

this  
is  
where  
we  
live

Short  
Stories by 25  
Contemporary  
North Carolina  
Writers

Edited by Michael McFee

The University of North Carolina Press

Chapel Hill and London

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For my  
students, teachers, colleagues,  
and many friends at UNC–Chapel Hill  
over the past quarter-century



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TONY EARLEY

## The Prophet from Jupiter



My house, the damkeeper's house, sits above the lake on Pierce-Arrow Point. The dam juts out of the end of the point and curves away across the cove into the ridge on the other side of the channel. On this side is the water, 115 feet deep at the base of the dam, and on the other side is air: the gorge, the river starting up again, rocks far down below, a vista. Seen from my windows, the dam looks like a bridge. There are houses on hundred-foot lots all the way around the lake, and too many real estate brokers. They all have jangling pockets full of keys, and four-wheel-drive station wagons with coffee cups sitting on the dashboards. The coffee cups are bigger at the bottom than they are at the top. Sometimes, at night, the real estate brokers pull up each other's signs and sling them into the lake.

A family on Tryon Bay has a Labrador retriever that swims in circles for hours, chasing ducks. Tourists stop on the bridge that crosses the bay and take the dog's picture. You can buy postcards in town with the dog on the front, swimming, swimming, the ducks always just out of reach. There is a red and white sign on the Tryon Bay Bridge that says NO JUMPING OR DIVING FROM BRIDGE, but teenage boys taunting each other and drunk on beer climb onto the rail and fling themselves off. I could drop the water level down a foot and a half any summer Saturday and paralyze all I wanted. Sometimes rednecks whoop and yell *Nigger!* and throw beer bottles at Junie Wilson, who walks up and down Highway 20 with a coat hanger around his neck. Junie drops a dollar bill into the water every time he crosses the bridge.

The Prophet from Jupiter brings his five young sons to the bridge to watch the Lab swim. The six of them stand in a line at the guardrail and clap and wave their arms and shout encouragement to the dog. The Prophet

drives an ancient blue Lincoln that is big as a yacht. He says he drove it in another life, meaning Florida. Down in the water, the ducks let the dog get almost to them before they fly away. They fly maybe thirty, forty yards, that's all, and splash back down. The townies call the dog Shithead. You may not believe me, but I swear I have heard ducks laugh. Shithead, as he paddles around the bay, puffs like he is dying. This is where I live and this is what I think: a dam is an unnatural thing, like a diaphragm.

The most important part of my job is to maintain a constant pond level. But the lake rises all night, every night; the river never stops. This will worry you after a while. When I drive below town, coming back toward home, I'm afraid I'll meet the lake coming down through the gorge. When Lake Glen was built, it covered the old town of Uree with eighty-five feet of water. As the dam was raised higher and higher across the river, workmen cut the steeple off the Uree Baptist Church so it would not stick up through the water, but they did not tear down the houses. Fish swim in and out of the doors. Old Man Bill Burdette, who lived beside the church, left his 1916 chain-drive Reo truck parked beside his house when he moved away.

The diver who inspected the dam in 1961 told the Mayor that he saw a catfish as big as a man swimming by the floodgates. It is a local legend, the size of the catfish the diver saw. At night I fish for it, from the catwalk connecting the floodgates, using deep-sea tackle and cow guts for bait. It hangs in the water facing the dam, just above the lake's muddy bottom. Its tail moves slowly, and it listens to the faint sound of the river glittering on the other side of the concrete. The Prophet from Jupiter says, *When you pull your giant fish out of the water, it will speak true words.* When they tell history, people will remember me because of the fish, even if I don't catch it.

The Prophet from Jupiter's real name is Archie Simpson. He sold real estate, and made a fortune, in Jupiter, Florida, until nine years ago, when God told him — just as he closed a \$4 million condominium deal in Port St. Lucie — that he was the one true prophet who would lead the Christians in the last days before the Rapture. The Prophet says his first words after God finished talking were, *Jesus Christ, you gotta be kidding.* He is not shy about telling the story, and does not seem crazy. He has a young wife who wears beaded Indian headbands and does not shave under her arms.

Old Man Bill Burdette's four sons hired divers and dragged their father's Reo truck out of the lake fifty years to the day after the water rose. It was almost buried in mud, and hadn't rusted at all. The Burdette boys spent six thousand dollars restoring the old Reo and then said to anyone who would

one's the same. She always squeezed her longings onto a piece of plain white paper, five-inch by seven-inch, according to my measuring. At the top she'd put Monday Morning or Monday Evening, but never any dates. Never signed her name. Lilly said it didn't matter about the dates because Richard would have kept them all in order, week by week. I myself wasn't so ready to see him as being all that tidy a man. So we'd disagree now and again, me and Lilly, about what goes where. But that wasn't near as bad as when we got to arguing about what they meant. Lord. I'll show you what I mean. Here's one we never did see eye-to-eye on. I don't believe we ever could.

