teeth."

"She's somebody's great grandmother. She's old." Quinton swerved abruptly to avoid a small furry animal on the bumpy, dirt road.

The literary agent persisted, "A lot of websites are into Granny sex. That should help sales. Put on your famous charm. Smile. You could be the next, great Black writer. Chicks spread wide for potential million book authors. That should make you very happy."

"Against my better judgment, I'm back in Dixie land. I doubt if these swamp crackers can mumble through the Sunday comic strips." Quinton's dark green Ford Explorer rumbled over some loose wooden boards on a narrow one lane bridge. "Shit, I just missed a rusty spike. Where the hell are the street signs?"

His agent exclaimed, "Oh, oh, oh . . . we need pictures of snakes. Big ones. Maybe, 5, 10 feet long. Poisonous are the best. Cottonmouths, copperheads, rattlers, coral. Readers love that shit. What's her name?"

"Margaret Garner. That's the name she told me on the phone. The name has numerous references in pre-civil war chronicles. Margaret was an enslaved Black woman who was celebrated for killing her own infant daughter rather than see the child placed in a life of slavery. The woman I spoke with today claims to have known my great grandfather."

"Grandparent sex in a dank, dark swamp with snakes. Damn, I almost got a woody! I may write this story myself, if you screw this up."

"Asshole. Good thing you are well connected to the New York publishers and bloggers or I would dump you and get a better literary agent."

"If you were a better writer, you would have a better literary agent. But for now, we are stuck with each other."

The racing Ford crested a hill and suddenly tilted violently downward and careened madly toward the lake shoreline. Tires screeched, spitting pebbles and dirt in every direction as the vehicle came perilously close to diving into the deep, tea-colored water. Shaken by his near brush with catastrophe, Quinton stepped out of the vehicle and immediately sank ankle deep into the thick swamp mud. "Damn. I'm here. A fog is coming in. I think I see the tree. Things are hanging from it. Could be human bodies. Not completely sure. There is the wooden shack. On the porch, appears to be an old woman in a rocking chair. Wireless signal is weak. I may have to record my story and post it to your email when I

get -- SHIT! Something just slithered over my shoe. It's gone. I will not stay here longer than I have too. The old babe is waving at me. Hard to tell how old she really is. She is thin. Long hair. This could be awkward; she is not wearing a lot of clothes -- just a simple, very short cotton skirt and a thin blouse. Damn, she's got firm, perky boobs; very unusual for an old, crusty babe."

His agent warned again, "Stick to business! Write first, fuck later. This could be your LAST chance to resurrect your career!"

"I am losing the signal. Be sure to let the local police know about this. I may need their help." No response. No bars on his cell. He stuffed the Blackberry into his pants pocket. Then, he got back in the vehicle, rolled up the windows tight and locked the car doors. He wanted no nasty surprises coiled up in the vehicle when he returned. He took a quick glance at the afternoon sun, noting its low position in the sky. He activated his digital AV recorder and spoke: "In the pages of *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, this wild and exotic desolation is known as the Great Dismal Swamp. The terrain gives the visual impression of a vast primeval metropolis rising majestically out of the brownish water. Cypress, red cedar, sweet gum, tulip, poplar, beech, and holly shoot up in cathedral-like columns fifty, seventy-five, and a hundred feet in height; and below on the ground are colorful clusters of evergreen gall-bushes, with thick and glossy foliage, mingled in with sweet smelling, swamp honeysuckles, copious grape-vines, as well as skin-piercing barbs from briar, laurels, and other shrubs, creating almost impenetrable thicket. It would seem impossible that humans could infiltrate this wild, dangerous jungle; but the natural barriers might well bid more than adequate defense for swamp savvy fugitives who sought discrete refuge here."

He spoke softly as he carefully threaded his way through the thorny briar towards the old woman's house, which, like many houses that were built in this region of the country, was elevated off the soggy ground, resting on sturdy columns of red brick nearly a foot high. The structure itself was constructed from pine wood boards now weathered gray. It was a typical shotgun house popular in the old south; a narrow rectangular domestic residence with a basic door at each end. Superstition holds that evil ghosts and malicious sprites were attracted to shotgun houses because they could easily pass straight through to seek human prey, and that some houses were built with doors intentionally misaligned to foil these supernatural agents. Discreetly, he pointed the audio/visual capture device at the house and the old woman in the chair, and tried to send the images to his agent. Unsure whether the file transfer was actually successful, he put away his equipment and stepped up to the door.

"Good afternoon, I am Quinton Brown. We spoke earlier." He stood respectfully below the brick steps leading up to the small porch of the house where the elderly female occupant waited.

"I know who you are. Step up. Come closer. The light is failing. You can call me Maggie." She smiled widely, proudly displaying a perfect set of pearly white teeth.

Quinton looked beyond the grinning woman to view a grisly tree in a clearing not far behind the house. Indeed, the afternoon sun had to be playing tricks on his vision; several of the things hanging from the boughs of the ancient oak seemed to be twitching.

"I need five dollars," Maggie said. There were thin curly streaks of gray in her otherwise smooth, shiny black hair. Her breath was fresh and slightly cinnamon scented. She rocked slowly.

Quinton pushed his hand deep into his pocket. He commented, "You look young to be a great grandmother. Where are the drug dealers? Did they leave?" He handed her the money. Her thin hands brushed lightly against his fingertips. He gasped at the unexpected contact.

She cackled an old woman's laugh, "No drug dealers here, sweetie! HE scared them away."

Quinton asked, "Are you the same Margaret Garner I spoke with on the phone, about the lynching of 99 white men?"

"That's me. Are you afraid of what you might see?"

"I'm a crime reporter and triple divorcee. I've seen it all. You said you knew my great grandfather who lived in this county. Is that true?"

"Your great pappy was well known. Everyone called him Pud. Pud was always horny right up to the night he died," her voice took on a different, milder quality. "You remind me of Pud. That's why I only charge you five dollars for services to be rendered." She deftly stuffed the money in a fold in her blouse, then she reached down, parted her legs slightly, and pulled her short cotton dress back a bit to scratch a fresh mosquito bite on what was nearly a blemish free, smooth, coco-colored thigh. "We can go inside," she suggested. "The bugs are biting."

"What services?" asked Quinton as he considered the woman's invitation to enter her abode. "This is business. I need information about the lynching, before the police get here."

She winked at him and croaked, "This here is my business. But besides that, HE is awakening and HE is coming. Police don't much come out here after dark. It's safer for you inside." Maggie stood and moved with youthful fluidity into the house, a breeze fluttered her thin cotton dress exposing a brief glimpse of a surprisingly firm round butt and small, tight fitting, pink lace panties.

Quinton at first hesitant, but mildly intrigued, slowly followed her into the shotgun house; but she had moved past the first room which contained a large bed with a multi-colored quilt, into a second room that contained several chairs and small table. Quinton inquired, "Who is he?" he asked as he sank into a padded wicker chair directly across from where Maggie sat rocking.

She scowled, wrinkling up her forehead, "The name is HE!"

"Pardon me. I misspoke," Quinton said calmly, quietly apprising his informant as she crossed and re-crossed her legs exposing taut and shapely thigh muscles.

"I thought you were a top notch reporter. Did you research anything relevant for this story?"

