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Issue #39, supported with a grant from the North Carolina Arts Council, includes a showcase of work by African-American writers, edited by Lenard D. Moore.

Work by some of the contributors to the issue is sampled below.

Linda Beatrice Brown	Beverly Fields Burnette	L. Teresa Church
Angela Belcher Epps	Chantal James	Willie James King
Valjeanne Jeffers-Thompson	Lenard D. Moore	Netia T. Raye	Gina M. Streaty

LINDA BEATRICE BROWN

I Pray God Gonna Read My Quilt

For My Ancestors Who Need Voice

Read my quilt Lord. See it for the truth.
What you see is a old raggy thing, made from scraps here and there,
Gathered because that's what I had to use, that's maybe all I had to use,
And what I had to lose.
Read it like a map, like a puzzle, like the deep waters of a black river.
It's deep, deeper than all the words I can say about who I am.

Where the African sun burned down on the slave coffle, where they took my skirt that wove the brown earth into mud cloth and tore it off my maidenhood and threw it in the dust, and I was pulled naked onto a boat to hell. And where they ripped up the kente cloth for head bands to keep the sweat from their eyes.

Read it where I never again saw my children, and the screams of my heart made the ocean cry, the storms that shook the boat belonged to my heart, my lost heart, my no longer heart, my heart I threw up on the wooden deck, and there is nothing to cover my nakedness, and let a hole be here in the quilt in its place.

Read my quilt. The rough buckram, that wrapped my stolen gun, I took when the word went out that Nat was hung. The mud streaked osnburg they called Negro cloth, the blooded knife and the whip marks on the shirt.

Read my quilt. The black silk dress I was handed by mistress because it was threadbare and sweat marks under the arms and she wouldn't wear it; put a piece of that in your mind; that she handed to me when they put my baby in the ground, too late, doctoring too late. And she made me wear it, an it stinkin like her. She say I wanna be a lady I can wear that dress. Mas give me that baby but I loved my baby anyway cause he a chile and what did he know, and read the blue and white flour sack they put my chile in when he was took, my chile in his early grave who had to wear a flour sack, all they had on him in that wooden box.

Read my quilt where I did find my way to freedom until they tried to take me back to hell and I killed the devil with pleasure and my feed-sack shirt red with my blood, showered all over me, and the last time I saw my Sudie she was cryin in the doorway dressed in her checkered indigo that she so proud of and waving into the dark night.

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Linda Beatrice Brown, continued

Read my quilt. See my deerskin dress that went to bury my heart away from all I ever knew and all I ever cared for. To a place I never heard of and how could that be home? My beaded head piece dangling in the dust after it was pulled off my head by the wachisu who didn't want me to be decorated. "Filthy Indian beads" he picked up to sell later.

Read where my deerskin moccasins walked to Oklahomhell from North Carolina and there was no more leather but just holes and where grandmother's feet blistered and ran and wrapped in rags she laid down and said no more and died, and where snow was my blanket and death my partner and I did not care because my man was gone, with his breech cloth and his strength that I needed. Half Moon was dead or lost or stolen and gone and all I had was his face in my heart. And some say he fought back and they took him to be shot but I didn't believe that. Cause he was somewhere. He was.

Read where Morning Flower drowned her baby girl because she couldn't make any more milk and the baby cried so much and the soldiers were gonna dash out the baby's brains and so she drowned her one night and after that Morning Flower couldn't remember my name, my sister never called my name no more.

Read my tear dress, a tear dress made with ribbons, but this one sewed with real tears, yellow/ blue/ satin Cherokee tears traded years after they made us walk the trail, put it in your mind Lord, please Lord.

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Read my quilt where there was only rotten potatoes to eat and where my bones showed through my linen dress with yellow flowers that was the only dress I had in this world, the only thing I owned in this world, and when I ate grass that day I decided to sell myself, the day they took you away in the death cart from working to feed us with no food for yourself. I decided to go to hell since I was already there and give my body to the drunks for food, and bless me father for I have sinned, but I am alive and my daughters and sons too.