Tuesday Afternoon

Richard darling—

I still have the smell of your hair and your skin trapped here in my hands. So I opened up my fist just a tiny bit to let the pen in. I need more than ever to write to you after we've been so close that way. I do love you so. The times between the times when we're together go so slowly they would surely come in last against a snail. The way you touched the bottom of my foot, do you remember? I keep on feeling the broad smooth tips of your fingers on me. I love that it's getting to be that we talk more now. I have to know all there is to know about you, inside and out, and I know you want the same. We are one in body and spirit and always will be forever.

from You Know Who

You can see for yourself what a ninny Lilly was about this letter. To my mind, it's plain as soup that Richard and this You Know Who girl were full lovers, that's what I'd call them. When she says here "so close that way" I know enough to know which way she means. It's as close as a woman can get with a man. I tried to get Lilly to see how the girl makes no bones about saying that they'd been doing a whole lot of something that's not talking. Then I said how I liked that part about the foot, but the part about the pen was all silliness, seems to me.

Lilly was all the while turning purple as a turnip left too long in the ground. She said there was nothing specified about them being full lovers. That's what a ninny she is, like I told you. As far as she's concerned, it's all in my mind, which is a dungheap. She tried to show me how it was all spiritual. That when the girl writes about them being one in body it's only a manner of speaking. Same as when they talk about us eating the body of Christ and don't mean that at all. Lilly acted as if the case was closed when

she said, "and besides, this letter was written on Tuesday afternoon." To her this meant that the two of them would have been doing their whatnot in the morning. And that's an idea Lilly can't think of and never will.

But I'll tell you, it makes sense to me. There were some mornings out there on our hill—it's been years and years since I was up there. On some of those mornings there'd be a perfectly middling breeze, the kind that sways right there between cool and warm, and now and again presses your skirt against your legs. New sunlight would seem about to lick the petals clean off the stems of the violets. It would have been on such a morning. I can't see the wrongness of it. Depends on how you look at a thing. After all, I said to Lilly, when it's morning in Vermont, it's nighttime in China far as I know. But Lilly just shook her head. Then she packed up the letters and wouldn't let me see any again for a week. Not a one.

I calculated the whole thing between Richard and that girl lasted about eight months altogether, right up to his going off in the winter sometime. Father had already gone off, I remember, and left us to ourselves. I won't say abandoned. He'd come around every so often, we didn't know from where. Besides, me and Lilly were over twenty by then. The last time we saw him was after we'd gotten word about our brother, how he'd been killed over there. They never did tell us what killed him or why they couldn't send the body back. We thought maybe Father knew, but we didn't ask him. Father had got some money somehow, more than he ever thought he'd have, in connection with the war. He gave us enough so we could pay off the farm and go on living here. He didn't want our thanks, he said. We never could figure him out. He confiscated even on that last day. Went on into our rooms and took up the little bit of jewelry our mother left with us. He said unmarried women didn't need any jewelry. And no one would want to marry us anyhow. I guess he was right.

According to that girl of Richard's, marrying wasn't all that needful for a woman. She told him as much. Must have been he was feeling on edge about them not being married. It would be just like him to worry about not offending, doing what others wanted. He once told Lilly and me, a long time ago, after dinner one night, I think—yes, it was after dinner, and we'd eaten some pheasant he'd brought home that same afternoon, and Lilly cooked up the best stuffing we ever ate. It was nobody's birthday, but it seemed like it that night. Anyway, Richard said it was positively proper we weren't married because no man in our whole neck of the woods was worthy of either one of our hands in matrimony. Told us we were both princesses in a land of dullards and brutes. That's how he talked. So high-minded and poeti-

wich and coffee, and a peanut-butter cup. I bought her some aspirin and a pint of milk, fingernail clippers and a souvenir shirt.

I told her I had a place where she could come to rest and stay, as long as she might want. I told her it wasn't fancy and wasn't but one room, but what was mine was hers. I knew it was clean. I'd cleaned it up the day before when I saw this girl hanging around.

She stroked my hair and said my heart was full of love. She said she had to sleep about twelve hours and then she'd go away. I took her home. She slumped down on the bed and cried—told me I was “so very kind.” And then she slept like the dead. I lay down on the floor beside her, where I said I'd stay. In the middle of the night I woke up on fire, and the room was turning. I couldn't think. The air turned furry, where I crept up and slid in bed beside her, that girl still completely dressed. She breathed like the sea. I touched her skin, just her skin inside her clothes. She really never woke, just sighed and turned. In the morning when I woke up in the bed, she was gone.

