

THE O:JA&L 2023 PAMPHLET SERIES
A WRITER'S PORTFOLIO

LOCAL HABITATIONS



EDISON JENNINGS

BUTTONHOOK PRESS

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“Homebound” and “Old-Times There Are Not Forgotten”
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EDISON JENNINGS

CONTENTS

Wolves	4
Homebound	6
Naptime, Head Start	8
Headcount, Head Start	10
The Holiness House of the Lord	11
Old Times There Are Not Forgotten	14

WOLVES

Before any houses were here
there was a cave where wolves
mated, birthed, and ate, cool
in summer, always shadowed,
and in winter a place they could lie
on stone instead of snow, the wolf-
heat of their flesh and breath
enough to keep them warm
while they slept, robed in russet fur,
which was how Boone and three
other pelt hunters found them
after tracking their bloody prints
stamped in snow when the wolves
loped to their lair after raiding
the hunters' camp at midnight,
ripping the throat of a mule
named Moses, whose scream
woke Boone and the others,
whose blood led to the cave
where the hunters now stood
wordless, exhaling white vapors
beneath its limestone lip,
and shot the she-wolf, her mate,
two young males, and four pups
tucked into their mother's teats,
the cracks of their rifles echoing
down the cave's stone throat,

LOCAL HABITATIONS

then returned to camp and ate
a lunch of jerky chased with rum
and cleaned their beautiful rifles
while Boone wrote in his log,
naming the place Wolf Hills.
That being done, they packed
what mules were still alive with gear
and provender and cut a trail
to the dark and bloody ground.

HOMEBOUND

One rabbit, two dogs, a cat, several fish—
tropical and gold—assorted roadkill—
domestic and wild—and the ashes
of one child— her only, a girl—buried
in the yard, the girl's ashes in the crotch
of a maple, bind her to the house
and three acres her husband bought
the day before they were married,
assured that only death could do them part,
but it wasn't death that did them part
(that came later), but the lifeguard
at the public pool who parted them
quite easily when the tanned and blond
young man awakened a self her husband
didn't know he had, compelling him
to quit his job, no reason offered,
and head for LA with his lifeguard lover,
leaving his pregnant wife with a note,
their savings, and all their property,
which five years later passed to her
uncontested as his heir apparent
when he was killed with his lover
in a fiery I-10 pileup on the way
to ask forgiveness and for the first time
see their child, Elissa, who would die
three years later of Amebic Meningitis,
contracted probably in the pool

LOCAL HABITATIONS

her father's partner cleaned and guarded
without fail until they left for California,
each of whom—daughter, father,
father's lover—she sketched in ink,
their faces framed in birdseye maple
hanging side by side near a window
where she often sits come evening,
sometimes nodding off to sleep.

NAPTITUDE, HEAD START

They're sleeping on the classroom floor,
fifteen or so, 3 to 4 years old,
on foam-blue pallets with lighter blue blankets,
some tossed off, bunched, or wrapped around them
with undulant folds like mountains viewed from angelic
altitudes,
their chaste faces not yet enshaded with needs
they don't yet know they need.
The teacher is scribing something teacherly
and beneficent in a burgundy spiral binder,
her eyes cast down,
and I am leaning against the classroom door,
little more than a hapless ghost
who serves as one of the two adults
required to watch the children,
a job I would like to quit
but won't because I need the money,
and at the moment, a cigarette.
Meanwhile the children sleep, still beautiful.
You can hear their breaths (make note of this).
Sometimes a child will cry while sleeping,
and thrash a bit then somehow soothe themselves
or rock themselves into silence (this also).
Once they wake, we'll put them on a bus
to take them home wherever home might be
and whatever home might be
and deliver them to an assigned adult,
maybe a parent, too often not.

LOCAL HABITATIONS

But who could ever deliver them all?
There are too many altars,
and they are too much like lambs.

HEAD COUNT, HEAD START

Well, of course we count them
several times throughout the day,
beginning when they board the bus
and we put a check beside each name
on the daily manifest, and once again
when we arrive at the Children's Center
where they're fed, sometimes cleaned-up,
sometimes coddled, and come afternoon,
we lay a palm upon each head and count
and as we count, they count too
and sing the counting song,
one and two and buckle my shoe...,
and then we lay them down to sleep.
Throughout the day their sum is kept
in large digits on a whiteboard,
increasing or decreasing as they come or go
to be sure no child is lost or wandering,
which is to say, we know who and where
they are throughout the day while in our care,
which is to say, they have been numbered,
their names inscribed in a ledger,
one volume among the books of life,
before we put them on the bus
to carry them back beyond our care.

THE HOLINESS HOUSE OF THE LORD

for TR Hummer

First, the sign was shotgunned
for reasons known but to the shooter,
if indeed the shooter knew,
and some years later, a drunk ran his car
off the road, causing him to overcorrect
and cross the white lines into the downhill path
of a coal truck, slamming the car
across the churchyard, flattening the sign,
killing the drunk, girlfriend too,
though the trucker survived unscathed,
a miracle, some said. As for the church,
no one had attended service there
in over sixty years, so no one was sure
just what genus of church it was
other than a casualty of one Great Awakening
or another, though the fieldstone church itself
still stood, but in a coma, waiting
yet another awakening when it might again
proclaim itself as was written
on the flattened sign in gold script:

The Holiness House of the Lord

Here the Ghost Resides; Here the Ghost Presides;

