That red dirt road. 2010

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That Red Dirt Road

Poetry by Kay Sanders

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

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For my parents, Houston and Nell Nobles, and for the aunts, especially Aunt Lillie, with thanks for the stories that made me who I am

Contents

Perspective

Remember when you chased your cousins through rows
of graves, chanting rhymes
When you skipped through the cemetery tagging
tombstones, keeping count
When you balanced on low cement walls that divided
family plots, arms outstretched,
teetering, falling, shouting laughter
When you ran a curious finger over deep
indentations, cool inscriptions of a lifetime
Remember when you ran joyful through the dead

Let Me Have That Red Dirt Road

You can have this modern, cement bridge, with its supports
and side rails,
the way it begins long before the creek comes into view
and continues long after the creek has been left behind.

Let me have that old plank bridge I feared as a child,
so close to the creek I could hear the water licking its lips,
see vines straggle from bent-over trees like an old man's beard
dragging in his red-eye gravy.

A stylish brick church stands there now,
its windows stained and pure, organ throned on high,
the building humming an air-conditioned tune.

Peel away these brick additions and let me have
that old clapboard church encased within,
windows open to catch the breeze,

air filled with the rustle of funeral-home fans,
piano chords so lusty the vase of flowers marches
to Zion right along with the congregation.

You can have this road that cuts away the side of the mountain,
this blacktop road with Burger Kings and Dairy Queens
and rejuvenating
Scandia Spas, canned music blaring all the way to Birmingham.

Let me have that red dirt road that winds through the graveyard
back into the hills, plots of graves lined with low brick walls
where children teeter and learn to balance and listen to their elders
    talk of the dead.

Let me have that grove of hickories, rough plank tables underneath,
loaded with platters of Aunt Lillie's pan-fried chicken,
Aunt Mary's devil's food cake, the chocolate dark as a country night,

my mother's sweet potato pie, jars of Aunt Pearl's pickled peaches
lined up like soldiers for review, and from the church window
the harmony of a gospel quartet calling reveille

for "that great gettin' up morning, fare thee well, fare thee well."

Communion

Small country church,
    steeple piercing the pale
sky, alabaster jewel
    set among grey stones,
some leaning like hands
    lowered in blessing
over the pallid cloth
    of the dead,
some upright, gleaming
    in their newness,
jutting from raw
    exposed earth,
markers for the still
    mounded below.

Small country church,
    once a year calling
its children home—home
    to feed upon remembered
blood and shared bread
    of the long- and the newly-
dead, all of us shoots
    from the stem
of a common root
    following the call
piped through our veins
    back to our beginnings,
to the endings
    of our forebears' lives.

Remembering Aunt Essie's Hair

In the powdered red dirt I stoop,
a child on the edge
of the family plot, searching
for cone-shaped depressions in sand.

I drag my stick around the rim
of one, in a circle wide and slow,
spiral down, chanting.

Doodle bug, doodle bug,
fly away home,
your house is on fire
and your babies are gone.

The rhyme ends
as the stick reaches centerpoint,
exposing a small, grey bug.

Miniscule legs flail, fold
inward, the body rolled into a tight
smooth ball. A ball like the hair gathered
at the nape of Aunt Essie's neck,

strands pulled tight to the bone,
lines etched on her face
like names and dates on stone.

I follow the aunts
through the graveyard,
hear them once again
unfold their tales:

How these dead walk the earth,
wean their babies to work in field and mill,
gather wild greens and hickory nuts,

suffer snakebite and live
and play the harmonica,
loosened strains of their tune flowing
down the slim back of night.

Embers

Mid-March, and already the mill is hot,
clack of machinery a constant roar,
sweat glands pumping overtime
to cool the heated blood of first-shift hands
waiting for release by the two o'clock whistle.

Aunt Lillie trudges out the gate,
empty lunch sack clutched in hand,
bits of cotton clinging to her hair like ashes,
faded work dress cinched at the waist,
belt appearing, disappearing,
between bellows of bosom and stomach,
a softness belied by sternum and pelvic bone.

Late spring, the family comes together
for Reunion Day. The uncles play cards
behind muscadine vines while we children
follow the aunts through the graveyard,
their funeral parlor fans stirring
the air's warm breath as Aunt Lillie tells
the stories that resurrect the dead.

Dressed in her best black crepe,
traces of the mill combed from her hair,
the flecks her own true grey,
she loosens her belt, opens her purse,
extracts a bottle of stomach pills.
Give me a sip of that Co-Cola, Sugar,
and hold this pocketbook, if you will.