I've worked here since 1953, waiting for the right girl to come along. I guess she did. Some good marriages don't last long.



PHILIP GERARD

## Death by Reputation



Thursday morning Paul Sartorius awoke to the certainty that something would happen today to change his life. In the steam of the shower he recalled having the same feeling on the morning of the day he met his wife, Connie, and on the morning of the day she died in traffic, five years ago now, when he'd first taken the archaeology appointment at State University. And that feeling had overtaken him like a virus on the morning of the day his draft notice arrived in the mail.

But the feeling had been present on an equal number of mornings of days on which nothing happened. He shut the water off as suddenly as changing the subject and towed vigorously, raising blood to the surface of his skin.

Paul walked briskly the three blocks to campus clutching a hard-used leather bookbag. He gave more attention than usual to his Introduction to Archaeology class this morning. He was a good teacher and a popular one, at ease behind a lectern or stalking the dais in restless pursuit of archaeological truth.

Nothing happened at lunch, except that Dean Willis came by to congratulate him on his book, *The Speaking Creature*, which would assure tenure. In it he argued that, since the australopithecines developed modern locomotive apparatus and articulate fingers long before their brain case increased in size, the evolution of the brain was directly caused by social developments, especially language, an offshoot of specialized sign language and play. After *A. africanus* disappeared a million years ago, the human brain mushroomed to three times its previous size.

“Much obliged,” he said to Dean Willis, shaking his dog-eared hand, wondering if this was all his premonition would amount to.

He picked up the papery necklace and handed it to her where she sat. With a long fingernail she slit open one of the compartments and emptied it onto the coffee table. Hundreds of tiny, whitish whelk shells fell out, perfectly conical, perfectly detailed miniatures even to the spiky nobs near their tops.

“You can imagine how many eggs there must be altogether,” she said. “I mean, rows and rows of these casings washing up onto the beach. And each one has—what? Maybe a hundred of these little compartments?”

He touched his index finger to his tongue and then to the table, so that several of the little whelk shells adhered to it. He raised them to his eyes. They were small and white, each one capable of a new life, and they struck him as distinctly hopeful.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ellyn Bache has been part of the thriving writers' scene in Wilmington since 1985.

She was born in Washington, D.C., in 1942, and received degrees from UNC-Chapel Hill and the University of Maryland. Her books include three novels—*Safe Passage* (1988), which was made into a movie starring Susan Sarandon and Sam Shepard, *Festival in Fire Season* (1992), and *The Activist's Daughter* (1997)—as well as two volumes of nonfiction and a collection of short stories, *The Value of Kindness* (1993), which won the Willa Cather Fiction Prize.

Sarah Dessen was born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1970, but her family moved to Chapel Hill when she was two and she has been there ever since. She graduated with highest honors in creative writing from UNC-Chapel Hill, where she now teaches fiction-writing. Her first novel, *That Summer* (1996), was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association and a Best Book for the Teen Age by the New York Public Library. Her other novels are *Someone Like You* (1998) and *Keeping the Moon* (1999).

Tony Earley, named one of the *New Yorker's* “Twenty Best Young Fiction Writers in America” in 1999, was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1961 but raised in the North Carolina foothills town of Rutherfordton. He received a B.A. from Warren Wilson College and worked at several mountain newspapers before taking an M.F.A. at the University of Alabama. His books are *Here We Are in Paradise: Stories* (1994) and the novel *Jim the Boy* (2000). His work appears regularly in such magazines as *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Granta*, and the *Oxford American*. He teaches at Vanderbilt.

Candace Flynt—born in Greensboro in 1947, a graduate of Greensboro College and the celebrated M.F.A. program at UNC-Greensboro, and still a resident of her hometown—is among a number of writers who have kept Greensboro a center of literary accomplishment for many decades. She has published her work in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Redbook*, and such North Carolina journals as the *Carolina Quarterly* and the *Greensboro Review*. Her novels are *Chasing Dad* (1980), *Sins of Omission* (1984), and *Mother Love* (1989).

Philip Gerard has been energizing UNC-Wilmington's creative writing program for many years. He was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1955, and educated at the Universities of Delaware and Arizona. He has published three novels—*Hatteras Light* (1986), *Cape Fear Rising* (1994), and *Desert Kill* (1994)—and three books of nonfiction, including *Writing the Big Book* (2000). He has also written a number of scripts for television and radio, and published widely in literary journals and