Read it, where my dark green wool coat was sold to go to America from Ireland, away from home forever, never again to see the green hills where my heart should be but isn't anymore. The fluttery flyaway hands of my youngest daughter she wrapped in her thin gray shawl over and over and over, cause there was no more mama to run to, no mama to run to, because I was leavin for America to be a white slave and she with strangers.

Read the hard black wool of my one wool coat left over from grandad's corpse that I pulled off him, may the saints forgive me, cause freezing ain't no better than dyin, anly you can feel it more, so they say unless they's a hell really where you burn or maybe freeze.

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Linda Beatrice Brown, continued

Read the red of blood and the white of bone and the black of earth and then tell me how to put a white lace bonnet on my baby's head and know she is safe. Then tell me how to turn, and turn, and turn, and come back right and find you, and find you, and find God; and tell me if I walk in this circle long enough will you be there, and will the green of life come through and will the yellow sun warm me once more, and will the blue sky show me the way, and will You be there yes, and yes? Oh read my quilt and set me free, Lord, set me free. Read this quilt Lord, and wash it in the evening starlight, give it a place to be remembered, and then wrap the rippling silk of your Love around our dreams like a river. Amen. Amen.

Linda Beatrice Brown is the author of the novels *Crossing Over Jordan* and *Rainbow 'Roun Mah Shoulder.* She has taught at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Guilford College. She has been at Bennett College since 1992—first as Distinguished Professor of Humanities, more recently as Assistant to the President.

BEVERLY FIELDS BURNETTE

Witnesses on the Corner of Gay and Grace: 1952

(A prose poem)

While the elderly white man was out of the office, and when his black suited and tied son had no wood and coal yard customers, he left his desk, hurried beyond the stacks of wood and mounds of black coal, closed the gate, glanced both ways as he crossed Grace St. He unlocked his black sedan, parked on the street, just below our bedroom window. He looked around watchfully, yet never knew my sister and I peered from behind our curtain. He hoisted a clear bottle from the floor, adjusted his short body below the steering wheel, lay backward across the seat, and guzzled long and swallowed hard from his bottle. After another gulp, he sat up, replaced the top, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and leapt quickly from his car, crossed the street, re-entered his business, as two little black girls squealed to Mama that we'd just caught him drinking his booze~ again.

Beverly Fields Burnette lives in Raleigh, where she is a school social worker. She's a founding member of the Carolina African American Writers Collective and president of the North Carolina Association of Black Storytellers.

L. TERESA CHURCH

Pepper and Prayer

Runs streak our caramel calves like keloids,
when briars snag cinnamon-brown nylons
while we wind paths in Sunday-dress.

Us girls bounce petroleum-jelly-fried curls,
let our shoulder blades jab pastel sleeves,
elbow-hunch air like bantam roosters.

We vow for front-row seats,
giggle when the Starlight Quartet travels through.
Guitars strung with foot-pattin' songs

raise money for church building funds,
help wise saints steady-up God's house
where mothers clutch prayer shields,

hide their single gals behind the cross,
dust our tracks with pepper and prayer
every time the lead singer wails,

nearly knots us into his necktie,
red silk noose that somehow seems
loosened on purpose.

L. Teresa Church is a playwright, quilter, freelance writer, poet and library professional. A founding member of the Carolina African American Writers Collective, she lives in Durham. In 1989 she received a playwrights fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council.