"Of course," said Quinton refocusing his attention on his job. "Your big tree out back is supposed to be haunted just like every other large tree in North Carolina. Evidently, a runaway slave on his way to sanctuary in the Great Dismal Swamp was caught and chained to this particular tree as a bloody lesson for other runaways that came this way. But these slave catchers were a really sadistic bunch of Appalachian inbreeds. They kept the runaway alive, and had a big celebration. Big party. Booze, fiddlers, games, and feast. They expertly carved off pieces of the man and made stew. Fingers, toes, ears, hands, skin were all part of the main dish. Legend tells us that the man survived for nearly 6 days in incredible pain. His wails could be heard for miles around. But the slave catchers just prodded their musicians to play a little louder and they danced a little harder. On the morning of day 7, the decision was made to finish the meal and head back home in the hills. But a thick fog rushed in and the man, or what was left of him vanished in an instant. Only his bloody chains wrapped around the trunk remained as if the tree had swallowed him whole. The white men pondered what to do next. A group picked up their axes and saws and agreed to hack down the tree. As they approached the giant oak, however, leaves began rustling, then the branches of the tree shook violently while its roots angrily rose up out of the ground and began clawing and ripping human flesh. The slave catchers tried to run away but a howling African tree demon strangled every one of the men except for one who somehow got away." He shuddered. "The story is told in various versions. But the end result is the same."

Maggie sat quietly for a few moments. Then she offered, "Lemonade?"

"No," said Quinton. "I want to see the tree. That's the only reason I'm here."

Disappointment briefly washed over Maggie's face. "Males are always impatient for the wrong reasons." Quinton stood and headed toward the backdoor. He was armed with his digital AV recorder and his Blackberry. Maggie warned, "Take that long stick by the wash basin with you. Cottonmouths hunt this time of day. Stay on the dirt path, watch where you step and you shouldn't have any problems. I'll wait for you here. We'll have a little time to socialize before dark."

"Thanks," said Quinton grasping the heavy wooden staff. "When I get back I may have to ask you a few background questions, and take some photographs."

"Pictures," she smiled. "I'll do anything you ask, but it may cost a little more than five dollars."

"Sure," he grumbled. He walked out the backdoor into the approaching dusk.

Maggie yelled, "I'll have fresh-made, cold lemonade ready when you get back."

#

Indeed, the sun was quickly sinking as Quinton's digital recorder switched to flash mode. "Now, I remember why I left North Carolina and went to school in Boston. Testing, Testing. This is Quinton Brown recording. Luckily, I managed to arrive on the scene before the police. By now, my literary agent should have informed the local authorities. They will want to see this. Dead white men hanging from a tree. The bodies still smell fresh. Blood has not yet congealed. Corpses show marks of suspension: bruising and abrasions on the neck. Multiple sphincters have relaxed spontaneously and urine and feces has been liberally evacuated creating a thoroughly disgusting smelly mess beneath the tree. Never understood why white racists would bring their wives and children to witness a lynching of a Blackman; oftentimes, it was part of a Sunday afternoon picnic right after church. My friend Wiki suggested that southern whites also used lynching to terrorize and intimidate freed Blacks who were voting and assuming political power. A study of the period of 1868 to 1871 estimates that the Ku Klux Klan was involved in more than four hundred lynchings. This looks like a white supremacist rally that went really bad for them. Somebody had a real grudge against these men. But, I find it difficult to feel sorry for them. Only ninety-nine victims. I wonder what happened to lucky number one hundred?"

He went closer to the tree doing his best to avoid stepping in the noxious puddles of human life substance collecting under the tree.

"All of sudden it just got freaky cold! Why the hell are these bodies still twitching and jerking? No wind. Involuntary muscle reflex after death? I will have to ask my friend Wiki about this phenomenon. Damn, something IS writhing in the branches. What the hell! The corpses' eyes are all open. Camera! Camera! Stupid. Take pictures. Be scared shitless later." Quinton pushed the digital shutter button rapidly before realizing he could capture more images by shifting to the VCR mode and make a digital movie of this appalling setting. He had never seen anything like this. His hands were numb with fear. But, he hoped, perhaps his asshole agent could sell the video rights to a small horror film company. He tried to email some images, then went back to filming.

But while his attention was focused upward, he was paying no attention to the tall grass terrain he wandered through and where he placed his feet. Veteran swamp dwellers tell you that the serpent that you see, seldom bites you; it's the snake you don't see that could kill you. "AHHHHH!!!"

#

Back at the house, Maggie chuckled at Quinton's high pitched wailing. She chided, "Sweetie! That's why I gave you a stick."

Quinton had almost shit his pants when he saw the long black scaly body coiled by his feet. In a heart beat, the highly venomous reptile had sunk long white fangs deep into Quinton's calf. "It was a damn big snake, real thick in the middle and nearly 5 feet long! White mouth! Hissing. Crawled forward again and again, as I limped away, and it lunged several times after the first strike!"

"That was ole Henry. Mean bastard. He's laid claim to this patch of waterfront. You got lucky," she said examining the snake bite.

"Lucky?" exclaimed Quinton, hot sweat still streaming down his face.

"Sweetie, it was just a dry bite. No venom was injected; which happens about 50 percent of the time. Have a rest on the bed. A little iodine and hot soapy water should help. Have some lemonade."

"I got to call my agent. I need emergency medical treatment."

"This is not the big city. No ambulance. No police. No lawyers. Just me. I thought you were a seasoned crime reporter. Do you want to know what happened here or are you too afraid because of a little scratch?"

He sniffled once. "A dry bite won't kill me?"

"More people have died from gonorrhoea and syphilis than poisonous snake attack. Don't twist your gizzard for nothing!"

Indeed, the throbbing in Quinton's leg was gradually ebbing. He was more embarrassed than in any physical pain. And, he did have a job to complete. "I need my recorder."

"You dropped everything and ran screaming back in here. You fainted for a minute, so, while you were resting, I went out, chased ole Henry away and got your stuff. I whacked him pretty hard. He's mad as hell but he'll stay away for a few days."

"Thanks." Quinton took several deep breaths. The lemonade was sweet and cool and delicious. Each sip eased his hurts and help to rebuild some of his injured male pride. Feigning confidence, he hopped off the bed and sat down in the chair across from Maggie. She had changed clothes into a long, silky, almost transparent red gown. In the dim light, it was hard to tell that she was elderly. In fact, to Quinton, she began to look even more sensuous each second he stared at her. "You put anything in this lemonade?"

She chuckled softly, "Just a little blue mountain sweetener to help calm your nerves."

He wasn't sure what that meant. "Well, you look damn good for a great grandmother," he admitted. "You must get a lot of exercise out here."

"Well, not as much as I'd like. Have some more lemonade."

"Earlier, you looked older, elderly, but now you look . . . hot."

"Yeah, you're just like my dear Pud. I miss him." She sighed for a moment as she recalled some distant memory. "Since the early 1900s, the coloreds have called this soggy stretch of swampland, Redneck Valley. Whites called it Bad Luck Cove. There was some good white and Black folks that use to live here. They would eat Sunday supper with you; give you a ride to the store or church. But there's denizens in the hills who are real messed up. Some could pass for human, but truly aren't." She paused, then walked over to the stove and lit a kerosene lamp. The flicking flame cast long, dancing shadows

on the wall. The burning fluid was scented and soon the entire house was filled with the comforting essence of roses.

