

Flatwoods

Photographs and Poetry
by Jim Cleveland

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When Mom was 92, she appeared at death's door. She kicked it shut and raved on for another six years.

I saw her frail head on the pillow and a second pending surgery for corroded arteries. The heart surgeon was speaking about odds.

But she recovered. Her gallant if cantankerous spirit chose to fight on and it was to be some years later, in December of 2010, when I finally called the coroner in the night to come collect her remains. She was virtually skin and bones by then. She had lost all capacities for living, all joy in living, and made her own choice this time.

As I was struggling to feed her and she was struggled to swallow one morning, she just pulled away, and insisted on making her assisted way to the bed. She would not be deterred.

She never left it again. She closed her eyes there, and remained there. She did not respond to my voice and she slept through her final hours.

Hospice helpers told us that she had made the choice, and they helped us through the last days and hours. They said that's the way it always happens. There was no quality of life remaining.

In those years as I helped out there, the hometown I left in 1956 came back to me in memories of people and events, attached to scenes that had changed surprisingly little over the years. I made photo images that were of interest to me. They appeared to make cultural statements in some way and seemed timeless as well. They seemed to represent a bygone era that is still with us. They seemed to say things about the people behind them.

But finally, just as surely as Mother passed in 2010, many of these images are now changed or gone as well.







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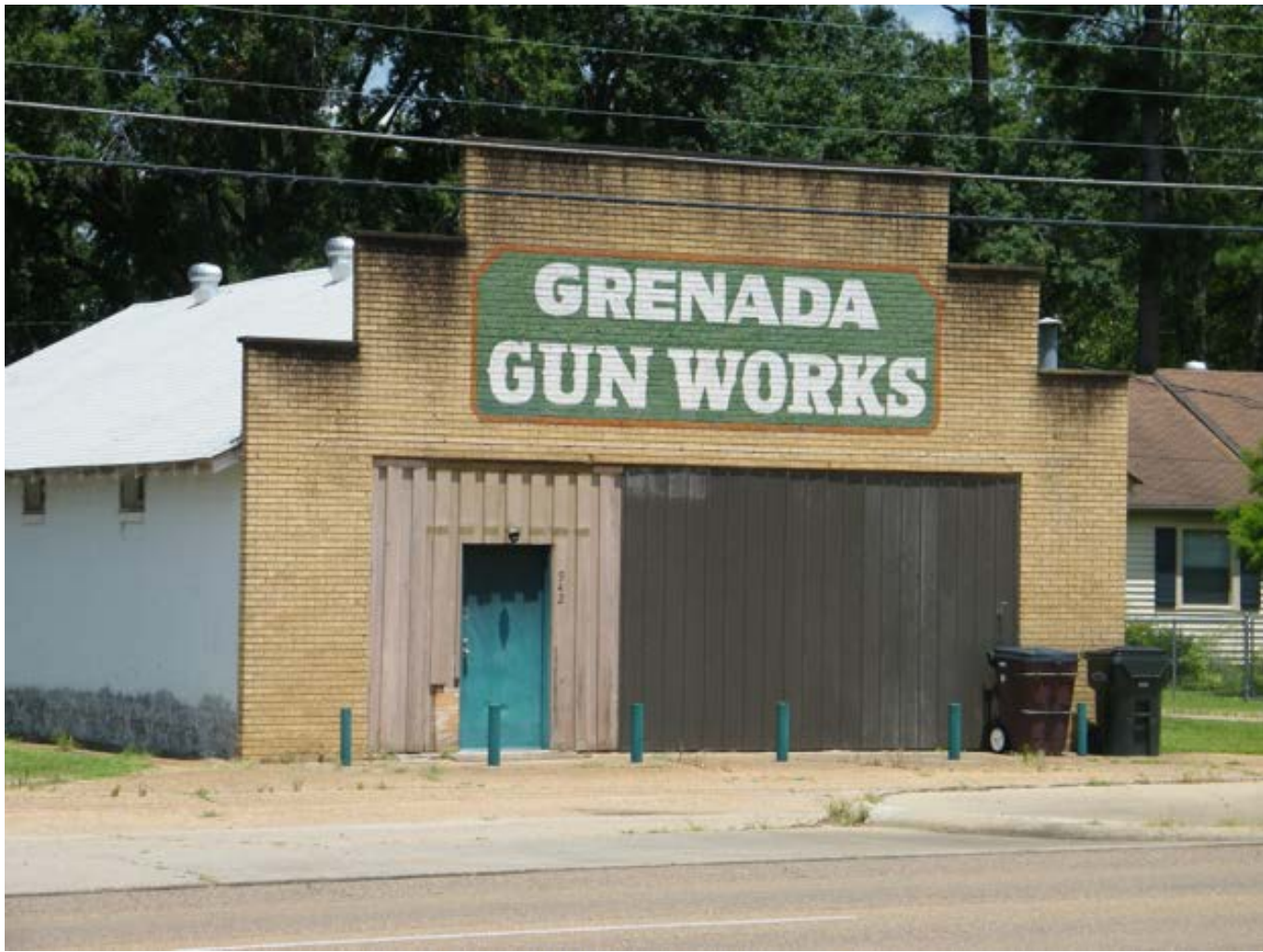






































































