

Lee Bloxom

*Lee Bloxom is a local writer, photographer, and documentary artist
who has taught writing at the Visual Arts Center since 2002.
She is currently a doctoral candidate in VCU's Media, Art, and Text program.*

COURSES & WORKSHOPS

<i>The Recorded Human Voice: Using Interviews in Radio, Drama, and Text</i> Honors College Seminar, Virginia Commonwealth University	Spring 2011
Professional Writing in the Arts: Proposals & Artist Statements Writing Instructor for Sculpture & Extended Media Senior Seminar, VCU	2006, 2009
Creative Writing Workshops: <i>Writing Immersion, Writing from Life, Playing with Words, and Intro to Fiction</i> Creativity Workshops: <i>The Artist's Way, Creativity as Provocative Magic</i> Visual Arts Center of Richmond	2002 – present
Literary Arts Department Chair / Curriculum Development Appomattox Regional Governor's School for the Arts and Technology	1999 – 2002

GRANTS

Virginia Foundation for the Humanities/PNC Foundation <i>20th Century Farm Life in Accomack County: an Oral History Project</i>	2009-2010 \$8,000
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FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Graduate Whitesell Critical Essay Award	2010
"Under the Jujube Tree" (play) Honorable Mention, Wits End Play Festival competition	2009
"Invocation" (poem) nominated for Pushcart Prize	2008
"Witness" (poem) Honorable Mention, Writers at the Beach conference competition	2008

Personal Essay, published in *The Sweetbay Review*, December 2007

Excerpt from "Some Stories Grandmothers Don't Tell"

My grandfather has been dead twenty years when she tells me their love story. How Brantley came to an event at the schoolhouse where she taught first grade. How they left the second floor at the same time, down opposing staircases, and how he laughed in her face when they met at the bottom of the stairs.

Miss Nannie Miles wasn't interested in him. She was thirty years old, an unmarried schoolteacher, but she was far from desperate. Times were hard with the Depression, yes, but she had work and a place to live on the family farm. Every summer she traveled by car and ferry across the Chesapeake Bay to Williamsburg to take classes at the College of William and Mary. Brantley was old enough to be her father.

"Why would I want to go out with that old man?" she told her friend. She had to be convinced to go out with him. On their first date, they went to the movies. The film was set in New York City.

She says he leaned over and whispered, "That's where we'll go on our honeymoon." This time she laughed in his face.

Exactly a year later, they were in New York City, celebrating their honeymoon. She never taught school again.

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Every weekday, tall and lanky as Abe Lincoln, my father crosses the highway at a jog and walks briskly across Mappsville's town square through the garage and into his mother's house for lunch. On most summer days, my mother, brother and I join them around the dining room table for a meal of fried flounder or chicken and dumplings with fresh yeast rolls and boiled white potatoes or butter beans. We always drink sweetened iced tea.

My grandmother's rocker sits near the door to the screened-in side porch. On cooler days, once the work of lunch is done, she opens the door, sits in her rocker and reads her Bible, a well-worn modern edition. Behind her, a huge fern spills out of a pot big as a washing machine and fills the bay window. My brother and I are scolded for touching it and bruising its leaves. We are allowed, however, to play with anything else we can find. All Dad's toys and books and puzzles we drag out of closets and hiding places. There are WWII era guns and tanks, a stuffed monkey whose ear we tear off, wooden puzzles of farm animals in a large crock, a movie projector with 1940's era cartoons, and lots of wonderful picture books like the Uncle Wiggly series and The Little Brown Bear.

My grandmother's house, a three-story Victorian, towers over Mappsville's town square. Outside her doorway, eighteen-wheeled tractor-trailers hum past on the four-lane road, a blur at sixty mph. Inside the drawn curtains, it is 1940, the world of my father's childhood.

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My grandmother decides that I need to attend a funeral before I have to attend one for someone I care about. I am twelve and she loads me in the front seat of her big black Buick and takes me to a stranger's funeral. I sit next to her in a darkened funeral home on a folding chair; a minister I don't know reads from the Bible and says a few words. I suppress a giggle. Why is no one crying? This man had been old, but didn't anyone here care that he is dead? I guess my grandmother knew this corpse, but I didn't. Everyone attending this funeral is older than my parents. After the hushed service, we follow other cars slowly in a line to the cemetery behind Downing's United Methodist Church. Under a postcard blue sky with white fluffy clouds and a stiff wind, we bury the stranger with a few more words I've heard read before. Then we climb back into her Buick and drive away.