"It's getting late," said Quinton. "Maybe I should come back in the morning with the county Sheriff and cut those dead men down from the tree. At least, they deserve a decent burial." There was still a thin sliver of sun on the horizon; and he was anxious to transmit his story with the digital images. That would guarantee a small payday to cover the costs for the rental car and hotel room. The leg seemed to have not suffered much but he planned to have a doctor examine the wound. "Can I borrow your stick, again?"

"You can have anything you want." She fetched the stick, handed it to him, pressed close and whispered, "The Hill folk congregate under the tree; bringing bootlegged booze, deer meat, and pelts to trade. At night, the men drink and seek the company of women. Decent people stay away and barricade their doors and windows at sunset. But I was young and foolish and wanted to see what everybody was so scared of." Maggie stroked Quinton's chin very tenderly and gently touched her moist lips to his cheek as they embraced. She leaned back and sighed, "I wish you were older."

Quinton was moved by her sincerity. "Well, age is only a number and --"

"I want to show you something, that I never showed any man before."

"Okay."

"Do you believe in ghosts or demons?" Her full bosom heaved as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm not sure, ah, exactly in what direction this conversation is going," confessed Quinton. He had never felt this excited and scared around a woman in a long time.

"The stolen people from Africa brought with them the seeds of their magic and gods. On occasion, the gods demand revenge." She paused and gazed deeply into his eyes and said mysteriously, "Do you know what a Conjure woman does?" She slipped out of his embrace and pranced around lighting candles throughout the house. Her flowing gown twirled and twisted around her trim and shapely body.

"I can stay a little longer. It's still early."

"Concentrate on these words." She whispered in his ear. "Say them out loud, three times. Then close your eyes," she added mischievously.

"OK," he mumbled the words wondering what in the hell had gotten himself into. When he finished the chant, he felt slightly lightheaded.

"Good! Now open your eyes and take your pants off."

"OK."

"Leave your draws on! Damn! Just like Pud. Anxious for the wrong reasons."

"But, but . . . I'm confused."

"Of course, you're confused. But I can help you find your destiny. Wear this." She helped him don a long white gown. "And this." She positioned a hood over his head. "And white gloves."

There was a tiny mirror over the wash basin. Quinton peered at his attire. "Maggie, this may be a little too kinky for me. I look like--"

"I know what you look like," she deftly dropped her sparse clothing, standing for a moment like a

supple, smooth skin, brown goddess completely naked except for her satin panties. "Hurry, we don't have much time. Help me get dressed."

In a few moments, there stood in the shotgun house two vintage Ku Kluxers. "Come here," she pressed her body close to his, and lifted the bottom of his hood to surprise him with a long, wet kiss. They both swooned. "Wow," Maggie looked at Quinton with new appreciation. "That should inspire you."

Quinton, indeed, was inspired with the gift of wild abandon. Legions of warriors had sailed thousands of miles on the whim of a kiss. Quinton became more alert. "I hear music, men laughing." He peeked out the window. "There is a Klan rally in the clearing. We're going undercover!"

"You are smart just like Pud! But be careful. Observe and remember."

"What happened to the bodies in the tree?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"You'll see. Let's go. This is a rowdy bunch. If we get separated, meet me back at the house. Lock the door, whether I here or not! Good luck!"

In the clearing near the tree, the rally apparently was shifting into high gear. Many of the participants had their faces covered, but others chose to expose their identities to enjoy unencumbered drinking and eating. Banjos and fiddles added their rowdy reverberations to the mixture of drunken laughter and high pitched rebel yells. The night was bright with torches and several small bonfires. Quinton noted that the celebrants had all apparently arrived by foot or horseback. "I need to get my equipment. I must shoot some pictures."

"Not with those fancy gadgets of yours," warned Maggie. "Wait a few, until they get too drunk to notice."

"Good idea." The wet, dense fog, bonfire smoke, and loud cursing and swearing created a nightmarish carnival, but no one seemed to notice Quinton. There were several long stares at Maggie and one intoxicated, bearded man tugged roughly on Maggie's robe. But she slapped his hairy hand away and light-footedly merged within a knot of hooded figures crowded by an open whiskey barrel. Quinton attempted to follow but was cut off by a smelly trio of drunks stumbling and punching each other in the chest. He was separated from his guide but still miraculously no one paid any attention to him. It was as if he wasn't even there; which suited him fine. But he felt more and more giddy as events rapidly seem to progress independently around him.

"Don't touch me, you filthy demon!" screamed a woman.

"Careful, she's a Black witch woman! Dressed like one of us. Put a rag in her mouth."

"Damn, she's strong!"

"Don't look at her eyes. Cover 'em."

"Take her clothes off! Take her clothes off! Yelp!! Yelp!!!"

"Gawd Dang! She's a purty little Black wench!"

"Can I cut off a tit?"

"Not yet!"

Panicked, Quinton tried to push his way through the circle of men surrounding Maggie but it was very difficult to move the heavy men aside. Considerable commotion arose with even more yelling.

"There's another imposter! Grab him!!"

"Get some rope!!"

"Gun! Somebody get a gun!"

Angry men rushed toward Quinton and filed past him. The intended target was many yards away but Quinton was swept along with the tide of bodies that chased a single Black man mounted on a Palomino Appaloosa mare. The rider and horse swept boldly through the crowd of cursing and swearing men. The Black man had stripped off the reviled white robe and rode bare-chested wearing only heavy riding boots and coarse woolen pants. He charged and scattered the clump of men that held Maggie. Pausing for only a moment, to unbind her and remove her gag, he helped Maggie pull herself up on the rump of the horse. She wrapped her arms around her rescuer who methodically kicked men away and expertly maneuvered the horse to keep the crowd at bay. Maggie screamed a dreadful oath promising a hundred years of bloody torment; her voice seemed to stun some of the pursuers who fell to the ground in severe distress. "HE is here!" Maggie screamed. "Now face HIS retribution!!"

Quinton felt the ground tremble as for a brief moment he and Maggie locked gazes. Her mouth formed a single word: RUN. The Palomino, foaming at the mouth, kicked mightily and leaped over a circle of men and galloped away at high speed into the night. In a moment, riders and horse disappeared in the wet fog. Amidst terrible chaos and confusion, Quinton turned and tried to push his way through the angry mob back toward the house. Some of the men were trying to mount their own horses and give pursuit, but the animals were all white eyed with fright and refused to be ridden. They reared and kicked sending several would-be riders to ground in agony with shattered ribs and fractured skulls. The tremors in the earth became more intense as Quinton hopped over fallen bodies and a tangle of tree roots. Then he heard a blood-freezing screech that nearly burst his eardrums. He covered his ears and barely ducked a tree branch that whipped violently over his head; he stumbled, falling face down in the bloody mud. Quinton tore off his hood and looked behind him, but his mind had trouble focusing on and accepting what he saw.

