

**"There are no snakes in the garden" inSite 92, Tijuna**

*An installation by Anna O'Cain*

*The four stories played on a continue loop, with headphones for each recorder, inside each birdhouse.*

### **No. 1 Grandmother Madge's Story: "The Snake"**

The first time I ever saw a snake I was walking in my grandparents' garden in Durant, Mississippi. I was five or six years old. It must have been July or August because the tomato plants were much taller than I was. There was yellow straw mulch pushed up against the long rows of plants. I liked this area of the garden because of the wide clear walking paths between the rows. The sun was bright. It was the middle of the day and the dirt was a little crunchy on the surface. I heard a movement behind me and turned to see a black and yellow snake. It slid from under the straw on the row to my left and moved straight across the path and into the straw of the row on my right. Suddenly I couldn't see the beginning or the end of the snake; both ends were covered in the straw. A rhythm of black and yellow rings moved across the walking path. It seemed forever until I saw the end move from one row and disappear into the straw of the other. Its path formed an imaginary line between me and the edge of the garden. I was inside the line, inside the garden; I was frightened and wanted to get out. The snake had crossed the path telling me not to go out the way I entered. Walking backwards I moved deeper in the garden. I made a decision to move left. I walked into the rows of beans and wondered what those leaves might be covering. I ran through the cucumbers, over the imaginary line the snake had drawn and jumped out of the garden onto the grassy yard.

Safe. I finally felt safe. I was out of the garden and moving through the awful, sticker-filled grass yard. I ran up the stairs to the back porch. I could hear mother talking to Grandmother Madge. I could see her sitting at the kitchen table and Madge working at the sink. Running down the lattice hallway of the back porch I hollered I'd seen a snake. Grandmother turned quickly, looking very surprised and said, "*Lands alive Anna, there are no snakes in the garden!*"

## No. 2 Madge's Story: "*The Letter*"

I went to college at Oklahoma University and studied art. I had decided against architecture because of a five-minute comparison between the two departments. I felt foolish about making a decision based on such a quick observation but each department had required an exclusive commitment for four years. The architecture department looked dark, the art department looked light. I voted for light.

Two years later I received a scholarship to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My family was against my moving to Chicago. They seemed against my being an artist without admitting it. Moving from my home in Mississippi to Oklahoma was far enough, but as soon as I expressed my plan to move to Chicago quiet objections became screams of disapproval. This was not acceptable for any reason. Chicago was too large, too far north (as in the land of the Yankees) and too dangerous. Even my sister who was on her way to work in the Middle East thought it wasn't such a great idea. I was doing it anyway. Everyone was furious. I would not pass up a scholarship. I would not pass up a move to a different city. I received no support from my family. No congratulations, only warnings of danger and of the hopelessness of life in a big city. I moved.

Three weeks later and out of the blue I received a letter from Grandmother Madge. She enclosed two photographs dated 1915. The photographs were taken of her when she attended a women's college in Mississippi. (She was the only grandparent with a college education and who traveled to other countries in the world.) She told me about her summer at the Music Conservatory in Chicago. I had never heard her speak of this event in her life. She was thrilled I had received a scholarship at the Art Institute; she was proud. She granted me the right to pursue my interests to have my passion. She trusted me to develop my own perceptions of the world in a different place.

A voice that had forsaken me by distrusting my vision of the snake, a voice that had fundamentalist beliefs about etiquette as well as Christianity, a voice that gave no room to breathe for all the rules she believed so important was now the only voice of confidence.

## **No. 1 Grandfather Harry or Papa's Story: "*Potatoes*"**

It was September. I six or seven years old, my family was visiting Papa and Madge in Durant, Mississippi. Papa had a surprise for me. We sat on the steps of the back porch while he laced up his work boots, we were going to the garden he said. We walked all the way to the edge by the barbed wire fence where all the plants look yellow and dead. The ground was dry and the air smelled like dirt as we walked down the dismal row of dead plants. He got down on his knees and began digging around underneath the plants. I was not interested. I loved being with him, but I was not interested in whatever it was he was doing. I was sure we would be moving on to another area of the garden. He signaled me to copy him and start digging.

