SUBMISSIONS
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Editors’ Note

Beauty confuses us.
Take this issue’s cover art, for instance. Green balls roll out of a camel’s stomach, a hammer dangles from its side, a man seems to be hopping atop to ride. A woman stands ready with suitcases on the ground, a tiny blue car is parked at the camel’s feet—which are not feet at all—and in the background a terrain that looks familiar and yet not. In the clouds we see something, maybe an echo of the images in the forefront, maybe something else entirely, possibly nothing at all. The picture is striking but what can it mean? The artist Orna Ben-Shoshan says the images in her work are not random but inspired. Surrealism has its own internal logic.

A literary journal is a kind of surreal art. Pieces not designed to sit side by side, to inhabit even the same world, are snapped together into surprising whole. A reader doing either a methodical cover to cover read or a cherry-picking surf through the contents for what strikes her gets the impression that herein lies a conversation, an assertion of some kind. The brow furrows, the images and characters flash through the brain, and the dominant conclusion is—we hope for Silk Road anyway—beauty. The Winter-Spring issue is filled with work by writers talented in conjuring the arresting and the sublime. Spun for us are shimmering worlds of desire and images as solid as apples we know we shouldn’t eat but are going to bite into anyway.

As humans we are drawn to what hurts us—a flame, a cruel lover, a past we might better forget. We are seduced by the shiny, the ethereal, and the poignant only to realize later we have been tricked into seeing the unbearable. Writers are compelled to mine the unbearable moment, to try to come to terms with it. Above all else they are driven to find a way to get the reader to
experience it.

Read this issue back to front, starting with Roderick B. Overaa’s elegant story “Girls Like That” and you will discover regret on every page. Start at the beginning with Josephine Ensign’s essay “Gone South” and you will experience a haunted magazine, ghosts lingering like guilt, and a landscape saturated with mystery and an ugly beauty. The truth is we most comprehend the horrific the moment we see the exquisite within it. Flip open the journal to about halfway through and find yourself inside the poem “Status, News Feed, Most Recent, Last” by Luisa A. Igloria, the lines carrying you like a leaf on wild water. She writes, “O agony and ecstasy, our lot on this blue-green/planet.”

We are here and then we are not, and the writers in this issue confront the spinning chaos of that temporal journey. They do it with sharp wit, breathtaking pacing, and wry flashes of humor. They ask us to slow down and face the place where we find ourselves.

On behalf of all the editors of Silk Road, I thank you for reading

Kathlene Postma
Editor-in-Chief
Gone South

Josephine Ensign

Nonfiction

I grew up surrounded by Civil War ghosts on 600 acres in coastal Virginia. The blush sand and red clay road leading to my house didn’t have a name. But the closest paved road was an old twisted cow path called McClellen Road for the Union army general who lost the battle here. Early in life I learned how to ride in a car on these sinuous country roads. Bumping along at a humming clip, my mom steered the car around sharp bends, over washboard dirt road stretches, and between deeply rutted potholes. I breathed in burnt orange dust through the open car windows. As I lurched side-to-side, sometimes forward, occasionally up off the seat and down with a thump, I learned without being told that it’s best to relax into the offbeat rhythm.

The land I grew up on near Cold Harbor had been the site of the bloodiest battles in the Civil War. Two battles that were two years apart; soldiers on both sides in the last battle unearthed decomposing bodies from the previous battle as they dug trenches. Our land was strewn with their bullets, musket balls, deep earthworks and mounded graves. From an earlier time, the Pamunkey Indians had scattered the land with white quartz arrowheads. My mom collected arrowheads and bullets along the road. She taught me how to search for them.

There was a path behind our house that began at the swing set, wandered through holly bushes, gangly sassafras and towering oak trees, and connected with the pot-holed dirt road out of camp. Before I was old enough to start school, this was the path my mom and I walked on after lunch to get the mail. We searched for bullets along the way. Spring was my favorite time to go for walks.
The wild dogwoods spattered the woods with white flowered snow in amongst the new green shoots of leaves shimmering in the sun. Sometimes my mom found flat metal buttons from soldier’s jackets. Other times she found old bullets with smashed in points.

“These are ones that hit something and got smashed,” mom said, holding up a buff colored bullet for me to see.