Men were being snatched off the ground by long thorny vines that swooped down from creaking branches in the old oak. Horrifically, the howling tree itself was transformed, its rough bark and trunk were turning into a twisted version of a human face; an enraged countenance with large yellow incisors and bloodshot eyes that darted back and forth searching for new victims to be bashed and strangled before being strung up and dangled like perverse Christmas tree ornaments. More than once, a threatening vine twisted in his direction but would suddenly veer to the left or right and snatch a different victim. He ran, stumbled, and crawled to get away and had abandoned all rational hope for survival. He expected at any moment to be snagged and ripped apart by the maddened tree demon. But by amazing grace, Quinton, breathless and quaking with terror, stumbled and fell against the backdoor of the shotgun house. He scrambled inside and dropped a heavy iron bar across the door. He still could hear men running, screaming and pleading for their lives. In sheer exhaustion, Quinton dropped down in Maggie's rocking chair and shut his eyes and covered his ears and prayed for the night to end.

#

At dawn, Quinton was startled awake by the sound of multiple police car sirens. He had fallen asleep in an old rocking chair. The house was empty; layers of grime coated the floors and walls. He called out, "Maggie?" No answer. A small field mouse scurried along the wall; its tiny claws shredding cobwebs

and scattering dust balls. He saw no other living creature and a mindless panic started to crawl up his spine. "Maggie!" This was not the same house he had willingly entered yesterday at dusk. No candles. No soft, quilted bed. He shivered uncontrollably as he sought to grasp a rational explanation of what he had experienced and seen. Childhood fears of old ghostly houses that swallowed people whole and spit out their bones crept into his mind. Time to go. But Quinton was groggy and staggered a bit as he made his way to the front door and into the reality of morning sunshine. At the portal, he hesitated as a large, angry crow swerved nosily across his path. He shielded his face but when he opened his eyes he saw that several white lawmen had surrounded the house. They had their service revolvers drawn. Quinton blinked, his face contorted into a frightened smile, "Wait!! Wait! I'm not a drug dealer. I am a news reporter! I have ID!"

"STOP! Stay right there. Don't move!"

The sheriff, a large white man with a puffy red face and wild gray hair, whispered to one of his deputies, "You got him in your sights?"

"Yes, sir."

"Shoot."

A single loud bang and blast of fire and smoke filled the clearing. "Good marksmanship," smiled the sheriff, pleased to rid his county of yet another petty annoyance. "Pick up the body, we'll dump it deep in the woods somewhere. I don't want any trouble with the National Park Service boys. They're a humorless bunch." He scratched the thinning hair on his head. "By the way, you can put your hands down, Mr. Brown. We may have just saved your life. Some rattlesnakes don't rattle before they strike."

Indeed, Quinton had failed to hear or see the 7-foot long Eastern Diamondback rattlesnake sunbathing on the brick steps leading to the front porch. The fangs of the dead snake glistened with a thick yellow fluid seeping out. "Thanks," he said taking a deep breath and recovering his composure, "I am here to cover a crime scene: the lynching in the clearing back behind the house."

"Lynching? We've been all through the perimeter. It's all very peaceful except for the occasional poisonous critter. Which, by the way, federal law says we shouldn't kill. They are part of the eco system. You look confused. You ok?"

"Maybe. I think so. My head hurts." Glancing back at the tree, there were no signs of bodies, blood, or anything to indicate human mischief. "But I wasn't dreaming."

The sheriff continued. "We figured you got lost last night. So, at first light we organized a search. Smart move on your part to find shelter. But you got to watch where you step. Every swamp child knows that."

"A lady called me to report a lynching—"

The sheriff approached in a neighborly fashion and dropped a heavy, bear-like paw on Quinton's shoulder, "Son, you can write whatever you like, as long as you file it in the category of fiction. As far as me and my deputies, well, we just rescued a foolish northerner who got lost in the swamp. There ain't no corpses, no lynching, no haunted tree. No ghosts! The place is deserted. No human has lived in this old shack for decades."

"But," Quinton shook his head, blinking hard in the bright morning light. Indeed, the house was empty except for a few pieces of broken down furniture. "Was the last occupant living here a woman, named Maggie?"

The sheriff scratched his bald spot. "How the hell did you know that?"

"She lived alone; but she had a lot of male friends. Her favorite beverage was lemonade, laced with home brewed moonshine."

The sheriff stared down at the ground and spat out a fat glob of mucus. He yelled to his men, "Go back to town. Direct some traffic. Earn your paychecks. Git!" He waited until the last patrol car had turned and sped back down the dusty road. "Son, I know you are a news reporter; and sometimes reporters have a very unhealthy imagination. Maybe you ought to consider a new profession."

"Are you threatening me?"

The sheriff tucked his thumbs into his gun belt. "Son, if I thought you were a problem, you'd be at the bottom of the swamp lake doing your best impersonation of gator bait. But, I swear, you do look familiar. Do I know you?"

Quinton swatted a deer fly on his neck trying to suck blood. "You may have heard of my great-grandfather, Pud."

"Pud? Ole Black Pud! Sheeet!! You and I might be kin!" The sheriff let out a huge belly laugh that scared a flock of egrets that were resting on the lake. He gripped Quinton in a mighty bear hug and released him. "Well, that answers a lot of questions. I'll be damn! Your great-grandfather and my grandfather were as close as brothers; closer than any white and colored man safely could be in those troubled times. They fought side-by-side in the War in Europe! 2nd Cavalry. Decorated heroes. And, then they came back here and raised holy goddamn hell!"

"Where does Maggie fit in?"

"Well, the two men had a special arrangement with Maggie. They both loved her. Gave her land, built her houses. So, she accommodated both of them. I was a real young boy when she died. She was a sweet, pretty lady, dedicated to helping people. Attended church frequently. Traveled the county, offering home-cooked meals and lemonade for fifty cents. Some of the elders didn't approve of her somewhat checkered past; and malicious rumors about being a colored bootlegger didn't help. Some folks just were outright jealous."

Quinton was intrigued and would have turned on his recorder if he knew where it was. "Are you a hill man?"

A dark cloud crossed the Sheriff's face. "A what?! Do I look like a po white hillbilly retard?"

"No sir, of course not. But, allegedly, Hill men would come down here and have a big party, rape a few girls and hang a Blackman just for sport; once a year."

The sheriff guided Quinton to the porch steps. "Let's sit down a minute. I'm not sure where you got your information from, but you need to understand some things. Maggie's murder investigations ended decades ago. State and federal judicial officials have closed the case. And, the Klan has been totally shutdown in this county. I personally saw to that."

"Was Maggie a conjure woman? I swear on my granny's grave that I saw -- "

"Whatever you thought you saw was merely a dream; just a swamp induced dream from stories you heard as a kid." A small breeze suddenly swept pass the two men pushing open the front door of the house and whistling through the rooms to the backdoor. The Sheriff turned pale as a sudden cold filled the space they occupied. He shuddered, "I don't believe in ghosts or tree demons or werewolves or shape-shifters. It's just crazy talk from old coots in the nursing home or BS spouted from Saturday

night drunks. This land may be cursed or not but whatever, it's your problem, now."

"My problem?"

"Yeah, you are probably the last legitimate, surviving heir. Maggie was wealthy. In her will, she left everything to Pud's colored descendants. You might own this here soggy patch of swampland with its damn snakes, gators, legends and curses." The sheriff stood and took one nervous glance back into the rundown shotgun house. "Tear this shack down and tow in a doublewide trailer home. Start a horse farm; ole Pud liked horses. You own about 150 acres here and another sixty on the other side of the lake. Come down to the courthouse, Monday. Get the paperwork started." He paused and breathed deeply the clean, pine-scented air. "Well, you seem to be OK. I'm gone. We put gas in your Ford. See you around, cuz." He made haste to vacate the porch and walked gingerly through the tall grass. Once safely in the car, he stepped down hard on the gas pedal and sped away.