I understand her logic later, when the first funeral I attend for someone I care about is hers.

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I am six hundred miles away at college when my grandmother gets sick. My mother chides her for not getting up, preferring to believe that my grandmother is lazy than to entertain the possibility of a terminal illness. Shingles mask the cancer until it fills her body cavity with black fluid, leaving her nauseated when she moves.

I finish my junior year in college and come home about the time she is finally taken to the hospital. Alone with her, I lean against the hospital room wall and let it hold me up. She sits weakly on the edge of the bed, body swollen, round and painful, and she asks two haunting questions. "What was it about? What was my life about?"

We are crying. I want her to know the answer. I am the child. She my beloved grandmother, the woman who squirrels dimes and quarters in her kitchen cabinet for me to spend on junk food at the grocery store next door, the woman who takes the time to tell me stories, the woman who comforts me when I fall. She taught me to read. She is supposed to have the answers.

I tell her, "You loved us. That matters more than anything." She has loved us, completely and well. She loves people with an active, often silent love. She feeds people and remembers people with cards and letters and she visits people. She listens. I tell her this matters to me, to everyone.

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My grandmother dies quietly at home on a hot summer night. Her bed, in the parlor that adjoins the dining room, is just ten feet from the table where we have shared so many meals. We care for her ourselves. My mother and a woman my grandmother sheltered as a teenager administer the morphine she needs for the pain. It causes her to see people and animals we can't see. A few days before she dies, she sees my grandfather.

...

Twenty-six years have passed since we cried together in her hospital room. I believe her love mattered, but her questions haunt me. What price did she pay for her selfless love? Did she give from her soul's deepest desire or had she been derailed, captured even, and therefore lived a less than authentic life?

Some stories grandmothers don't tell.



On the far side of the Chesapeake Bay, an isolated peninsula marks the eastern boundary of Virginia. The rural farming community on this peninsula was the local of my childhood. Since May 2009 I have been making aural recordings in this geographically distinct region known as the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

I expected to hear about plowing behind a team of mules and scratching out potatoes. I did not expect to hear retired farmers speak of the loneliness of modern farming, of how 5000 acres used to support 50 families and now barely supports one.

Since October 2009, I have posted excerpts from the interviews on the blog *Eastern Shore Stories*.

Interview Excerpt: On turkeys, eggs, and afternoon naps

Daddy raised chickens and he sold eggs. And he said that he didn't go by the market price on eggs. He said no egg was worth more than five cents, and he wasn't gonna charge anybody more than five cents an egg. So that was 60 cents a dozen, and he sold chicken eggs for 60 cents a dozen, and he couldn't supply all of his customers. They all wanted eggs. ...

Mother ... raised turkeys down at White's Neck, and one day ... a storm came up in the afternoon, and she had this little flock of turkeys that were kind of back of the house down this roadway that – they were a right little old distance from the house. She had a little coop down there, and a storm came up in the afternoon, and honey, she ran off there kiting it, because she was afraid her little turkeys would get drowned. They were outside. And she did get wet before she got back to the house, but when I saw her coming – I was standing out on the back porch. The back porch was screened in ... and when she came up the steps, I opened the door, held the door open for her, and when I hit that door, I got stung – lightning struck – I got stung and I kind of shook a little bit, you know. But ... it soon wore off. But I got her in the house, 'cause it was getting stormy – lightning and thunder and stuff going on, and I didn't want her out in that, but she got her little turkeys in. She didn't want them to get wet. They were the prettiest little things, those little fuzzy things.

Frances (my sister) said that, when I was little, I would bother the egg basket. Mother would keep the egg basket in the pantry, and the pantry opened on the porch, and I would go in there, and I would bother the eggs. She told me – I guess it was so – she said they got so that they would put some feathers in the egg basket. And I was scared of feathers, so I stopped bothering the eggs.

I guess I was four or five years old. Mother used to put me upstairs in the afternoon to take a nap, and I didn't like that afternoon nap – oh, that was terrible. And she would put me upstairs, and this bedroom window opened so that I could see the yard, and we had this orchard out back that had peaches and apples and plums and all sorts of good things in it. Mother and Frances would go out in the afternoon and they'd walk around the yard, and they'd go to the orchard, you know, and they'd pick some fruit, and oh, they were just having a ball. And I thought, oh if I could just get out there with them. I didn't understand why she put me up there – I had to have that nap. But she would – I just had to have that nap. She'd put me up there, and she thought I was asleep, bless her heart, but I was watching every step they made.

from an interview with Ruth Justis Thornton, summer 2009.