CHANTAL JAMES

From the Boy on the Corner in Tanger

i have looked past the Strait and i've seen in the face
of the mountains of Spain only you and the moon.

and i've looked many times, *ma gazelle*. only twice
have i seen past the haze of the heat off the sea—

how this continent steams! you are cold to me, mount-
ainous. steaming, i itch to get off of this cont-

inent. oh you are cold! you will cool me, i hope.
you will take me from here, back to where you were born.

i will sleep in your arms. i'll lay curled in your bed
every night and i'll wake, foreign girl, to the things

that i dream about here. i would leave my own god
to be godless, like you. or the face of the moon,

or the mountain and rock—godless too, if not gods.
you are cold and i twitch with such heat. sweet Amer-

ican dream, take me home. to your house in the States.
or to where you sleep here, soft gazelle. only once

Chantal James is a writer of poetry and fiction who lives in Raleigh.

ANGELA BELCHER EPPS

Heartless Crazy Woman

Peggy was their youngest daughter; and now she needed a heart transplant.

"Good Lord!" Lila said and put her hand over her own heart as the doctor delivered the news over the phone. Lila felt sorry for the lovely, but heavy-spirited girl. But then Peggy was a woman now. Already 53.

When Lila told J.P., he stumbled. She watched him wobble and grab hold of the chair when she said, "The baby needs a new heart." She touched his shoulder and said, "I know, honey. It's hard to hear; but she sure wasn't taking care of it."

"God forgive you, you heartless woman," J.P. told Lila.

"J.P., I love Peggy the same as you. Life just…"

"Give me the details, Lila!" J.P. cut her off.

"Her heart rate is very slow. There's a lot of damage to the muscles. She's very much overweight. Her blood pressure's high. They've put her on the list for a heart. Right now she's in the hospital, and they'll keep her for several days."

J.P.'s eyes swam in fast-breaking tears. He placed his head in his hands.

"We saw it coming, J.P. She was bent on living like a racecar. Running all her cylinders all the time."

Lila caught her own reflection in the mirror as she turned to leave the room. "We'll go and see about her, J.P. See what we can do. What do you think about that?"

"Yes. That's what we need to do. We'll take the train and go see about her."

Lila turned back to the mirror for a moment. Sometimes in shadow, Lila barely recognized herself. The years seemed piled on her face like new roadways on a travel atlas. *Is that really me?* she wanted to ask; but instead, plucked her mind to attention and told it with finger-pointing emphasis, *Stop the foolishness. You know exactly who you are.*

And that was the truth. It was J.P. who floundered. Lila could tell by his eyes— shifting this way and that, lingering on the images on a page, or the pictures on the wall, or just looking around at nothing while his coffee cooled. He found no peace, even as he searched everywhere. J.P. planned with precision. He factored in any nuance that could possibly make a difference—- a northern or southern exposure when booking hotel rooms; buckles or laces for a new pair of shoes; Glen plaid or Burberry socks to accentuate the stripes in his slacks. Lila knew his mind was already trolling for ideas about what he should do or what he could've done.

Angela Belcher Epps, continued

As her husband's eyes darkened with the news, she wanted to say, *J.P., there's no use wondering. We have only one heart and one mind. We can't give her either of those.* But she didn't say it. She left the room, as she often did when he took up his mentalizing.

Lila refused to align herself with his worrying. Doing so might prove to be fatal, she figured. For if she wasted the precious moments given to her, mightn't they be snatched away for mis-use? Like taking prescription glasses from the careless hands of a toddler.

The doctor was putting Peggy on a spell of bed rest, to be followed by a strict diet and lifestyle changes—as they put it. Yes, she and J.P. would go for a week's stay-- settle her back in her home when she was released from the hospital. Shop for the healthy grocery and wash up her laundry. Lila would try to give her a short talk about taking care of her heart in other ways too. Lila knew the words would fall on deaf ears. Peggy was so much like her father—all manner of emotions running her life from hour to hour.

God, how the girl tortured herself! She'd worn out her heart for sure. Always weighing and disappointing herself. Eating half a cake, then hating herself as soon as she swallowed the last bite. Then she'd taken to counting gray hairs and wrinkles-- worrying about aging—-as she called it. Peggy watched for signs of decline like the weather forecasters looked for rain and storms and all sorts of life dampeners. How many picnics, barbecues, late night walks and beach trips had been needlessly postponed based on the wrongful predictions of a newscaster? How many days of living had Peggy wasted by hating little bits of herself and situations?