SHORTY'S BULLET: In 1955, we observed a bullet hole, by either BB or a .22, in the window of Shorty's barbershop on the Calhoun City square. There's where Shorty Bumgarner, cigarette hanging from lips, shaped my hair into a flat top and anchored it with pink butch wax. The hole remains there in 2016, though the building is vacant. Somebody recently said they thought Shorty was still cutting hair somewhere.















During drought, water level in the Grenada Lake Reservoir drops and creates a desert once inundated, a strange landscape for driving but not boating.















DOTS

In the end, there is no real history in one's head.
Only dots there,
Not connected
Little splashes of moments in time.
Just indelible etches that forever scar the mind
Not writing a history at all.
Why do we recall these instances
that happen in mere seconds?
They aren't traumatic or problematic.
They often amounted to nothing
But there must be something
that keeps them hanging around.
Forever.
Dots
on the mind's historic landscape.
connecting threads?
a tapestry to life?
Then dots will make beads to shuffle
in our restless fingers
while we say little prayers for ourselves.

OVALS

There is that class picture,
Packed away.
Pulled up here.
Forty-three of us in little ovals
Egg-like
in high school posterity.
Too many girls here died from breast cancer
In a land where field workers
Used to be white with cotton poison powder.
They called DDT 'drop dead twice'
And thought it was only for insects.
And outlawed for a long time now.
I ate greasy burgers in the window seat
in Helen's tiny café
And looked out over the hanging dead mist
Near dark when the wind was low.
A genocide for the boll weevil
And 'Better Living Through Chemistry.'
Another night I sat outside in a green 1957 Plymouth
and listened to The Great Pretender
And admired the rows of white cotton
that had been wrought across the road.
Billowy Southern lifeblood.

And there was Billy Dean Jones in an oval,
First to go, long ago,
His speeding pickup truck rammed an old concrete bridge.
I never knew on what road it was and didn't care to wonder,
Self-absorbed as a teen.
And I never talked to him any.
He was from out the country, and buried there someplace
And the rest of us in the little ovals will pass too.
When I pass on, I want to wake up in the heavens
and be perfectly round.
I don't want to have poisoned anyone here or been poisoned.
I want to drive at a moderate speed here
and get across all the bridges that show up before the last one.

THAT INSTANT

This is the place where I saved them all.
Just a spot on a little hill right out of town.
A drug store here where Uncle Gene's hamburger joint used to be,
although briefly that was.
He lived across the street and had a pen of bird dogs
Of which I didn't think too much, but he showed them proudly.
Now Uncle Gene was gone, first an invalid, like many others.
Now the mayor had a drug store there at this hilly spot.
And a dot of memory.
It started with this new kid in town,
A flashy red and white '55 Ford with a gutted muffler,
A sneering look, collar turned up.
His eyes slanted strangely
And our girls in the car.
Donna Jean was in there.
I think I remember Linda Nell.
and maybe Wanda Kay.
Showing his ass, he comes roaring past me on the hill.
He's crazy and he won't show me up and get around me.
No.
I nudged the accelerator.
The hill loomed
The obscene red Ford had no chance if anyone was coming.
I hit the brake
And the red car slipped around me to safety
As another fast car zipped by
in the breadth of a hairy breath of death.
I remember then that moment later in the R&L parking lot.
Wide-eyed, maybe trembling some over there
We would'na had a chance, she said, if you had'na hit the brakes.
She was scared-looking with dark eyes like a gentle doe
Peering through the car window.
I think now that I saved some lives with a quickening flash of brake
And I'm glad that in a split second,
I saved my own life from having to think about it.