Here the Poor Might Find Respite

And they came, the homeless,
finding shelter but little else until the sheriff
secured the door with hasp & lock,
though every Halloween a clique of boys

would crowbar the hasp, drink cheap wine
and then deface parish gravestones
with pentagrams and swastikas,
conjuring the ghosts of the scandalous couple
killed in the coal truck wreck
(as it had come to be known) whom the boys
had endowed with the darkest of powers
as anathemas to Jesus and assuredly
damned, then stagger-swagger home
and later boast of their temerity,
an event so predictable the town police
didn't bother finding their identities,
their identities being already known
and not wanting to know more,
they'd replace the hasp and lock and judge
their labor sufficient unto the day,
until the whereabouts of a missing child
revealed the township's dull bucolic
a deceit, and the parents raised hell
all the way to the capital and the governor.
Then with a kick the church doors
flew back, terrifying swifts into frantic flight,
revealing the decomposing body
of a dark-skinned grade-schoolboy,
his clothes in a pile and a 5 foot
length of chain with a padlock
at the flailing end in a heap on the floor
and five 22 cartridge casings
where a firearm had spat them out,

LOCAL HABITATIONS

and no one ever held to account.
Several years later the church caught fire,
arson probably, and little now grows
but weeds through stony rubbish
where once it stood, and where the poor
might find respite and where the ghost
might now reside cannot be determined.

OLD TIMES THERE ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

for Mark Roberts

A student at Patrick Henry High, Oakum asserted he didn't give a shit about Marse Robert, Stonewall Jackson, Beaux Beauregard, or any of them fancy Southern boys when queried by his eleventh-grade teacher regarding his opinion of the Southern Cause, which only compounded the contempt his classmates and teachers heaped upon him and which he indifferently shouldered enroute to the admin office where he waited, ear-phoned, AC/DC grinding his brain to mush, until he was granted audience with Principal Dumas in his chambers, a magisterial presence behind a dreadnaught of a desk, beckoning him forward, calling his attention to the Patrick Henry High motto, Liberty or Death! in frou-frou script printed on what looked to be parchment of recent production, framed and hanging close by his desk, on which he opined in not a few words, then, moved by the gravity of Oakum's offense and his own eloquence, ventured upon a peroration, the gist being: as foul language is the preferred mode of discourse among louts, lunatics, and lost souls, Oakum's own soul might soon be irredeemably corrupted unless he were to confess his sins, accept Jesus as lord and savior, and thereby

receive grace, born again to everlasting life,
the sooner the better because one just never knows.
Wasting not a moment, Oakum nodded,
perhaps ironically, irony being unknown
to Principal Dumas or beyond his grasp.
Either way, Oakum was then dismissed with a smile
and a hearty handshake, whereupon he walked
three miles home jamming out to Motley Crewe,
foregoing further immersion in the glories
of American History by returning to class.
And did he fear reprisal of a physical nature
from Patrick Henry Patriot jocks due
to his indifference inre the Southern Cause?
That Oakum worked as a farmhand on weekends
and all summer left him a well-knit hefty youth
given wide berth as he walked Patrick Henry halls
or smoked a blunt with Billy Winsome,
his one companion, in the parking lot in front
of God and everyone, though on occasion
Coach Boysman Flagrante would proposition
him to try out for P. H. Patriots football
where Boysman was sure he would excel.
But Oakum would decline, often by simply
not responding, in accordance with his mama's
wishes, making it clear she had no use
for a boy who wasted time playing football
when he could be working and bringing home
some money because she didn't make shit
cleaning other folk's houses and didn't he have

enough on his hands just staying out of trouble with the law and banging that slut Tiffany, and yes, you better believe she knew because Tiffany's mom told her all about it while standing in the Dollar General checkout, followed by a silence only to be shattered about ten seconds later when she added, "What you going to do when you knock her up?" an outcome so plausible and of such magnitude she was compelled to shut her eyes and meditate. When she emerged from her reflection, uncharacteristically dispassionate, she told him if that happened, as was most likely, he damn well better marry her, and Mama, now true to form, got a bit weepy remembering her own pregnancy and hasty hymeneal followed by the birth of baby Oakum, cute at the time, not so much now, the same Oakum who replied, rather demurely, "She's on the pill Mama. We aint stupid," leaving Mama to recall that Tiffy was just 16, prompting Mama to petition the heavens, "Sweet Lawd, she's just a child, just a baby girl." Then, switching attention from the Almighty to Oakum, she queried how little Tiffy gets 'em and was informed little Tiffy gets 'em herself with money she makes after school bagging groceries at the Piggly Wiggly, fated to close within a year, starved of revenue by the new Walmart just off Exit 5. The integration concluded, Mama prophesized

they'd be married within a year, accurately, as was so often the case when Mama augured. And soon the foreseen marriage was arranged, a secular affair, as preferred by all parties, under the auspices of Randy Communion, JP, who sealed the deal for \$25 and a bag of weed, some of which was rolled, fired, and shared among the assembled celebrants, then chased with a toast of Sweet Bitch Moscato Rosé Bubbly, courtesy of Billy Winsome and Tiffy's mama, Rose. Thus the banns were reviewed, approved, and conducted by properly vested authorities and later consummated at the Dollywood DreamMore Resort & Spa where they spent a three-day weekend of rollercoaster rides, BBQ, and disco—an artform in which Oakum displayed a stunning mastery—and other shameless pleasures, and a grand fine time it was, too.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Edison Jennings lives in Southern Appalachia, working as a Head Start aide and GED tutor. He holds a Virginia Commission for the Arts Fellowship. His poems have appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Rattle*, *Slate*, *Southern Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. His book, *Intentional Fallacies*, is available at Broadstone Books.

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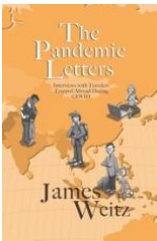
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