Lila loved the passing of time. It settled around her with thousands of reminders of it all. The yellowed pictures of weddings and babies and vacations in the same room as the big flat screen television; the peeling Adirondack loungers just yards from the new silver Cadillac; her mother's cast iron pots and skillets in the same kitchen as the microwave. They were signs that she was on the right track; for if she weren't, surely she'd have been taken away by now. God knows, after the many visits that Death had paid to her family, Lila considered any day with breath flowing free and easy through her body a good one.

But tell that to J.P., who sometimes trekked around the property for the sole purpose of frowning at warped doorways, chipped paint, and rotting fences. He'd open up a photo album and let his soul wither with memories. He'd talk to his brother on the phone and run off a list of aches and pains, and hardships, as if he had then filed and waiting for the occasion—the arthritis in his hand, the broken weed eater, the twenty dollars missing from the last time he went to the supermarket, and always the tentative goodbyes that included the ever-nearing appointment with death.

"J.P., wake up and smell the coffee," Lila admonished now and then. "I've buried two of my children, my brother and my sister-- all before their times, so I'm happy to get old. And I do plan to get good and old." She said it as if he hadn't been a part of the wailing, the early morning phone calls, rides in hearses, and the endless cleaning of closets, apartments and houses. She said it to boost him up, lift him from his tendency to mourn and grip loss like a warm blanket.

They were so different—she and her husband of 58 years. For, after following the rituals of death, Lila always felt lucky and electric to be a survivor. Each time a loved one passed on, she cried and suffered, but she also thanked God for the privilege of living on.

"Heartless, crazy woman!" J.P. barked at her two weeks after burying their son.

"Hush, you ingrate. He wasn't yours to keep! Mind you don't put out the wrong idea," she shot back.

"What are you talking about? Wrong idea? This is the second child taken from us."

"Who said you'd keep them forever?" she debated. "Stop your blaming and drink your coffee." She'd refilled his cup. In time, J.P. smiled again, but questions of safety remained on his forehead.

Angela Belcher Epps, continued

They made plans to leave on Friday morning. Peggy would be released that morning, and they'd be there by nightfall. A taxi was arranged, after J.P. called all the companies in the area, and finally settled on a reasonable price that included a comfortable riding car. Lila stayed up late packing the night before. J.P. had made several weather-related decisions about his clothing, then left the folding and packing to Lila. Every trip, Lila had trumped his packing preferences, and he'd always been prepared. "Lord, I forgot my raincoat, or warm sweater, or thick socks," he say. "It's in the pocket, or in the garment back, or in my bag," she'd respond. But still he didn't trust her to do right by him.

Before going to bed, Lila lit a seven-day candle to keep peaceful spirits content during their absence. She said her prayers and climbed in beside J.P. How she loved the warmth flaring out around him. He roused as she covered up.

"I hope she's not too different," he said, near sleep-- his uncertainty suspended above them like spiders.

"She'll be weaker for sure, but J.P., we'll do what we can, won't we? She'll be comforted to see us. We'll make a difference," she said with a bit of excitement brewing. Lila placed her hand over J.P.'s heart and settled comfortably behind him. "Just thank God for how strong your own heart's beating. We need our sleep. We have a long trip ahead of us."

Angela Belcher Epps lives in Raleigh. Her work has appeared in *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review, Essence Magazine, Ladies' Home Journal*, and elsewhere.

VALJEANNE JEFFERS-THOMPSON

Valjean Jeffers-Thompson lives in Durham, where she is pursuing a master's degree at North Carolina Central University. Her poems have appeared in *Revelry* and the 2007 Cave Canem anthology, *The Ringing Ear*.

