

edited by
Shannon Ravenel

NEW STORIES
FROM THE SOUTH

The Year's Best, 1986

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PREFACE

Each of the stories in this book first appeared in an American magazine, review, journal, or quarterly. And all of them appeared there within the year preceding selection for this book. So truly, they *are* all “new.”

None of these short stories is, as far as I can know, part of a larger piece. None is an excerpt. Each was written to stand alone. And so they are all truly “stories.”

But are they all truly “from the South”?

Twenty years ago, John Corrington White and Miller Williams edited a collection of stories they called *Southern Writing in the Sixties* (LSU Press, 1966). They gave their criteria for selection as follows: “The fiction included here has been selected from the works of . . . writers who were raised in the South . . .” So far so good, clear and simple. They went on to finish the sentence, “. . . or, having reached the age of responsibility, came to the South and became Southerners.” That’s not as simple.

It’s getting harder all the time to draw the borders to the South. People move—both geographically and spiritually—a lot more than they used to. Do we still believe in the Mason-Dixon Line? Does being a Southern place still require one-time membership in the Confederacy? Does being a Southern writer still mean being particularly and peculiarly shaped by history, the past more than the present, nostalgia, defeat, poverty, color, guilt?

I call myself a Southerner. I was born and raised in South Carolina. So were my parents, and their parents, and theirs. I have an accent that doesn’t fade completely even though I have lived far away from the Low Country for more than 25 years. In thinking

about whether and how to judge what is and what isn't Southern writing, I find that my notion of it hasn't so much to do with geography or a personal relationship with history. What it does have to do with is belonging, something related to my having hung on to my accent. Corrington and Williams said it well: "The Southerner is not the only person who knows where his home is. But he is one of the few to whom it matters very much."

When I chose the stories for this book, I was, in many cases, unaware of the individual authors' origins. I didn't know whether Max Apple had been "raised" Southern, for instance, or whether Ron Carlson had ever "become" Southern, or indeed, anything at all about Doug Crowell. But "Bridging" seemed to me to nearly perfectly celebrate that Southern thing—how much home matters. I didn't know whether Suzanne Brown or Wallace Whatley were raised Southern either, but their stories have the same safe-at-home feeling, if in more explicitly Southern settings than Apple's. Ron Carlson's young male characters, swaying on that chain-link fence, reflect a relationship to a hometown that matters to the writer and his vision as much as the patently Southern hometown does in Sylvia Wilkinson's "Chicken Simon." Velma's voice speaks volumes about *her* home, wherever it is, and does it just as plainly as does Ginnie's Southern bad seed behavior in Mary Hood's story. The grit and determination to make a place for herself of Elizabeth Harris's Texas divorcee is no less true than that of Kurt Rheinheimer's Appalachian umpire or Gloria Norris's Mississippi restaurateur. And loss of the innocent belief in the inviolate security of the home place is painful no matter where it happens—on a pig farm known to Madison Smartt Bell, in David Huddle's Rosemary, Va., in James Lee Burke's field, Mary Ward Brown's evangelical church hall, Luke Whisnant's North St. Louis tenement, or W. A. Smith's Charleston operating room. Love and the commitment to it are, of course, the basis of this Southern home business. See "Martha Jean" for Leon V. Driskell's version of home-in-the-making.

The reader will notice that all but one of the stories here were first published in the so-called "little magazines." Most, but not all, of the journals represented here are issued from Southern locations—Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, Tennessee. The other ones are from such far-flung parts as Cali-

fornia, Ohio, New Mexico, Nebraska, Utah. Only one lists New York City as home. The point of all this is to emphasize that wonderful short stories are being first brought to light by "little magazines." Year after year, decade after decade, this country's finest fiction is consistently to be found in the pages of these publications with their consistently tiny circulations. Whatever your favorite American home place, you will find near it a literary journal supporting, on a shoe string, our remarkable outpouring of creative writing. That all but one of the stories here came from the literary journals is not due to any effort on my part to help the literary journals. It is simply because the best short stories are to be found there.