Quinton watched the sheriff's car fade in a cloud of dust then turned around to observe his new domain and ponder his next move. "Maybe I could open a writer's retreat," he mused. On a whim, he checked his leg. There were two tiny marks that appeared to have healed very rapidly. He couldn't remember where he dropped his digital recorder, probably somewhere in the grass. His Blackberry buzzed. Five bars. "Good morning."

His agent screamed at him, "ASSHOLE! There is nothing there! I am looking at your camera phone images. I see a dark green SUV, a shack, a tree, goddamn big lake. NO dead bodies. No drug lords. No naked grannies. Help me here. Where the hell is the story!"

Quinton smiled, after last night and this morning very little would ever twist his gizzard again. "I got a cold case that's heating up. Decades ago, a beautiful Black heiress living alone deep in the forest stumbles into a lynching and is brutalized by a hundred Klansmen. However, she is rescued by a Black soldier, a war hero on a Palomino Appaloosa mare. This champion saved the girl and over the years hunted down each of the guilty perpetrators. Only one of the attackers has escaped justice. However, the chase is soon to be concluded by his descendants who will bring the last man to justice in a few days." The rest of the story, he'd hold for later.

Silence on the Blackberry, then his agent exclaimed, "Hell yeah! Push the point that it's a true story and you might have a sale. When can I read it?"

Quinton said simply, "I'll get back to you in a few days. " He turned off his Blackberry and walked slowly to his car, carefully watching where he placed his feet yet enjoying the sweet smell of wild roses. Then, he started the car and slowly headed towards town for breakfast at the motel. He expected a long day at the county library. He heard a distant voice calling his name and on a whim he glanced in his rearview mirror and saw on the porch of the shotgun house, an old woman in a rocking chair, waving goodbye. Quinton stomped down hard on the gas pedal.

My Life with a Soundtrack by Kim Sheard

When I was five years old, my dearest desire was to be a letter carrier. Peeking through the front curtains, I saw our carrier every day. Often she smiled and waved at me as she dropped our rubber-

banded bundle into our box with a swoosh and a plunk. I admired her two different uniforms. Both were blue. One had a sturdy coat and long pants and the other had shorts with creases down the front. My father wasn't allowed to wear shorts where he worked. He didn't get to drive around in a Jeep with the steering wheel on the wrong side and talk to all the neighbors. He just sat behind a desk and answered the telephone all day, or so he said.

My letter carrier ambition lasted all the way until third grade when, based on some evaluation I didn't even know I'd had, my school music teacher placed the most beautiful shiny silver tube I had ever seen into my hand. The metal was cold, but smooth, so smooth, and I couldn't stop running my thumbs across its surface. The flute was so big compared to my hands that my fingertips wouldn't even meet my thumbs around its diameter. They might have if I'd been willing to smash the keys under my palm, but they seemed much too delicate for that. Soon the metal grew warmer where I held it. My teacher showed me how to blow across the hole in its mouthpiece, making a soft, airy toot, and I was lost. I felt like a fairy princess with a new magic wand. From then on, I knew music and the flute would be my future.

Twenty years and thousands of practice hours later, my position as junior associate flautist with the Holly Valley Civic Orchestra made me eligible to compete in the America's Pops Concerto Competition. I pulled back out the Mozart concerto I'd perfected for my master's recital several years before and made the required recording. To my surprise, I won first place.

I was to travel to New York City to perform my concerto with the Pops Orchestra. The Pops conductor had also requested to meet privately with me just before rehearsal. This prospect made me more nervous than any performance in the last ten years had. I was awed by the man's musicianship. A conductor for fifty-plus years and an excellent violinist in his own right, he also composed. His music had backed almost every blockbuster movie of the last thirty years, and his themes could be hummed by almost the entire American population.

I had dreamed of composing once, had even improvised tunes on my flute as a teenager and tried to write them down, but two composition electives in college had dashed those hopes. Though I could play others' songs with technical accuracy and passion, creating them myself was beyond me. That fact still depressed me sometimes. Sure, I performed with a major orchestra and enjoyed it very much, but I never fooled myself that I would ever become a household name, especially as a flautist; they were a dime a dozen. From elementary school onward, I'd been only one in a crowd of flute players within every ensemble.

So, I was delighted to meet the maestro and hoped, deep down, that some of his genius might rub off on me.

He was an old man, eighty or so, and the years had made him frail, but he stood straight and proud as I walked toward him with my escort, the Pops' public relations officer. I noted a sparkle of warmth in the old man's smile and intelligence in his eyes.

"Maestro, this is our concerto contest winner, Salia Ribideaux," the PR officer said, and I smiled broadly as the brilliant man reached for my hand.

"I am a great admirer, sir. I have known your music since I was a child. Your theme for Running Ryan, in fact, was one of the first songs I learned to play. I wish I had one fraction of your talent for composition."

He took my hand in his own cold one, shaking it firmly then, retaining his hold, covering it with his left hand as well. "It is my songs you admire, then, more than my playing or conducting?"

I could feel my face grow warm and I slipped my hand gently from his. "I mean no offense, sir," I stammered. "It's just that I have learned to play my own instrument with some competency and to conduct a bit, but I don't seem to have an aptitude for composition, though I have tried. Whatever it was that granted you that ability--a gene perhaps--mixed with your innate creativity, has graced you with a gift I could never hope to have, and I am awed."

The maestro smiled and I could feel the PR officer relax a bit. I'm sure she was thinking that it wouldn't do to have the winner of their contest insult the maestro right off the bat.

"You are right," the old man said. "I cannot tell you how I gained the ability, but I do see it as a gift. The songs come to me, fill my mind, niggle at me until I write them down and hear them performed. I could no more ignore them than I could ignore the impulse to eat."

"Wow," I said, then winced, sure that sounded idiotic.

The maestro laughed. "Do not be ashamed, dear lady. I am warmed by your enthusiasm, and I share it. Unfortunately, I am an old man, and it will not be this way for me forever."

"You have a legacy, though, and it will live on," I said.

He eyed me closely. "Yes, it certainly will, thanks to young ones like you." And he took my hand again, raising it to his lips for a kiss. His touch this time was warm, and that warmth flowed from my hand where he kissed it down to my toes and then swirled upward, filling my mind and my brain with tingling warmth. My eyes went wide in question, but the maestro simply nodded and released my hand.

The PR officer didn't seem to notice that anything strange had happened, and she led me away to the small space I'd been assigned for my warm up.

After meeting an idol, my usual scales and arpeggios seemed tame and bland. After a few exercises, I segued into a jazz riff that smoothed the low, sultry notes of my flute into the higher, sparkling ones. To my surprise, I realized that the tune was a good warm up across the entire range, and was still fun and beautiful. I wondered where I had heard it before.