Down Home Ecstasy

(In tribute to Muddy Waters)

Listen to the Blues
Visualize
Charcoal black sweet, sweat sinews
Broad, powerful

Sunset of smudged peach,
Purple and orange
Honeysuckle
Fireflies
Cotton dresses

Brother testify with a harmonica
Make it preach
Baby, do your thing

Boss man's gone
Now, here is love and rhythm
Here is pathos in wailing song

A woman lounges
A child's head in her lap

Heads thrown back
Spines arched and proud

Listen:
Can't you hear
Song give birth?
Can't you hear that cry
Like throaty thunder?
Can't you feel its caress
Sultry and strong?

Blackness pure, undiluted
Like well water
Dipped up to a pair of full lips
Pouring down a long graceful neck

Ain't nothing like the Blues

WILLIE JAMES KING

Stay

Stay quiet and calm
my Saturday morning
bed seemed to say.

Let them call you lazy
if they like. Listen to
the lark shake dust

from its brown speckled
feathers in a fallow field.
You don't have to be

tired or sleepy at all to
remain where you rest.
There are those who're

almost always waiting
to put you through tests
as if there is something

in honest you've to prove.
Tomorrow they will be no
less anxious to erase

you from the slate
of the living only few
get to last for long.

Willie James King received his MFA in creative writing from Queens University, in Charlotte. His poems have appeared in *America, Blue Unicorn, Confrontation, Mudfish, Puerto del Sol, The Lullwater Review, Willow Review, Southern Poetry Review* and elsewhere. His latest book is *The House in the Heart*, with a foreword by Cathy-Smith Bowers, from Tebot Bach Press.

LENARD D. MOORE

Singing Memory

I.
Along the empty street
the wind ghosts winter evening.
The woman with brown eyes
knocks on the red door.
This is her first time.

II.
She settles on my sofa,
scans shelves—
Roots, Things Fall Apart, Beloved—
crosses legs,
twists, blinks.
Her lap cradles a folder.
The stereo spills fluid jazz.

III.
In the circle, one by one, we read,
sigh, nod,
bend a common song.
Our words wear blood.
The woman peers
into eyes, sees doors open;
her notepad scats metaphors,
sings womb-memory.

January 1, 2000

Lenard D. Moore, a Cave Canem Graduate Fellow and founding director of the Carolina African American Writers Collective, teaches English at Mount Olive College and directs the literary festival there. Mr. Moore's collection of poetry *A Temple Looming* has just been published by Wordtech.

NETIA T. RAYE

Blues Poem
Hollow Weeping Willow

I mourn like the weeping willow
because you crushed me and left me to lie
I mourn like that weeping willow
because you crushed me and left me to die

Hollow
like the drum I bang this pain
forgot to dust my soul from sole's heavy tread
like the drum I bang this pain
forgot to dust my soul from sole's stomping tread

moaning and groaning in the rain this grain
kissed the shadows that blew to the edges of oppression
moaning and groaning in the rain this grain
kissed the shadows that blew to the edges of oppression

My people
vocal enjambment quieted by zephyrs shielded by seraphim
anguish plucked the heart before imploding
vocal enjambment quieted by zephyrs shielded by wings of seraphim
anguish plucked and rattled the heart before imploding

like the whining of a guitar and the sobbing piano
be still weeping willow
like the whining of a guitar and soulful bellows of a piano
be still weeping willow

a tone deep and guttural it cuts
and suckles like wine every morsel every taste of grief
a tone deep and guttural it stings and cuts
and suckles like wine every morsel every tasty crumb of grief

Netia T. Raye graduated from Mount Olive College last year and is pursuing an MFA in creative writing.

GINA M. STREATY

***An excerpt of the forthcoming novel, My* Father's Daughter**

It is Sunday, February 2, 1997, the first day that I see him in the hospital and I am there at his request. His room is extremely cold and shockingly white. When I walk through the door, his eyes pull me to him.