FAMOUSLY

Those famous people that we brush against.
They make a permanent little impression.
A few seconds of flash.
Jimmy Carter in a rain hat reaches out his hand at a rainy airport
And I shoot his picture instead.
Dick Nixon waves those pudgy fingers right in front of me.
Victory sign that I'll see again when the helicopter whisked him away
from a disgraced White House.
V for victory, V for hippie peace, V for Nixon, V for Vendetta today.
Jimmy Buffet,
Laughing out loud in his trailer,
He and his entourage enjoying the absurdity of TV wrestling.
He wore short cut-offs and sat on the back of a chair.
I saw his balls hanging out
Memorable.
Here's Todd Rudgren
Grinning friendly with stringy long hair
Soon to do his new rock opera Utopia
in a big round coliseum that smelled of livestock shows.
My DJ friends brought in the Righteous Brothers, saw them briefly
And then they said the blonde one brandished a .45 in the car, a surprise.
Barry Goldwater in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, shook his hand.
Had just read Conscience of a Conservative
And it mixed into my white Southern hardcore upbringing.
John Denver.
He told me that Exxon never cleaned up the mess,
that if you picked up the rocks on the beach now you'd see the black oil
hidden just beneath the surface, a cosmetic job.
I wonder now if they sabotaged his plane, suspicious as I am.
And I thought about all the realities that live just below the veneer of plastic fame,
And they must smile and perform, lacquered and chosen.
And when fame fleets past we of the anonymous, not of fame
We ultimately see that fame is all temporary, in transit
like these moments that come to mind near famous people
and the fame is what makes the dot, black and indelible,
and one day they'll be nearly as anonymous as we are.

MERCHANTS

They were there all around the town square and beyond in 1956.
Listenbee's drug store, the owner a shiny bald soda jerk with a smile, Jimmie Lee's father.
Boland's
L.L. Lackey
Hathorn's
Lawrence Hayes and his Volunteer food store
Chandler's Drug Store remains today.
But not Sartain's Café
Shirley's Café
The Mayflower Café
The Mart Theatre, owned by Mart and Mary Ethel Mounger.
I had given them many coins over the years, for pieces of rolled cardboard that they just
retrieved again inside the swinging doors and a few yards away.
There was another chain, Woolworth's, with 'funny books' and loose candy displays,
candy corn overflowing gorgeously.
It was another Lackey enterprise. Now Henry Lackey, the kid, is a white-haired judge.
The Pryors, of course.
Pryor Funeral Home
Pryor Furniture Company
Pryor Chevrolet
Minnie Lee Pryor was choir director for the First Baptist Church.
Her sister was choir director for the Methodist Church.
The churches still stand facing each other diagonally.
Those lovely Pryor homes once sat within a walk to the two churches, adjoining one an-
other.
Now sold to others, a lawyer in one, someone with lots of cats in the other, and they filled
in the swimming pool.
Hawkins Motor Company sat just off the square
And for a time, my dad's DeSoto-Plymouth agency.
Those families are gone, Dad too, blown out of the Flatwoods on the time wind
And we have other things today, surrounding the hollowed out and near empty town
square with the quaint gazebo in the middle.
Subway. Sonic. Shell. BP. Dollar General. Fred's Dollar Store off the square.
And a lot of vacant and crumbling buildings on it.
And myself actually joining modernity, wishing for a Wendy's or a Taco Bell.
I feel the ghosts of the old merchants
And remember the day, as a kid,
When I sauntered to the back of a dark store
An old man sat unperturbed up front, with a newspaper.
I turned on the bare light bulb on the string back there
And roaches ran frantically left and right
From the frumpy round of hoop cheese
That sat there, hardening.
Harder times then.
Now we get slices of individually wrapped cheese
And if you don't want real cheese
You can get Sandwich Slices.
The Pryor Funeral Home
Remains
For people get older and die here.
Not busy being born, so busy dying
And in the meantime, they drive to the Wal-Mart
In Oxford
Or Grenada
Or Houston
Or Tupelo.
All those places that are out of town.
Other dots on the map.

JESSE VEAZY

We were dirty little kids
We sat by the big anthill
On either side
By that telephone pole,
Still here.
Here it is.
And we swatted them with our school pencils.
You know, he said,
It ought to be that we take one lick
And if we don't get him
He ought to go free.
It seemed reasonable in a way
But we thought no more of it.
The ants milled furiously
Not knowing one from another.
By chance they would become a splat
Or go on to mill furiously for another day.
They had appointed tasks as we do.
I don't recall another time
When I talked to that boy.
He was a grinner
But a loner.
Red pimples ravaged his cheeks.
He looked like Beavis
But only dangerous to ants.
We killed scores and then got bored and moved on.