Rehearsal went well. I guessed afterward why I had been given a meeting time with the conductor in advance. My awe had dimmed somewhat and I was able to concentrate on my music more easily than if I had met him just moments before. I found him to be detail-oriented, noticing the smallest mistakes or intonalties, but also encouraging, getting the corrections he needed, often on the first try, due to his clear and respectful explanations. I returned to my hotel that evening grinning and anticipating an excellent performance.

I should have been relaxed. I should have slept well since the big meeting and important rehearsal were over. The upcoming performance wasn't really a stressor for me. Stage fright had long since been tackled and wrestled to the ground. But I could not fall asleep. A melody filled my mind and would not leave. Over and over it played, beginning to end, then started over again from the beginning. No matter how many big Beethoven endings I tacked on, I could never get it to stop. I could think of nothing else.

The strange thing was that I could not identify this song. It was familiar enough for me to sing, apparently, but not for me to identify. I was not used to that feeling. I had always been the best student in my music appreciation classes, identifying the pieces played during drop-the-needle tests after only a measure or two. So why couldn't I identify this one?

Finally, at three in the morning, I got up and turned on the desk light. Pulling out a blank sheet of staff paper, I wrote the melody down, vowing to search for its composer as soon as I got home. Then I was

able to sleep.

The next day I had designated for sightseeing before returning to my hotel to dress for the evening performance. Because I had been awake so late the night before I allowed myself to sleep in, and then I raced to see the sights I had piled onto my agenda. The flashing lights of Times Square changed to drum strikes in my mind and the honking of taxi horns to cymbals. The city was a percussion symphony. At Lincoln Center, I heard swelling violin chords punctuated by trumpet fanfares that made me think of Sousa marches. On the tour bus ride to Ground Zero, I heard mournful oboes and English horns, and the site itself inspired a single bugle line. Not Taps, but obviously inspired by it. I didn't know where the music had come from, but it made the trip more meaningful, and I vowed to carry appropriate music in my MP3 player on later trips.

The music didn't stop once I returned to my hotel, though. In the shower, when I would ordinarily be humming through my concerto for the evening's performance, checking that I had the tricky fingerings down, the songs from earlier in the day swirled instead, merging angrily as if competing for my attention. As had occurred the night before, I could not identify the tunes.

I wondered if I was going mad. It was hard to think over the sound of the music. Would it ever leave me alone? Once again I dragged out staff paper and tried to write down what I was hearing, though the marks on the page didn't seem to do it justice. At that point, though, I cared less about doing it justice than I did just making it go away.

Thankfully, the Pops' sound was loud enough to drown out anything else that might have been rumbling around in my head, but the cacophony began again immediately after my bows, when a stage hand pressed an armful of lilies and roses onto me. Violins and flutes trilled upward, trumpets and horns blared, and snare drums rumbled to a crescendo as I received my applause. My smile was pasted on. I prayed my confusion was not noticeable.

At the hotel, I should have crashed as I typically did after performances, but nagging doubts overtook me and I called the hotel's business center to rent a laptop computer and wireless modem. Logging into the Internet, I located a "Name That Tune"-type web site and entered each melody I had scribbled down in turn. I could find none of them. Thinking that perhaps classical music wasn't available on the site, I tried all the other famous tunes I could think of. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony's "victory" motif was there, but that was extremely well known. I entered the theme from the more obscure Eroica Symphony and found that, too. Moving backward to Bach, I tried "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" and then some of his chorale tunes, and found them all. The web site's owner, listed as a professor of music at the Peabody Institute, had been very thorough, it seemed. So why couldn't I find any of the pieces that had planted themselves in my brain?

I woke bleary-eyed in the morning and hailed a taxi to take me back to the symphony hall. Something told me the maestro would be there, possibly even waiting for me. I was right. I found him in his office, packing some scores away in a banker's box.

He rose from his chair with some effort and greeted me at the doorway. "Ah, Miss Ribideaux. You have something to ask me?"

"No," I said. "Maybe," I amended. "Okay, yes."

The maestro smiled wearily. "Let me guess: 'What did you do to me?'"

I jerked. That was it, exactly. "Did you do something to me, sir?"

He pointed to a chair across from his desk and, obediently, I sat. He lowered himself into his chair, as

well. "I only gave you what you wanted," he said. "You said I had a legacy."

"I meant that your legacy was your music. The pieces you've written will live on."

"Certainly." He nodded. "But why shouldn't the talent itself live on?"

I cocked my head. "Don't you have children? Didn't you pass on your musical genes?"

"My children and grandchildren have musical abilities, yes. They sing in glee clubs and church choirs, lead community bands, one even teaches children to play their instruments."

"I don't understand, then, sir. Why did you feel you needed to pass your talent on to me, if it's already been passed within your own family?"

"This talent, the one you've wanted for so long, can't be passed through genes. It doesn't move to those who don't care for it, who don't want it or who are ambivalent." He folded his hands in his lap. "You still look confused. Must I tell you in so many words? This talent for composition, the same one that filled Bach and Chopin and Gershwin, has been passed from musician to musician by choice. When I was young, I was chosen as worthy, and I enjoyed and cursed that gift for almost fifty years. When I heard your contest recording I hoped you would be my successor, and when we spoke, I made my decision. Now it is your turn. Make the most of the gift."

"You mean the music in my head is coming from me? From the gift?"

The maestro chuckled. "You could search for a hundred years and never find that those melodies are already published. They have been given to you."

My heart swelled with joy, and then with fear. "How do I deal with it? Won't it control my life?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "It will certainly control you. But you will learn to live with it. To make it subside and wait for later when something else is more important. To use it to soothe yourself and others. And you will discover what it tells you about yourself. But that is all I have to say about the matter. Leave me now, and remain worthy of the gift."

I had so many questions bursting to escape, and the music in my head now was rapid and confusing, contrapuntal. But he had closed the door on any more questions. Except one, I hoped.

As I crossed through his threshold, I asked, "Does this mean you won't be able to write anything more?"

"Yes," he said, the grin stretching wide on his face. "I won't need to."

And, indeed, by the next day he was dead from a stroke.

As the maestro had promised, I did learn to live with the music, at least most of the time. The swelling song let me know that I was in love before my brain was aware of it, and the soft, soothing melody of a lullaby helped me handle the pain when our daughter was born. For fifty-five years I reveled in the fame the gift's compositions brought and, though I was tempted, I never revealed that I was merely a conduit for what I finally decided was the music of the universe filtered through my own sensibilities and desires.

Now, I seek another worthy carrier. I have my eye on a young man from Canada whose singing voice makes me want to weep, but I must arrange a meeting first. Perhaps next week. The time is drawing near.

Solstice in a Summerless Year by Marie Faye Prior

It was a summerless year, the first in her memory.

An oppressive purple sky pushed down on the fields, spreading low clouds of bitter brown gas that tore at the lungs like glass. Crops choked under a blanket of grit and dust, yellow and stunted for lack of sun.

Masked stick figures worked in the fields, their backs bent. Swaddled against the chill of the solstice, they did not farm, but scavenged. Their faces were muzzled, lupine and sinister in the always-gloom. Yu could not tell which one was her mother; they all moved the same.

She picked a dandelion, and it crumbled in her hands, the stem fragmenting like boiled leaves. Insects buzzed and chattered around her face, attracted by her colour. They skittered against the scratched glass of her eyeplate, and she pulled her scarf tighter, sealing the gape of the mask at her neck.