And so here are my favorite new stories from the South. In each of them I find startling evidence of the meaning of "home" to the writer—home of past, of present, and of future; home in the form of place and of person; and, most Southern of all, the discovery of why one speaks with an accent and where one really belongs.

Shannon Ravenel

NEW STORIES FROM THE SOUTH

The Year's Best, 1986

...the Academy. Now Ryan is shaving his whiskers. His
eyes are blue, but the color is fading. The radio announcer is not
...the Academy. Tonight, Ryan passed the Big Train and he
... Ryan is almost as old as I am
... Ryan's looking but smokes. His last ball is an empty
... Ryan's looking for his cure.

My fingers (left and right) have a great tickle, but tonight
... in the basement of St. Anne's Church,
... Kay's fingernails. Kay is holding her hands out
... her fingernails touching. Her fingernails move a little
... I can hear her nails click when they meet. That's
... I'm sitting.

Kay is talking about "bridging" with what her arched fingernails
... .

"Bridging," she says, "is the way the other young girl Scouts
... allow a whole lot
... for bridging."

Eleven girls in brown jumpers, with orange dots at their necks,
... Kay is talking. They hold their hands up, showing
... fingers out and bridge their... .

I thought the other tonight, and the other in gold stars, and the
... .

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Max Apple

BRIDGING

(from *The Atlantic*)

At the Astrodome, Nolan Ryan is shaving the corners. He's going through the Giants in order. The radio announcer is not even mentioning that, through the sixth, the Giants haven't had a hit. The Ks mount. Tonight, Nolan passes the Big Train and becomes the all-time strikeout king. Ryan is almost as old as I am, and he still throws nothing but smoke. His fast ball is an aspirin; batters seem to tear their tendons lunging for his curve.

My daughter, Jessica, and I have season tickets, but tonight she's home listening and I'm in the basement of St. Anne's Church, watching Kay Randall's fingertips. Kay is holding her hands out from her chest, her fingertips touching. Her fingers move a little as she talks, and I can hear her nails click when they meet. That's how close I'm sitting.

Kay is talking about "bridging"; that's what her arched fingers represent.

"Bridging," she says, "is the way Brownies become Girl Scouts. It's a slow, steady process. It's not easy, but we allow a whole year for bridging."

Eleven girls in brown jumpers, with orange ties at their necks, are imitating Kay as she talks. They hold their stumpy, chewed fingertips out and bridge them; so do I.

I brought the paste tonight, and the stick-on gold stars, and the thread for sewing buttonholes.

"I feel a little awkward," Kay Randall said on the phone, "asking a man to do these errands . . . but that's my problem, not yours. Just bring the supplies and try to be at the church meeting room a few minutes before seven."

I arrived a half hour early.

"You're off your rocker," Jessica said. She begged me to drop her at the Astrodome on my way to the Girl Scout meeting. "After the game, I'll meet you at the main souvenir stand on the first level. They stay open an hour after the game. I'll be all right. There are cops and ushers every five yards."

She can't believe that I am missing this game to perform my functions as an assistant Girl Scout leader. Our Girl Scout battle has been going on for two months.

"Girl Scouts is stupid," Jessica says. "Who wants to sell cookies and sew buttons and walk around wearing stupid old badges."

When she agreed to go to the first meeting, I was so happy that I volunteered to become an assistant leader. After the meeting, Jessica went directly to the car, the way she does after school, after a birthday party, after a ball game, after anything. A straight line to the car. No jabbering with girlfriends, no smiles, no dallying, just right to the car. She slid into the back seat, belted in, and braced herself for destruction.

I shrugged aside a thousand years of stereotypes and accepted my assistant leader's packet and credentials.

"I'm sure there have been other men in the movement," Kay said. "We just haven't had any in our district. It will be good for the girls."