“Hit something like what?” I asked, gazing up at her.

“Well—like maybe trees or people—it hit their bones and that’s what killed them.” At night, I’d lie awake thinking of the bullets.

On these springtime walks I pretended to look for bullets, but what I really searched for were violets. Wood violets were shy flowers, growing under the shade of young sassafras trees and cinnamon ferns, between the mossy cedar logs of the corduroy road. I loved their heart-shaped leaves, deep purple or purple-veined white flowers, and honeyed scent. The purple-veined violets were less common and were called Confederate violets, because from a distance their color resembled the faded blue-grey of Confederate uniforms.

The day I saw my first ghost was a spring day. I was walking on the path with my mom. She was up ahead stooped over with her hands clasped behind her back, walking slowly, while gently swaying from side to side searching for bullets. I lagged behind looking for violets and found a large patch beside my favorite white oak tree. The stately tree had a tire swing that my granddad had made for me before he died. I felt sorry for the tree now because lightning had split it down the middle in a night storm the summer before. It was black and brown and dying, with the tire sagging on the ground. I knelt down to smell the violets, inhaling their aching sweetness, a scent that in the next moment became the combined essence of fear and enchantment. Beside the violets I saw a half buried bullet. As if it were one of my marbles, I flicked the bullet with an index finger, and saw it had a smashed
I froze, feeling warmth slowly thaw my neck, hearing echoes of my heartbeat deep inside my head. Before I knew what I was doing, I buried the bullet down in the spongy earth and covered it with a mound of violets. My heart still bounding, I ran to catch up with my mom. I didn’t tell her what I had seen and she never asked why I stopped looking for bullets.

I saw other ghosts on our land. Some tended cows, others farmed, or fetched water from streams. They didn’t bother me the way the ghost of the soldier had, but I didn’t tell my mom about these either. I collected sights of them along with other secrets of my childhood—secrets that over time hardened into the skeleton of my identity. The ghosts appeared near old fallen down houses we had on the other side of the lake, along vestiges of old roads. I’d see them out of the corner of my eye as I walked amongst the silver lichen-clad pine trees growing straight in the rounded furrows of the overgrown farm fields. Sometimes they glowed at night in the foxfire fungi and swamp gas in marshy areas around my house.

On our property there were three of these houses abandoned during the Civil War, now flattened jumbles of wood. Old daffodils bloomed around the houses in spring, and magenta climbing roses gasped through thick mildewed leaves in June. Each house had a deep open well nearby full of tree limbs and snakes, fenced off because people had fallen in them and had to be rescued before they got bitten by copperheads and died down there. That’s what my mother told me, tightly holding my hand as I gazed over the edge into the dark pit. I was fascinated and repulsed, full of an alchemy of agony and awe. Secretively I wanted to crawl into those grottoes and touch their dripping moss-covered sides.

My mom took me on expeditions to these houses. First, she would study a large blown-up aerial photograph of our property. She’d point to an area of the map: “See those patches of
dark green? That’s where an old house used to be. The green is from all the old walnut trees they planted around it.” Then, armed with bags and garden trowels, we’d set off on trails through the woods. Once we’d found a house site, she’d locate the refuse area nearby and we would start digging, uncovering pale turquoise baking soda bottles, enameled rusted-through buckets and iron spokes from wagon wheels. In eroded red and grey clay banks of streams near the houses, we found fossil seashells and sharks’ teeth. At four, I got the history of our land in a jumbled Alice-in-Wonderland sort of way, imagining Indians and Civil War soldiers fighting undersea sharks.

The ghosts of the people who had lived in the old houses seemed content. Near one of the houses was a family burial site. Leaf-strewn mounds of earth bumped together in a line like the cedar logs on the corduroy road. The site was on a bluff overlooking a ravine cascading down to a small stream. Most of the graves had carved grey headstones: Robert Anderson born March 10, 1792, died July 26, 1853; William Nelson Anderson born February 16, 1837, died May 15, 1851; and, Nancy Peasley Anderson Born April 18, 1833, died July 15, 1834. Nancy’s grave was short, but there was an even shorter grave next to it of another Nancy, “infant granddaughter” Nancy Julia Elizabeth, with no dates given. A few feet away were six or so bigger unmarked graves that my mom said were those of slaves. These couldn’t have been content, but I didn’t see their ghosts back then. It was as if they had never existed.