"Come here, gal! Make this heifer stop hurting me!" I'm surprised and a bit disappointed that he's not at all happy to see me. A nurse is readjusting the IV on his hand. He mutters to her scornfully,

"Hell, you act like I ain't got no damn feeling in my hand! What you doin' hurts, damn it!"

The nurse pouts playfully, apologizes, and pats his hand. He winces.

"He's a real pistol today," she says as she leaves the room. He mumbles something under his breath, punctuates it with *heifer*, and turns his face toward me. He'd already been there for twenty-four hours, and looking at him, I can't imagine that he'll leave the place alive. His eyes remind me of wet gray marbles as they roll across me for what seems like several minutes before his thick, dry lips crack into a weary smile. We speak with our eyes first, like the strangers we are, deepening the chill of the room with the awkward familiarity we both feign. I watch him watching me, silence building an intricate bridge between us. I speak quickly to demolish it.

"How are you?"

"I'm good," he lies. "Good right now." He coarsely draws in breaths and lengthens his words as if death is standing in a corner of the room watching him, waiting for him to pause long enough to transform from patient to corpse, as if the *I'm good* lie will keep death at bay. I watch him until it pains me then divert my eyes outside. From the ninth story window I see visitors filing in from the icy parking lot and doctors in billowing white lab coats leaning against the sharp, winter breeze as they dart across the campus. I prefer this view to Daddy. It is difficult to look at him, small and weak, the man I feared, the man who still haunts my dreams, hunts me in my nightmares.

"Good you came." He whispers. I do not respond. "Glad you came. Knew you would. Talk to me."

"Okay," I say, watching the scene outside.

Gina M. Streaty, continued

“Talk to me. I’m sick.”

“You talk,” I say. “I’m here.” A florist’s truck pulls up in the circle in front of the hospital, just as a woman slips on the ice and falls, the contents of her purse spilling. People rush to help her. “Talk.”

“Not today,” he groans. “Got something I need to tell you, but I can’t today. Too sick. Lemme hear you.”

“I don’t have anything to say, Daddy. I’ll leave so you can rest.” I think this will be my last time seeing him. I don’t plan to come tomorrow.

“Don’t go!”

“Then tell me now, Daddy. Just talk and get it over with now while I’m here.” I feel his eyes on my back.

“Look at me, gal.” I do. It is difficult.

I want to hear what he has to say, and to preserve whatever it is he says. For what reason, I do not know. I considered this briefly the night after receiving the phone call for me and my siblings to come to his bedside, then later during the plane ride from Virginia to Missouri. I packed a micro-cassette recorder and two blank cassette tapes in my suitcase. I have them with me. His eyes are fixed on me. I reach into my bag and take out the recorder.

“What you doin’ there?”

“Getting ready to hear what you have to say. Go ahead and start talking. I don’t have a lot of time.” He looks at me sharply, a look I remember from childhood, as if I’ve instantly done something wrong. His hands curl into limp fists, but he says nothing.

“Go ahead,” I say. “It’s ok.”

He begins slowly, hesitates then mumbles as my tape recorder hums.

“You don’t know me. Don’t know nothin’ about me.” He stops. That’s it.

He seems disappointed, then momentarily detached, as if his words have taken hold of this moment and carried him back to a time before I was born. A time before he was old, before his tainted memories held any significance and his breath and speech were atrophied by congestive heart failure. Before rheumatoid arthritis gnarled his bones, and his vision dimmed in sync with the waning of his once melodious voice. He exhales weakly and looks at me with questions on his face, as if wondering why I’d only come to hear him just now and hadn’t stood before him years earlier when he was stronger, more alert, and far more protective of his past. I wonder if he sees the answer on my face.

Gina M. Streaty is a freelance writer, poet, teacher and lecturer. She is a graduate student at Duke University and has published in *Bma, Independent Weekly, The Saracen* and elsewhere. She lives in Raleigh with her daughter.