The bitter dark came in cycles, the elders said, like the rains and the river-flood.

Yu rubbed the clinging yellow plant matter from her hands and sat down in the dirt. It swirled around her, sticking to her clothes and clogging in the fine mesh over her mouth.

The farmhouse door opened behind her, and Yu heard the rustle of Sumae's kimono, the shuffle of her wooden shoes.

"Time to come in now," Sumae said, her hand on Yu's shoulder. Her voice grated a little through her own metal grid.

Yu stood awkwardly in her fat padded trousers and boy's tunic. Sumae's kimono showed flowers, pink and white petals against a summer-blue sky.

*

They ate congee at supper with wide-bowled pewter spoons, and drank boiled water from small leather cups. Yu's mother had come in from the fields, red lines on her face like spectacles where the mask had pressed into her. Yu could remember when they had eaten from deep, glazed bowls; blue and white, and not the sombre brown of earth and earthenware. She toyed with her food and wished for cherries.

Yu's mother finished her meal and stood, silent, carrying her own bowl to the kitchen. Almost instantly her seat was filled, another worker from the fields. He shovelled the watery mash into his mouth like it was sweet dumplings.

"Eat up," Sumae told her, prodding the bowl with her spoon. "Other people want to sit down, you're so slow."

*

In the evening, Sumae told the children stories.

She knelt primly on a reed mat in the corner of their bedroom, eight girls and four boys in a circle around her. Their sleeping mats were piled tidily under the window.

She had changed her kimono as Yu's mother used to do for the evening meal; its colours reflected a

summer sunset in a healthier year. Her lips were painted red, and Yu watched them as she talked.

Sumae's parents often talked about their daughter's engagement. Yu wondered when Sumae would have to leave.

Sumae's kimonos were not as fine as Yu's mother's had been, but Yu had no evidence, and so did not tell the other children. They had left all the good clothes behind, along with her father and the nice bowls and all of her toys.

*

If her father was here, Yu thought, then her mother would not have to work in the fields. He would bring her fine embroidered silks and cosmetics from the case in her dressing room, and she would restore herself. Yu had not seen her father since the last of the winter rains, on that long warm night when her mother's steward had driven them away. The horses had steamed, and the wagon had rattled so terribly loud along narrow, dirt roads they would never otherwise have used.

She had waved at her father from the back of the wagon, and watched him until he faded into the rain.

Yu pressed her face into the weave of her sleeping mat and tried not to cry.

Something shuffled at the screen. Yu heard Sumae's name, then Sumae responding, her voice thick with sleep. The screen door creaked slightly, and Sumae slipped out. Yu crawled softly along the floor, in the narrow aisle between the mats and their cargo of sleeping, snoring children. She stood quietly, and squeezed herself through the gap between screens.

Sumae was downstairs, in the sickroom. Yu could hear the soft, uneven rasp of Sumae's father's breathing, the equally soft sobbing of Sumae's mother, the rustle of paper. Yu hunched down beside a lacquered paper partition, and watched through a tear in the wall.

Sumae's father coughed, a gentle sound at first that got steadily louder and more violent. A man came forward to hold him up, while he spewed something thick and red into a large wooden bowl. Sumae's mother sat down, abruptly, and Sumae held her.

Yu recognised the doctor, and an icy dread slivered through her gut.

She closed her eyes, screwing them tight against the white prickling, the cold fear that Sumae's father would crumble like the dandelion stem.

The coughing began again. It and went on and on, and Yu huddled at the base of the stairs, snuffling into her sleeve. Sumae's mother wailed a mourner's cry, and Sumae knelt on the floor, not prim like a lady, but sprawled and ungraceful. Her head lay in her mother's lap; a sheet of paper crumpled in her hand.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. Sumae stared for a moment, a few black strands clinging to her cheeks, then nodded. Her father lay still. Slowly, the doctor placed a white cloth over his face. Sumae and her mother stood, shakily, clasping hands. Her mother bent and set down two ring-shaped bronze coins, one atop each of Sumae's father's covered eyes.

Sumae said something, the paper still crushed in her hand, and her mother shook her head. "Tomorrow," she said, and Yu slunk back up the stairs to her sleeping mat.

*

Sumae's father burned on a pyre of dead wood and broken furniture. They stood well back, past the firebreak between the sanctuary and the starving fields. Yu wept into her mask, her tears sliding down

her face and pooling at her neck where they soaked into the harsh thick wool of her scarf.

Everyone was there, all twenty-seven of the commune's refugees and the farming family who had taken them in. Yu's mother stood with Sumae's mother, both silent, the backs of their hands almost touching. Sumae stood apart in her funeral kimono, the stark white of the silk broken only by the slightest line of red. It was printed, Yu noticed, and not embroidered, but somehow still appropriate.

Yu looked up into the heavy purple sky; it was dark and mottled, like a bruise. Maybe next time it came the war would be won. They would be back in their painted villa with their servants and her father, with peasants to work the fields so her mother did not have to. Yu decided that she would keep Sumae as a Lady in Waiting, now that she had no father of her own.

*

It was a bright day when the messenger came. Bright not for the sun, but for the constant splitting zip of unnatural lightning on the horizon past the fields. The brown fog had lifted slightly, and the air was uncommonly clear. The workers did not work, but stood and stared, flinching occasionally, and talked amongst themselves. Every so often there was a thud, very loud, and very far away, and smoke would rise up in a cloud like fungus.

Sumae confined the children to their room. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and Yu noticed she had not bothered with make-up.

"Come, Yu, play monkey with us," Sumae said, holding out her hand, but Yu clung on to the windowsill and stared out at the horizon.

"No," she said, then, "Someone's coming!"

The other children clamoured to see, and Sumae clamoured with them, leaning over their heads to peer through the grubby glass.

At first, Yu thought that the messenger had no mask, but when he went to talk she caught a gleam of metal around his teeth, a mesh like spidersilk tucked away behind his lips. Lightning continued to split the sky; the messenger's horse pawed at the ground, jittery. Yu leaned closer to the glass, but no matter how hard she stared, the face of the messenger did not become familiar. She could not make him one of her father's men.

Yu watched him leave, a trail of dust spread up, agitated by his horse's hooves. The unnatural lightning flickered redly with some spell, a faint glow on his back.

*

Yu used the confusion to steal into Sumae's dressing box, to look at the paper she had been given the day her father died.

The page was crisp, flatter than it had been, but scored with lines where Sumae had crumpled it. Yu stared intently at the words, working through the syllables she knew, and guessing at those she did not. She didn't hear the screen door move.

"What are you doing? You don't go through my things!" Sumae snatched the page from her and crammed it back into the box. Her cheeks were red and blotchy like the sky, and her eyes were wet.

"Answer me!" Sumae yelled, raising her hand.

"You can't hit me!" Yu yelled back, but flinched regardless.

"Why not, child?" Sumae said, but she lowered her hand. She was shaking. "You go into my things without asking, you read my father's will. How dare you? You disrespectful little goat."

"You're a goat!" Yu cried, her lower lip quivering. "I'm the pro-consul's daughter, and that means you can't hit me!"

Sumae opened her mouth, then closed it again, and walked out. Yu followed her, but her mother was in the doorway, their masks dangling from her hand.