I hand her my Coke, really Orange Crush,
but we rarely distinguish flavor by name.
She knuckles one hand at the side of her waist,
tilts the bottle to her lips,
the hairs of the mole on her cheek twitching.
We pass our possessions back again,
easy as thoughts slipping back and forth
across the boundaries of time. She gathers
the purse in the crook of one arm,
me in the other. *Thanks, Dumpling*,
and she kisses the top of my head.
The lines round her eyes crinkle,
flecks of light spark from their depths,
kindle mine.

Aunt Ida

Your house sits low
to the ground
weathered and grey
as the rainy day
you stay in the kitchen
baking giant teacakes
on the old wood stove
that sends up smoke
smudging the sky,
marking your place
on the horizon.

In the rain-paused still
of late afternoon
you stand
by the porch,
your frame spare,
strong as wire,
reach out
your roughened hand
to the patch
of prince's feather,
caress its flaming torch

that not even this tumbling
stream of years can quench.

Blood Kin

I don't remember when I realized
that a white rose worn on the lapel
for Mother's Day meant, in our small
country church, that your mother was dead,

but when my mother told me to pick two
white roses from Aunt Lillie's bush
outside the front room window and two
roses from the red bush, I knew

that my sister and I would wear the red,
and I knew that thorns from both
would prick my fingers, draw blood.

Letters Written in Longhand

Looking through my mother's old cookbook,
published in celebration
of Alabama's sesquicentennial,

I come across divider pages,
the backs blank when the book was new,
filled now with her handwritten copies of recipes,

and suddenly I am propelled into her presence
just by the sight of her handwriting,
feathery lines that float across the page,

familiar as my own
heartbeat. Familiar

as her letters written in longhand,
a script that travels across the years
as inexorably as it once traced

the northward curve of the continent
to find me here in Wisconsin.
And I marvel at a thing so simple that joins

two spirits no longer present
to each other in the flesh.

Aunt Pearl's Hill

Halfway up the side of the hill her house
with its foundation of stone extending
to form the sides of the porch, stone
columns at each end to support

the low-slung roof, a country house,
natural outgrowth of wood and rock
to shelter a large family, gone now.
As a child, I would begin to watch

out the window of the car, past
the graveyard, across the bridge,
the dark green swimming hole
overhung by a sturdy branch,

along the pasture with clumps
of cows resting in the shade
beside the winding creek,
then the curve and my heart

would begin to beat faster
because I knew soon, soon
it would come into view,
Aunt Pearl's hillside banked

with a carpet of pink blossoms
drifting down the hill, a mass
of abundant, low-growing plants
they called the common thrift,

kept all these years in a chamber deep
inside against days of storm and loss.

Playing Cards and Drinking Coke in the Storm Pit in the Middle of the Night in the Middle of What Might Have Been a Tornado

There's not any need to do this, Lillie,
my mother would grumble
as Aunt Lillie rousted us out of bed
and we grabbed shorts and shirts and made a mad
dash from the porch to the storm pit,
Aunt Lillie, flashlight in hand,
lifting the heavy, slanted door in the ground.

But there was no arguing with Aunt Lillie
when she had her mind made up.

Even my dad, unperturbed as always, eventually
made his way out because he liked sitting around
the stacked case of Cokes covered with oilcloth and used as a table,
smoking his Lucky Strikes, playing rummy with us kids
as we poured packets of salty peanuts
into our bottles of Coke,
swigged and crunched and laughed,
the kerosene lamp throwing weird shadows
onto the walls, the roar of the wind shut out.

Talk of the Dead

How Pearl has put sweet peas on brother Bob's grave
How he loved the way they climbed, tendrils clinging to stone

How he sat in Nellie's old green rocker when he came back home
laughed so hard at his own jokes that the chair broke beneath him

How he never talked about the wife and children he left up North
walked out one day like Papa before him—never looked back

How Papa would have been a different man if Mama hadn't died
How he did everything he could think of those years she was sick

Moved up yonder to Tennessee where she died and he buried her
couldn't afford to bring her back home—never got over it

How with Papa coming and going, mostly gone,
Lillie, not but fourteen herself, took over the younguns still at home

How Papa paid a price, said Maud, for getting mixed up with Oscar
and his moonshine business—never could say no to his brother

How he come to miss Chester's funeral hiding out from the sheriff
How Chester taken sick and died before Louella could get the
doctor down

Couldn't nobody find Papa to tell him so they brought Chester on
out here
Papa watching the procession go by, knowing it was his own
son passing

And now they lie in a row, separated from those they loved
Mama somewhere in Tennessee
Chester's Louella married again
Bob's wife Lord knows where
side by side at the mercies of the aunts who walk and talk

among the graves while the children play in the sand.