I absorbed history from our land before being taught proper Virginia history in grade school. Once I began school, my textbooks had pastel colored drawings depicting the Godspeed, Susan Constant and the Discovery tall ships of Jamestown, and another of Pocahontas, looking as buxom and scantily clad as a Barbie Doll in a bikini. The boys in my class twittered over this page. I believe there was an illustration of thick-lipped black
slaves on an auction block, but I don’t remember any discussion of slavery or race relations in school. Strange, since around us roiled the Civil Rights Movement. My school was desegregated when I was in second grade, and in the spring of that year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The only thing I remember about the year of desegregation is that my school bus began to pick up black kids along our route. They sat together in the back of the bus. When I asked my mom about this, she said it was out of habit, and that they probably felt better sitting together.

The only history I was taught in school, until grade 8 at Stonewall Jackson Junior High School, was Virginia history, as if there were no worlds outside the Commonwealth. At night, when I read my history textbook, mom would frown over my shoulder, scan the page, make guttural “Hmmm” sounds and mutter, “Well, that’s not exactly correct.” I’d look up from my book and she would provide me with an alternative view of Virginia history, such as, “The early English settlers here were prisoners and women who got into trouble and got kicked out of England—remember that when anyone tells you they’re Virginia Blueblood.”

My mother was an educated woman, a professional artist. She had a master’s degree from a university in the North. I figured she knew more about most things than did my provincial teachers and textbooks. Not surprisingly, in fourth grade when history was graded separately, I didn’t do well. On the back of my report card, my mother wrote in beautiful cursive, “I have felt for some time that I should talk with Mrs. Blaylock about her social studies tests and the history textbook used. Please let me know when would be a convenient time.”

I do wonder how that conversation went between mom and Mrs. Blaylock. I never asked. As I have come to know now, this was during an era of the Virginia Blueblood oligarchy control of school textbooks. Liberal, educated voters like my parents, fought this control. Members of the First Families of Virginia, such as the
Byrds, Carters, Lees, and Berkelys, controlled the State legislature and decided the appropriate version of Virginia history that could be taught. Our school field trips seemed approved by them as well, and were to places like the White House of the Confederacy, Monticello, and the Shirley and Tuckahoe Plantations—all former or current homes of the First Families. I did not go to school with children of Virginia Bluebloods. The white children with whom I attended school were much more plebeian. They were children of farmers or small tradesmen who lived in Lego-shaped ranch houses with incongruous pillared antebellum flourishes, black lawn jockeys, and stone deer in the front yards. The children of Virginia Bluebloods—with nicknames like Archer and Hobbie—went to private schools, and occasionally were sent to our summer camp while their parents went on extended vacations to Europe.

The land I grew up on was the first integrated children’s summer camp in the South. It was Presbyterian, but also ecumenical and interfaith. In 1957, my dad was recruited from his North Carolina church to open it. The summer camp had racially integrated staff and campers. Summers were full of canoe trips on the nearby rivers, volleyball games in the dust, sliding like otters on wet clay hillsides by the lake, cookouts and campfires. My father presided over each solemn opening and closing campfire deep in the nighttime woods, reciting the poem, “Kneel always when you light a fire, kneel reverently in grateful be…” as he lit the fire, a circle of restless faces gathered around. The faces of white children glowed in the firelight, while the black faces stayed hidden.

If there were local tensions about our camp being integrated, I wasn’t aware of them. I lived for my summers and got through the school year by helping out with diverse weekend retreat groups at camp, such as the B’nai B’rith Jewish Youth and Southern Baptist missionary kids. There was even a large Hindu meditation group led by a wizened, straggly grey-haired Indian on
a pink plastic lounge chair surrounded by flaming marigolds. Camp expanded my world past Virginia, past the South, past the Civil War ghosts that continued to swirl around and through me. The ghosts had become part of the landscape.

One late summer day I was riding in our VW, my mom driving on back roads from the airport. We had just dropped off a camp counselor who was flying back to college. I was ten, sitting in the backseat, slumped against the right side window, reading a book, vaguely registering the countryside and farms we were passing, when mom slammed on the brakes.