"Yu-Shilmar, we need to go," she said. She looked straight into Yu's eyes, and Yu felt the ground fall away from under her.

*

There was no wagon, this time, and no horses to pull it, no snug nest of blankets to sleep in while the miles of back-country swept away behind her.

Yu walked with her mother among the farmers and the refugees, a small pack on her back, her mother supporting a larger one. The heavier goods had been piled on a cart: the food and the water, pots for cooking, the tools from the barn.

The ground shook more often now, and although they walked away from it, the lightning felt closer.

"Did they do this?" Yu said.

Her mother reached for her hand and squeezed it. "No," she replied.

Yu thought of Sumae's father coughing blood into a bowl, of the bitter sharp air that clouded around them, a rolling brown fog tight to the ground. An aftershock of guilt and shame rumbled through her; she had still not said sorry to Sumae. "Whose fault is it?" she asked.

"Nobody's," her mother said. "It was the earth, remember, a long way away. There was a volcano."

Yu glanced behind her; the sky crackled. "The earth can't do that," she said, sceptically.

Her mother shrugged, hefting her pack to shift the straps. "That's different," she said, "It started before you were born, a long while before. If the crops fail once, people recover, if they fail year after year..." she trailed off. "Even if there are good years in between..."

"Where are we going?" Yu asked, and instantly regretted it.

"We'll find out when we get there," her mother replied.

Yu stared back at the patchy brown fog. The view was blurred slightly by the scratched and fogged glass of her eyeplate, but still the war blossomed red and purple and grey.

"Look where you're going," her mother said.

In front of her was the bright blue hem of Sumae's kimono. She wore it over dark boots, and under a thick coat to pad against the weight of her pack. Beneath her mask, her eyes were black with kohl, the skin around them powdered white in mourning.

Yu walked behind Sumae, following her steps. The silk fluttered on, summer blooms blown against a bright azure sky.

Blurred Edges by Malon Edwards

This story was originally published in Underground Voices, November 2005.

Interestingly enough, the world doesn't warp for me in June, July and August. The shimmering, dancing vortices of heat obscure the flick of her sun-sheened, ebony ponytail as she turns away from me. If it's late September, she allows me only to glimpse how brown her forearms have gotten during the summer because she knows I want to stroke them and feel their fine black down. If it's early December, she laughs in my ears when I'm dreaming because she knows I'm too afraid to peel back the world and chase her through the worn, brown-patched sickly green fields mined with dogshit.

When I was in middle school, I was sure if I peeled back the blurred edges of the world and stepped into the expansive fields to search for her I'd get lost. Lucky for me then I was more chickenshit than Curious George. Now that I'm married with a seven year old daughter, I gaze indirectly more and more at the muzzled world most people can't see. Good thing I'm more faithful husband than libidinous prick because her forearms get lovelier each August.

Anisa was the girl I was too frightened to kiss on a heat-wavy July afternoon in my parents' garage. She was the girl all the other girls envied because of her St. Thomas skin, she was the girl all the boys wanted because of her St. Thomas tongue, and she was the girl her crazy St. Thomas-patois-mumbling father raped and murdered one night because a bottle of Jack Daniels made him believe his daughter's room was the room of a Cherry Lane Motel whore.

The world warped for me long before Anisa died, though. I remember watching Transformers after school at my god brother's house on the south side of Chicago near the decayed steel mills and trying not to look at the scribble-drawn, gray-hazed cat things flit back and forth across the undulating demarcation lines. If I happened to be alone when I saw them, I would chase the cat things to the edge of this world and no further, ignoring their slit-eyed mewls of what couldn't be anything but mocking laughter.

Soon after Anisa died, I was more likely to see her brown forearms than the twitch of murky shapes I thought to be curved cat tails. More recently, however, Anisa has taken to whispering angry things to the darkness just before I drooled sharp, sleep-scented effluvium into my pillow--things which let me know she has just watched my wife and me breathe, touch and taste one another.

If it wasn't June, July or August, and if I didn't peer through the darkness of my bedroom to see exactly where the world warped, Anisa would follow me into my dreams and do things to me which made me question my fidelity to my wife and the possibility of a world behind this one.

But then last summer Curious George got the best of me, and so on a Friday night in February when my wife was on a ski trip in Aspen with three of her closest girlfriends since third grade and my daughter was at a sleepover with three of her best friends since the week before, I peeled back the world and stepped into dogshit.

Anisa allowed me, for a long moment or two, a glimpse of her not-so-brown-but-now-golden skin, her long, not-so-brown-but-now-golden legs and her lustrous fourth-vertebra-length ponytail before she rewarded me with the kiss I've wanted and dreamed the past twenty-five years.

And then, without a word (or even that erection-inducing laugh of hers), but with a flip of her hair not unlike that of a gazelle's tail, she dashed away on those wonderfully long legs of hers and bounded over the dogshit marinating in sunshine too warm to be from a February sun.

I was apparently supposed to chase after her, and so I did, slipping and falling in dogshit. At three bounds, her laughter floated over her left shoulder; at eight bounds her golden skin was tinged indigo and she was camouflaged against the horizon.

It took me much longer than I liked (as I stood there with the sun hanging low, pregnant and orange) before I realized this world didn't shimmer, dance and blur like my world. So, I did the only thing I could have done in that situation—I wiped shit that wasn't mine off my ass and hoped the horizon wouldn't run from me as I ran to it.

Issue Nine Contributor Biographies

Stafford L. Battle

[Stafford Levon Battle](#) was born in North Carolina. At an early age, his family moved to Washington, DC, but he spent many summers in the South. In the 9th grade, he matriculated at a New England prep school where he saw his first computer in 1969. He received his BA from Brandeis University in Waltham, MA. He did additional course work for book publishing at Howard University, in Washington, DC, and Stanford University in Stanford, CA. He has worked for *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Time-Life Books*, *Washington Living Magazine*, and the *Journal of Housing* (National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials). He co-authored the **African American Resource Guide to the Internet and Online Services** (1996, McGraw Hill, Inc., New York). He is a cofounder of the Black Author Showcase, a social network for writers and other professionals who help bring a book to life. Currently, at Howard University College of Medicine, he works as a Digital Designer for the Office of Curriculum. His most recent publications include **Afrocyberspace: 1000+ Web Sites That Will Enrich Your World** (Summer 2009, 22nd Century Press, LLC, Mitchellville, MD); and **Insane Messiah** (Fall 2009, 22nd Century Press, LLC, Mitchellville, MD).

He is married and has one daughter who is pursuing her MD/PhD degree.

Kim Sheard

Kim Sheard divides her workday between walking dogs and writing. Her published works include SF/fantasy stories, non-fiction, and romance short and long fiction. See the complete list at www.kimsheardauthor.com. She lives in Fairfax, Virginia and reads everything she can get her hands on.

Marie Faye Prior

Marie Faye Prior is an architectural historian living in York, England. When she isn't writing, working or teaching, she fills her spare time by building corsets and making jewellery. Her fiction has appeared in [Behind the Wainscot](#) and [Hub](#).

Malon Edwards

Malon Edwards is male, African-American, thirty-three years old and a resident of Chicago. He also serves as the Older Writers' Grant Administrator for the Speculative Literature Foundation. The Older Writers' Grant provides \$750 for writers fifty years and older just beginning their writing career.