FRAIL HEAD ON PILLOW

How long can she go
Beyond 92.
Boney unconscious face
Buried in a pillow
Stringy gray strands
Of hair askew
Old, very old,
And beyond the beauty shop
Or the mall or some café
I will move back down here
And take care of her
If she gets through surgery
For corroded arteries.
Dr. Purdon often strolled in
To say, hey, Myrtle.
You still here?
I'm still a'kickin'
With a sardonic grin.
She was a frail, sad face
In a pillow now.
I missed her pis and vinegar.

KNOCKED IN THE HEAD

Jimmy had a cantankerous daddy
All soured and sucking on a cigarette
Proprietor of a smoky corner café
That smelled of tobacco
And hamburger grease
A row of low stools
A row of clunky booths
And mini-jukeboxes at the table.
Mr. Shirley had a taxi too.
One day, mamma said,
He picked up a nigger and
He knocked him in the head with a hammer.
He ain't been right since.
All mean-faced
And who knows what went on in there,
in that dark, sour head.
And then came that accident with me and Jimmy,
Late night and after a night of beer-drinking in Carroll County honktonks.
Either the Lonesome Pine or the Yellow Dog or the J.T.'s.
Me asleep by now, head lolled back
And then Jimmy asleep at the wheel
and straight into a light pole just south of town.
After bursting through that windshield,
I sat dazed in blood and shattered glass
And said, yeah, I could get out
But couldn't, and fell away,
Blood burbling through bursted lips
Face ripped open here and there
Intermittedly barely awake
On a rumbling stretcher and into the clinic.
One eye squinting into the eyes of a doctor
And prickly pricks all over my face,
Strange smelling soap
A clap of rubber gloves
Female hand,
Big male fingers with cord and snippers.
Later, I limped around the house in a bathrobe
And Jimmy came to say how sorry he was
It's okay. It's okay. It's really okay.
Don't worry about anything at all, I said.

And then I was hearing that his demented daddy
Had exploded on him and sent him off.
The 1956 budget Plymouth was wrecked, and maybe the family.
He had a morose-faced mother,
Always looking away with
Her fingers on her lips.
I couldn't believe she had much to say.
Jimmy quickly went to live
With his uncle up near Booneville,
A big farm, they said,
And in later years I saw him,
Muscular and tall now
I forgot how many acres of soybeans
He had, but it was a lot.
And they were running some number of cattle too,
Cows to have calves
To become feeders
To get shipped up north
To be fattened in shit-filled lots
To be knocked in the head.
And fed to all.
The old Shirley Café later had a holy roller bible church.
inside it.
In the front window there are white curtains and a table display
Red and white and green plastic flowers
And praying hands.
It went out of business and now a lawyer has moved in.

WAITING

I am waiting here
For Mom to pass on.
I imagine nothing but the scenes
In front of me.
There is just about no change
Over more than fifty years
That the eye can readily discern, strange,
Except for all the vacant buildings
On the square, this subtraction process.
Just a small town, like others,
Passing away, much the same, a ragged remnant,
And leaving only the dotted thoughts
Of the scenes behind them in time.
No people to share the raggedness
Visual compositions to which they no longer
Paid any mind.
But there really had been great changes
Since 1956, my departure,
Just hidden away.
Air conditioning pulled people inside.
Television kept them there.
And there were personal computers now,
Also inside, not in view.
And frozen pizza to eat at home.
And cell phones
And video games
And pot smoking, a privacy of sharing,
And a greater variety
Of personal spirits and wine and beer

From merchants outside this dry county.
And many getting a continuing stream
of fixes, remedies of the tube
from preachers to pornography
to preachers being pornographic
and sharp-tongued judges
and sellers of sharpened
instruments of commerce.
All of this circus of circulation
boiling inside our houses,
at our fingertips
into our psyches
Our everyday everything and
In all of future, no other hope.
All brought into our cell
No outer hopes in our inner escapes
From the porches of life.
Come swing with me.
The community outside
Seems vacant and empty,
Populated with ghosts
And hardly no more community
At all.
You're inside feeding and dulling
Your heads, it seems
Except when neighbors meet up
In the Piggly Wiggly
And block the aisle
Catching up with things
They may have missed
While festooning themselves
Into their home entertainment
Meccas.
And outside, things seem much the same
But petrified
As those decades-ago.
Old brick and mortar buildings
Don't change too much
From their emptiness.
Neither do we.