Not for my Jessica. She won't bridge, she won't budge.

"I know why you're doing this," she said. "You think that because I don't have a mother, Kay Randall and the Girl Scouts will help me. That's crazy. And I know that Sharon is supposed to be like a mother, too. Why don't you just leave me alone?"

Sharon is Jessica's therapist. Jessica sees her twice a week. Sharon and I have a meeting once a month.

"We have a lot of shy girls," Kay Randall told me. "Scouting brings them out. Believe me, it's hard to stay shy when you're nine years old and you're sharing a tent with four other girls. You have to count on each other, you have to communicate."

I imagined Jessica zipping up her sleeping bag, mumbling good

night to anyone who said it to her first, and then closing her eyes and hating me for sending her out among the happy.

"She likes all sports, especially baseball," I told my leader.

"There's room for baseball in scouting," Kay said. "Once a year, the whole district goes to a game. They mention us on the big scoreboard."

"Jessica and I go to all the home games. We're real fans."

Kay smiled.

"That's why I want her in Girl Scouts. You know, I want her to go to things with her girlfriends, instead of always hanging around with me at ball games."

"I understand," Kay said; "it's part of bridging."

With Sharon, the word is "separation anxiety." That's the fast ball; "bridging" is the curve. Amid all their magic words, I feel as if Jessica and I were standing at home plate blindfolded.

While I await Kay and the members of Troop III, District 6, I eye Saint Anne in her grotto and Saint Gregory and Saint Thomas. Their hands are folded as if they started out bridging and ended up praying.

In October, the principal sent Jessica home from school because Mrs. Simmons caught her in spelling class listening to the World Series through an earphone.

"It's against the school policy," Mrs. Simmons said. "Jessica understands school policy. We confiscate radios and send the child home."

"I'm glad," Jessica said. "It was a cheap-o radio. Now I can watch TV with you."

They sent her home in the middle of the sixth game. I let her stay home for the seventh, too.

The Brewers are her favorite American League team. She likes Rollie Fingers, and especially Robin Yount.

"Does Yount go in the hole better than Harvey Kuenn used to?"

"You bet," I told her. "Kuenn was never a great fielder, but he could hit .300 with his eyes closed."

Kuenn was the Brewers' manager. He has an artificial leg and could barely make it up the dugout steps, but when I was Jessica's age and the Tigers were my team, Kuenn used to stand at the plate, tap the corners with his bat, spit some tobacco juice, and knock liners up the alley.

She took it hard when the Brewers lost.

"If Fingers hadn't been hurt, they would have squashed the Cards, wouldn't they?"

I agreed.

"But, I'm glad for Andujar."

We had Andujar's autograph. Once, we met him at a McDonald's. He was a relief pitcher then, and an erratic right-hander, though in St. Louis he improved. I was happy to get his name on a napkin. Jessica shook his hand.

One night, after I had read her a story, she said, "Daddy, if we were rich, could we go to the away games, too? I mean, if you didn't have to be at work every day?"

"Probably we could," I said, "but wouldn't it get boring? We'd have to stay at hotels and eat in restaurants. Even the players get sick of it."

"Are you kidding?" she said. "I'd never get sick of it."

"Jessica has fantasies of being with you forever, following baseball or whatever," Sharon says. "All she's trying to do is please you. Since she lost her mother, she feels that you and she are alone in the world. She doesn't want to let anyone or anything else into that unit, the two of you. She's afraid of any more losses. And, of course, her greatest worry is about losing you."

"You know," I tell Sharon, "that's pretty much how I feel, too."

"Of course it is," she says. "I'm glad to hear you say it."

Sharon is glad to hear me say almost anything. When I complain that her \$100-a-week fee would buy a lot of peanut-butter sandwiches, she says she is "glad to hear" me expressing my anger.