52 Monroe Street
Tallapoosa, GA
August 15, 1951

Dear Aunt Lillie,

The packige you sent us came today.
I was sitting on the porch steps playing rummy
with my new ~~friend~~ freind Jane. She lives
across the street and has a twin brother (!)
Jane says they are NOT identical.
His name is Monroe and wen I called him
Monroe monkee face like Jane does
do you know what my mother (YOUR sister
Nell did? She made me stay in my room
the HOLE afternoon and I had to apaluhgize
besides. That is Not Fair if you ask me.

Anyway Sue was way up in the memosa
tree (spell? You know the one with pink
fethery flowers that tickel your nose?
Anyway I ran and got the sizors. Mother said
I could cut the string but she made me wate
for Sue and let her cut the paper open.
I <u>did</u> get there FURST you know.

I liked the blue best and Sue liked
the green but we had to do eeny meeny
miney mo on the yellow and red.
I got the yellow and Sue got the red.
Mother says the plad will look very nice
made up into dresses. And white socks
go with everything. School starts
in just TWO WEEKS!!! I wish
we could come to your house again.

Love

Your ~~neice~~ neese,
Katie-Did (but I didn't!) (privit joke)

P.S. Daddy says the cotten mill
gives you a vacashun just like his mill.
Do you think you could come see us?
Even though it <u>is</u> a 100 miles away?

P.S.S. Me and Sue will sleep
on pallits and give you our bed
(we didn't wet it but once this HOLE
summer, so please please please please come.

Weather Map

A flash on CNN shows the weather map
eighteen degrees in Birmingham
and then on to other places across the nation
but I am frozen to the spot
a place no longer on the map
    a cotton mill village
    boundaries absorbed now
    by the next town over spreading
    in a cacophony of six-lane traffic
    lined by franchise shopping
    all the way to Birmingham.

A spark kindled in my heart warms
to that place in the southland
where the temperature has dipped
to eighteen degrees
    a three-room house in 1950
    across the tracks from Buck Creek Cotton Mill
    where we wake—my little sister and I—to see
    Aunt Lillie with her back to the space heater
    chenille robe hitched up to let the red glow
    of the gas flames warm her legs
    and she tells us once again

    how a girl she knew
    got too close to a space heater
    and her flannel gown caught fire
    and she burned to death.

She tells us this story often
cautions us to keep our distance
shakes her head earnestly
her flint-grey curls
like the excess bits of fiber
that cling to the windows
of the mill where she works

a spinner of cotton and stories
strong threads
that weather time and the map.

Aunt Ida's Antimacassars

Some say she led an uncultured life
    tucked away from civilization
        in her tin-roof house,
wind-drift of wood smoke
    seeping into walls and shed,
        outhouse connected to back door

by a line stretched shoulder-high
    so that blind Uncle Barber
        could wend his way out
and back again through kitchen
    and parlor to front porch
        to sit in a ladder-back chair,

air filled with his rhythmic thumping
    against the wall, punctuated
        by zing of snuff spit into zinc pail,
tang of turnip greens boiling in a pot,
    crusty smell of cornpone crisping
        in the wood-burning stove,

seeing still through clouds
    that filmed his eyes
        the lovely sway of goldenrod,
its gilded plumes
    that screened the barbed-
        wire fence beside the red dirt road,

the tensile strength of Ida's hands,
    wielding axe upon cords
        of wood, crochet hook upon yards
of thread—how delicate the lace
    that lay light as her fingers
        upon faded furnishings,

their backs,
    their arms,
        their bodies,
lit by a fire she did not let go out.

Childhood Twilight

Running through the shadows
in a game of hide and seek,
the thrill of disappearing,
the specter of being lost,

darting behind trees,
hunching beneath bushes,
air blue with the smudge
of distant adult conversation,

creaking chain of swing,
concealed cough,
a rustle in the branches,
a sudden dash to the steps

and we're out in the open,
home free, we think.

The Uninvited

In their seedy finery they sidle along the tables—
there must be a dozen of them, all sizes, all ages.

Is it their out-of-fashion clothes, clean but
too long in the waist, too short at the ankle?

Is it their hair, straight and oily,
that lies in strings to their shoulders

or their eyes, small and close,
that never quite meet your own?

Is it the smile pasted on long faces,
exposing teeth chipped and rotting

that sets them there, forever lodged
in a corner of my mind?

They clutch tin plates to hollow chests,
empty stomachs their only offering

to the feast, their approach marked
by thunder ridged on the brows of our elders.

We frown, too, straining at the leashes
of enforced politeness, but now we know

why Aunt Mary hides her blue-star brownies
under the table among baskets and boxes

next to reserve jugs of ice tea and tells us
we may get one when we finish our meal.