For more excerpts: easternshorestories.wordpress.com



Excerpt from *Rory Jones* (unpublished novel)

I woke up with the left side of my face flat on a dirty tile floor. Without moving my body, I opened my eyes and they slowly focused on the angle where the tiles met the concrete walls of a holding cell. My palms were stinging; I must have burned them where I'd touched the bars. There were no windows so there was no way to know whether it was day or night or how long I had been there. The only noise was a faint buzz from the bars that formed the fourth wall of the cell.

If I touched the bars, I would pass out again. I had shocked myself on them twice already. The vomit I was tasting ... okay, I was panicked. I had to think. I had to calm down enough to think. If not, I was going to throw myself at the bars again.

Since I was a little girl, I've been able to do things. Things other people can't do. I can make objects move and bring them to me through the air. I can make water boil when I'm angry. I have learned to hide these gifts – it's safer that way. Sometimes they – well, I'm 14, an orphan, a girl ... let's just say it can be helpful to be able to hurl a brick at someone and have them not know it came from me. These abilities, whatever they are, they've kept me safe.

Until now.

I moved off the floor and onto the cot. Even though my hands were throbbing, I slipped one into the back pocket of my jeans to check for the one picture I have of my mom and me. It was still there. That helped.

Time to take inventory. The cot I was sitting on was bolted to the concrete wall. On it, a thin mattress, a thinner scratchy blanket. There was a toilet with no lid in the corner. A partial roll of toilet paper hung on the flush handle. Nice of them to provide paper. A camera mounted in the corner of the ceiling next to the bars. I hadn't noticed it. How had I missed the surveillance camera? The red light was on. They were watching me.

A scuffling noise made me glance at the corridor. A black mouse was sitting on its hind legs outside the cell. It seemed to be studying the bars and the camera.

As I watched, the mouse shimmered and disappeared in a sort of blurry, noiseless tornado that grew in size, until it slowed and a young Asian woman seemed to form out of the cloud in front of me. She raised a finger to her lips to signal silence and gestured toward the camera.

I don't know why her appearing like that didn't scare me. Logically it should have. This bare cell with its camera – that scared me. Her changing appearance didn't.

I lay down and shielded my face with my arm so I could watch without tipping off whoever was watching me through the camera. She nodded approval, closed her eyes, and began to tremble. Anger radiated from her. She shimmered and changed form again, this time a black hummingbird. The feeling of anger intensified, seemed to match the bird's rapid wing movement. I let myself feel anger too, adding it to hers, trying to release the control I keep over my abilities. The water in the toilet bubbled – and then, big bursts and steam. A second or two later, boiling water erupted from the toilet and flooded the cell floor. The current from the bars sparked and hissed as water hit them. I saw an arc between the top bar and the camera, heard the camera crack. The red light went out and the door to the cell popped, water pushing it open. I sat up then and assessed the situation. If I stepped off the bunk now, I would be electrocuted. I heard boots, running up stairs – it sounded like they were coming from a lower floor. I heard one door open, then another. The hallway was flooded with flowing water. A man screamed. He must have touched the water. It was still flowing out of the toilet, and it was flooding the cell and the hallway.

I could make out shouted words now. "Man down." And "Turn off the power. Turn off the power." While chaos flared down the hall, the hummingbird darted into my cell and the woman rematerialized sitting next to me on the cot.

"I'm Jin. Any ideas?"

"Who ... what are you?"

"I'm a Mut like you. We've only got a few minutes. They're going to cut off the power, so they can get up here. Once the power's out, we go. Can you change form yet?"

"You mean like you just did?"

"You haven't gone through the passage."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Have you turned fifteen yet?"

Oh that. "No. I will in about eight months."

"Damn," she said. "Can you go through walls?"

"I don't think so."

That's when we heard the power shut down. Water was still flowing from the toilet, more slowly now, but the buzz was gone.

"Okay, this is it. Follow me. We're going to try to go through the elevator doors and down the shaft. Maybe, if we hold hands, I can get you through. You certainly helped me blow up the toilet, so I imagine you can do that much."

We stepped off the bunk into the water and headed down the hallway. There was a body on the floor, blocking the door but also holding it open for us. I wondered if he was dead.

Witness

you laugh like a thousand crystal bells
and rush like water into your life

I want to memorize everything about you,
my miracle, ordinary as rain

already I forget
how you looked red and sticky at birth
the first time you climbed up the sliding board alone
and the time you ran straight at the ocean without fear

was your first word really *moon*?