"Sharon's not fooling me," Jessica says. "I know that she thinks drawing those pictures is supposed to make me feel better or something. You're just wasting your money. There's nothing wrong with me."

"It's a long, difficult, expensive process," Sharon says. "You and Jessica have lost a lot. Jessica is going to have to learn to trust the world again. It would help if you could do it, too."

So I decide to trust Girl Scouts. First Girl Scouts, then the world. I make my stand at the meeting of Kay Randall's fingertips. While Nolan Ryan breaks Walter Johnson's strikeout record and pitches a two-hit shutout, I hand paste and thread to nine-year-

olds who are sticking and sewing their lives together in ways Jessica and I can't.

Scouting is not altogether new to me. I was a Cub Scout. I owned a blue beanie, and I remember my den mother, Mrs. Clark, very well. A den mother made perfect sense to me then, and still does. Maybe that's why I don't feel uncomfortable being a Girl Scout assistant leader.

We had no den father. Mr. Clark was only a photograph on a wall in the tiny living room where we held our weekly meetings. Mr. Clark had been killed in the Korean War. His son, John, was in the troop. John was stocky, but Mrs. Clark was huge. She couldn't sit on a regular chair, only on a couch or a stool without sides. She was the cashier in the convenience store beneath their apartment. The story we heard was that Walt, the old man who owned the store, felt sorry for her and gave her the job. He was her landlord, too. She sat on a swivel stool and rang up the purchases.

We met at the store and watched while she locked the door; then we followed her up the steep staircase to her three-room apartment. She carried two wet glass bottles of milk. Her body took up the entire width of the staircase. She passed the banisters the way trucks pass each other on a narrow highway.

We were ten years old, a time when everything is funny, especially fat people. But I don't remember ever laughing about Mrs. Clark. She had great dignity and character, and so did John. I didn't know what to call it then, but I knew John was someone you could always trust.

She passed out milk and cookies; then John collected the cups and washed them. They didn't have a television set. The only decoration in the room that barely held all of us was Mr. Clark's picture on the wall. We saw him in his uniform, and we knew he had died in Korea defending his country. We were little boys in blue beanies, drinking milk in the apartment of a hero. Through that aura I came to scouting. I wanted Kay Randall to have all of Mrs. Clark's dignity.

When she takes a deep breath and then bridges, Kay Randall has noticeable armpits. Her wide shoulders narrow into a tiny rib

cage. Her armpits are like bridges. She says "bridging" as if it were a mantra, holding her hands before her for about thirty seconds at the start of each meeting.

"A promise is a promise," I told Jessica. "I signed up to be a leader and I'm going to do it, with you or without you."

"But you didn't even ask me if I liked it. You just signed up without talking it over."

"That's true. That's why I'm not going to force you to go along. It was my choice."

"What can you like about it? I hate Melissa Randall. She always has a cold."

"Her mother is a good leader."

"How do you know?"

"She's my boss. I have to like her, don't I?"

I hugged Jessica. "C'mon, honey, give it a chance. What do you have to lose?"

"If you make me go I'll do it, but if I have a choice I won't."

Every other Tuesday, Maria, the fifteen-year-old Greek girl who lives on the corner, babysits Jessica while I go to the Scout meetings. We talk about field trips and about how to earn merit badges. The girls giggle when Kay pins a "Ready Helpers" badge on me, my first merit award.

Jessica thinks it's hilarious. She tells me to wear it to work.

Sometimes, when I watch Jessica brush her hair and tie her ponytail and make her lunch, I start to think that maybe I should just relax and stop the therapy and the scouting and all my not-so-subtle attempts to get her to invite friends over. I start to think that, in spite of everything, she's a good student and she's got a sense of humor. She's barely nine years old; she'll grow up, just as everyone does. John Clark did it without a father; she'll do it without a mother. I start to wonder if Jessica seems to the girls in her class what John Clark seemed to me: dignified, serious, almost an adult, even while we were playing. I admired him; maybe the girls in her class admire her. But John had that hero on the wall, his father in a uniform, dead for reasons John and all the rest of us understood. My Jessica had to explain a neurological disease that she couldn't even pronounce. "I hate it when people ask me about Mom," she said. "I just tell them she fell off the Empire State Building."