“Damn!” I’d never heard my mom curse, so I looked up quickly.

“What?” I asked.

“Keep your head down and stay quiet,” she said, adding more softly as she turned off the engine, “It’ll be OK.” I could see her leaning forwards, both hands tightly clutching the top of the steering wheel. I slumped down in the seat while quickly peering out the side window to see what had stopped us—to see what would be OK, to see what she didn’t want me to see. I figured it was a bad car accident.

It was approaching dusk, the witching hour for the waning sun. The field next to us glowed golden, with large rectangular hay bales strewn about the field of wheat stalk stubble. Hovering over the field, suspended in the thick damp evening air were shining motes of hay bits, effervescent like Fourth-of-July sparklers. With our car engine turned off, the sound of cicadas and crickets became a curtain of white noise, as mesmerizing as the floating hay.

“Evening, ma’am. Don’t mean no trouble. I gotta stop you here awhile. There’s a meeting up ahead that’s passing through, that’s all. You can get going in a minute or so,” a man’s voice, polite, official-sounding, with crisp words stuck in a slow southern drawl, echoed through mother’s open window. I looked between the seats and saw a spotless white-gloved hand cupped over the
doorsill. Behind that was blazing white with a thin, trickling, blood-red cross. Above the cross was a white mask and pale thin lips moving within an elliptical cutout area. From the words spoken and the weight of the voice, I expected to see the blue uniform of a policeman. When I first saw the white mask, I felt disoriented and had to remind myself it wasn’t Halloween. I stayed quiet, huddled down behind the seats. As the man moved away I looked out the front windshield to see where he was going. Up ahead, perhaps 50 feet away, was a swarm of ghostly pointed-hat masked figures swirling around a huge bonfire. It took a moment for me to see that inside the bonfire was a ten-foot dark wooden cross.

“What’s that and why are they wearing those weird costumes?” I asked.

“Shhhhh—I’ll tell you later. Stay down and stay quiet,” Mom said.

Absorbing the fear in her voice, I sank deeper in the seat, but moved over in the middle so I could see out the front windshield at the fire and the figures. Several of the white-clad men reached into the fire with long wooden sticks and withdrew flaming torches. Then en masse, with fluid amoeboid movement, the group came towards us, sucking in lone figures as it streamed forward. I heard deep-voiced chanting, words indecipherable as a foreign language. They grew louder, surrounding our car, lighting the inside with their glowing whiteness and lit torches, gently rocking the car as they brushed past it, moving across the road, then thinning to double file down a dirt path that cut through the next field. The comforting, familiar smell of wood smoke followed them.

I didn’t hear mom start the car. We were speeding away, screeching around bends in the road. Reflected in the rearview mirror, I saw mom’s face set hard as stone, etched with the fierce anger I seldom saw. I was more afraid of her anger than I had been
of the men we had seen. I stayed quiet, huddled down in the back seat, bracing myself for the rough ride. When we got home she disappeared into her bedroom, talking quietly with my father—so quietly that I couldn’t make out what they were saying, even with my ear pressed against the rough stucco wall between our bedrooms.

At the dinner table that night, my father told me we had been in the middle of a Klu Klux Klan meeting. “They’re racist white men who wear those costumes to look like ghosts of Confederate soldiers to scare black people—and to scare white people who don’t agree with them—like it scared your mother.” As I slowly chewed a mouthful of food, I considered this information. The ghostly man who had stopped us seemed polite, a Southern gentleman. Being in the midst of the KKK meeting had been exotic, dreamlike, seductive—almost beautiful. I knew that what I had seen—the way I had seen it—was not something to discuss. I swallowed the dissonance between my mother’s reaction and my own experience of the encounter.

The discord remains. It has taken living away from and looking back at the South to understand that the custom of ghosts being part of the landscape is not something to relax into. The landscape of my childhood is a landscape of half-buried violence, covered with violets, punctuated by deep, abandoned wells. The roads leading back to it are as twisted as the country roads I grew up on. Within the accretive layers of nostalgia, lies the sludge of orange dust tasting of blood. I both fear and yearn for the complexity and the chaos of the South that formed me.