Is it the gap I detect, even as a child,
between the commonly unaccepted

and the preacher's text that day—
go out into the highways and hedges

and compel them to come in,
that my house may be filled?

Looking for Nancy

My mother presses her hands
to her cheeks, mouth ajar,
eyes gathered to their center ridge.

"Goldie," she breathes.
"Oh, Lord, it's Goldie!"

I lean against the rough bark of the hickory
shading the tables spread end to end,
smooth the folds of my new dotted swiss,

a child aloof from women
too old to squeal.

They rush to embrace, hold each other off,
hug again, laughing or crying,
I can't tell which, in a flurry of flowered print.

I watch with the measuring eye
of a twelve-year-old, unable to see
my mother and her cousin as children,

unable to embrace joy
and sadness in one. And now

I reach across the gap
of fifty years looking for Nancy,
longing to grab her hand,

skip through the graveyard,
chasing our boy cousins around the bend.

Aunt Pearl, Her Voice

How the chickens, pecking and clucking,
roamed the hill back of her house!

How the rooster rang me awake those early
summer mornings from a drift of dreamless

sleep. How her voice, soft and slow,
penetrates the passage of years as she tells

again the story, how her late-life child,
my cousin Jim, survived burns in a fire

that shriveled his arm and scarred
his face, her voice soft and slow,

centers drawn out, edges rounded.
How she dabs the corners of her mouth

with a handkerchief bound with lace—
I never see the blotches of brown

that surely were there, stains
from the snuff that she dips.

How she pauses in contemplation
of the story not yet finished,

then tells of the sudden death
of her husband, Uncle Zeb, leaving

her with eight children and a farm.
And then I knew, I hear her still,

why God gave me that baby, and I,
with a late-life child of my own,

with losses abrupt and searing,
a part of me hears the parallel.

Spirits

They slip through the fringes,
ghostly figures
I cannot clearly see
in the fading light
at the edge of the woods.

A second sight fills in
muscle, bone, skin,
chin delicately carved,
eyes dark as stones
set in pools of pearl.

They move with purpose
through these trees,
shifting
from still and watchful
to a slow dance

with brittle branches,
stripping back the bark,
searching.
They call to me.
They wait and browse,

move and browse.
Some days they dash
into the depths
and vanish, some days
they simply fade

into shadow. One day,
some day, I will follow.

Along Back Roads

Sunday afternoons we pile in the car,
leave behind the Birmingham highway,
traffic and malls and neon signs,
head for the back roads, dirt roads

that mark our route with a cloud
of dust, pursued by a moving cloud
of red, as though we've turned
our backs on the promised land.

But our dad knows
where the wild grapes grow,
sprinkled like dew among vines
from time out of mind.

He stops the car by the side of the road,
doors fly open, we spill out,
plunge among tendrils, plucking,
popping muscadines into our mouths,

sucking the honeyed fruit whole from the skins,
spitting remnants onto the ground.
Plucking, popping, swallowing till
lips and fingers are painted purple. Later

we find a deserted pasture
where a lone tree stands.
Dad climbs it, shakes the limbs,
and pecans rain down like manna.

We gather them in our palms,
shells smooth, full of promise.
Then—crack, against each other,
extract the sweetmeat, the milky

sweet meat, eat our fill. Later
we come to a creek, roll up our pants,
wade in the pebble-strewn shallows,
laughing, splashing. We dry off in the sun,
clamber in the back seat
and watch out the window
as the car ploughs through the ford,
parting the waters, labors up the bank.

We never ask, on these Sunday rides,
are we there yet? Somehow we know.

Kay Sanders first connected with Wisconsin sitting at her fourth-grade desk in the deep south, reading *Little House in the Big Woods*, never dreaming that Wisconsin would one day become her home. She grew up hearing her mother and her maternal aunts recite poetry, sing songs, argue, tell stories, and quote scripture, sealing her destiny as a poet.

After earning her bachelor's degree in history from Auburn University and completing graduate work there, she married her German professor, moved to Wisconsin, and raised a family of five children. She worked a variety of jobs including time spent as a substitute teacher, church secretary, and proofreader and typist of graduate theses, before retiring in 2007 as Lay Ministry Coordinator for her church.

Her work has been published in *Wisconsin Poets' Calendar*, *Fox Cry*, *Free Verse*, and *Wisconsin People and Ideas*. She is the recipient of three Wisconsin Regional Writers' Association jade rings for essay and poetry; won various awards with the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets; and has won awards in the poetry contests of *Wisconsin People and Ideas*. She is currently working on a second poetry manuscript entitled *Traveling Light* and resides in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

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