* * *

Before our first field trip, I go to Kay's house for a planning session. We're going to collect wildflowers in East Texas. It's a one-day trip; I arranged to rent the school bus.

I told Jessica that she could go on the trip even though she wasn't a member, but she refused.

We sit on colonial furniture in Kay's den. She brings in coffee and we go over the list of sachet supplies. Another troop is joining ours, so there will be a busload among the bluebonnets—twenty-two girls, three women, and me.

"We have to be sure the girls understand that the bluebonnets they pick are on private land and that we have permission to pick them. Otherwise, they might go pick them from along the roadside, which is against the law."

I imagine all twenty-two of them behind bars for picking bluebonnets, and Jessica laughing while I scramble for bail money.

I keep noticing Kay's hands. I notice them as she pours coffee, as she checks off the items on the list, as she gestures. I keep expecting her to bridge. She has large, solid, confident hands. When she finishes bridging, I sometimes feel like clapping, the way people do after the national anthem.

"I admire you," she tells me. "I admire you for going ahead with Scouts even though your daughter rejects it. She'll get a lot out of it indirectly, from you."

Kay is thirty-three, divorced, and has two daughters. One is a Blue Bird; the older, Melissa, is one of the stubby-fingered girls. Jessica is right; Melissa always has a cold.

Kay teaches fifth grade and has been divorced for three years. I am the first assistant she's ever had.

"My husband, Bill, never helped with Scouts," Kay says. "He was pretty much turned off to everything except his business and drinking. When we separated, I can't honestly say I missed him; he'd never been there. I don't think the girls miss him, either. He only sees them about once a month. He has girlfriends, and his business is doing very well. I guess he has what he wants."

"And you?"

She uses one of those wonderful hands to move the hair away from her eyes, a gesture that makes her seem very young.

"I guess I do, too. I've got the girls and my job. I'm lonesome, though."

We both think about what might have been as we sit beside her glass coffee pot with our lists of supplies that the girls will need to make sachets with their flowers. If she were Barbra Streisand and I were Robert Redford, and the music started playing in the background to give us a clue, and there were a long close-up of our lips, we might just fade into middle age together. But Melissa calls for Mom because her mosquito bite is bleeding where she has scratched it. And I have an angry daughter waiting at home for me. All Kay and I have in common is Girl Scouts. We are both smart enough to know it. When Kay looks at me before going to put alcohol on the mosquito bite, our mutual sadness drips from us like the last drops of coffee through the grounds.

"You really missed something tonight," Jessica tells me. "The Astros did a double steal. I've never seen one before. In the fourth, they sent both Thon and Moreno, and Moreno stole home." She knows batting averages and won-lost percentages, too, just like the older boys. But they go out to play; Jessica stays in and waits for me.

During the field trip, while the girls pick the flowers, I think about Jessica at home, probably beside the radio. Juana, our once-a-week cleaning lady, agreed to work on Saturday so that she could stay with Jessica while I took the all-day field trip.

It was no small event. In the eight months since Vicki had died, I had not yet gone away for an entire day.

I made waffles in the waffle iron for Jessica before I left, but she hardly ate. "If you want anything, just ask Juana."

"Juana doesn't speak English."

"She understands; that's enough."

"Maybe for you it's enough."

"Honey, I told you, you can come. There's plenty of room on the bus. It's not too late for you to change your mind."

"It's not too late for you, either. There's going to be plenty of other leaders there. You don't have to go. You're just doing this to be mean to me."

I was ready for this. I had spent an hour with Sharon stealing myself. "Before she can leave you," Sharon said, "you'll have to