Papa could convince me to do anything, he believed me, he listened, we laughed a lot, told jokes, and he always tested and appreciated my elephant memory. He taught me how to fish, let me sit on his lap while driving and pretended to let me steer. My favorite thing was to watch the trains come in. We would move up close onto the diagonal paved walk where he would bend down and hold me tight while the trains flew by blowing wind and whistles in the air. Once we had gone for a walk in the woods behind the garden and came upon a huge cow resting in the shade. I was terrified and wonderfully impressed by his fearlessness. He went right up to that cow and gave it a few pats as we walked by. He fed any dog that came into the yard and always named them Charlie. Later he would teach me how to drive, shoot a twenty-two and a sixteen gauge, prune tomato plants, house paint, and make the sound of the bob white whistle. This was the man of my dreams. He and Madge had fun joking around together. He worked hard and seemed to love his tasks of the day, even his job at the Post Office.

I think I only disappointed him twice. Once when he found out I had a fondness for eating azalea blossoms and pyracantha berries and later when my long hair was chopped off because it had been my mother's faulty opinion that there would be no one at camp to braid my hair each morning.

I trusted him and followed the lead by digging around a little ways down the row. To my complete surprise I found red potatoes, little ones, my favorite. I loved them boiled with salt and pepper and butter rolling all around a plate. I was thrilled. He laughed at my excitement. I couldn't believe how something that good could be living underneath the earth. I dug in a frenzy as if uncovering a great secret of life. How could we have ever known how many times I would remember this day?

Neither he nor I had any idea how many times I would remember this day.

## **No. 2 Papa's Story: "*Color*"**

In the fall of 1962 I was nine. My family lived in Jackson, Mississippi. It was one of those locust years. There were zillions of them screaming loud noises and leaving their crusty body shells fixed to pine trees everywhere. My fourth grade teacher's name was Mrs. Goodyear. Every afternoon we played kickball on a dust-covered field while she sat on a small patch of grass listening to her GE transistor radio. She wasn't really there, she was wrapped up in the news coming from Oxford, Mississippi where the first black man was attending class at the college called Ole Miss. The National Guard had been called in to calm the rioting students. Her daughter was going to school up there and she was worried about what danger she might be in, and about what would happen to Ole Miss should more black students enroll.

The news was filled with danger, fear, and despair over what might happen should integration be instated in the public schools, should black people be allowed and encouraged to vote, and should the Freedom Riders come to your town. I wasn't sure who the Freedom Riders were, but they had come to my town and were taken to jail immediately. I saw it on the news, it happened at the Greyhound Bus Station. I knew that station. I had taken many bus trips to visit both sets of Grandparents on the Gulf and up north.

It was a very confusing time. "Difference" was pointed out everywhere. Signs over water fountains saying "colored" and "white" became front-page photos. Front door, back door, side door entrances were suddenly noticeable. Willie, our housekeeper couldn't go in the same door with me at the doctor's office. I remember one visit when I was sick and didn't want to sit by myself. I finally asked the nurse if I could sit with Willie. She said "yes". So I went to her side and napped in her lap.

Willie was the stable presence in my family life. My sister and I thought the world of her. No matter what happened Willie was there for us; ready to sort things out. It didn't make any sense, this uproar about black people and white people doing things together.

"What about Willie?" What about her sisters and her nephews who played with us? What about them? Were all the horrible things that people were saying about Willie and her family? My mother loved Willie, clothed her kids, took care of her medical problems, and helped her other family members when needed. She stayed in her place of service for less than minimum wage as she cared about and protected us, bringing great delight to our lives as if we were her own children. I had been to her house. I knew our house was larger and that we had nicer cars and furniture. This was the normal world I was born into. Willie was "good" but there were "others."

On a visit to my grandparents' house in Durant I watched the news with Papa. He groaned and worried and talked to the television. Martin Luther King Jr. was being portrayed as a villain, but when I heard him on television he sounded like lessons I'd learned in Sunday school. I didn't understand what was happening, the adults around me seemed particularly confusing. Louder than ever there were cries of outrage on the news, not just in the schools, homes and grocery stores.

Things were changing. White people were afraid of change, were angered and responding with loud self-righteous hate. Boy, was it ever troubling. Because I trusted Papa I knew he would answer my questions. We sat together at the dining room table covered in a vinyl and felt cloth of light blue. He calmly explained to me that in the town he lived in there were three times as many "colored people" than "white people" and if these uneducated people were allowed to vote they might elect one of their own to office. He believed that they would insist that they get all the rights of white people. This would anger his community and create violence right in his own hometown. He said he was very afraid. He feared what would happen to everyone. He was not angry. He was taking the time to tell me how what was happening only 30 miles away might affect his town.

The man who was 6'6" tall, the man who took me to ball games, who worked hard in the garden after coming home from the Post Office, the man I thought so courageous and strong, was now telling me he was afraid.