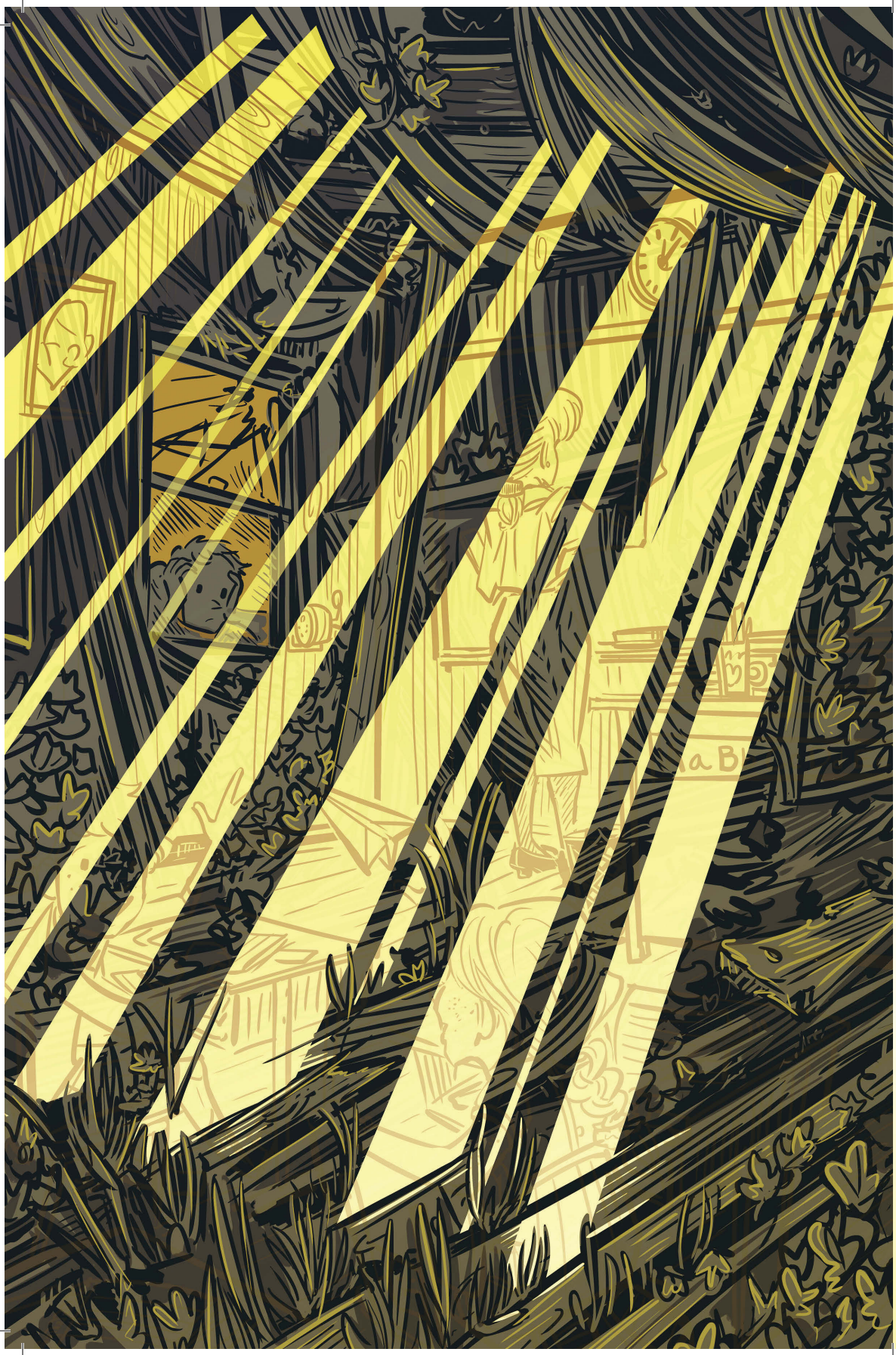

Elegy FOR A School

The lunch ladies were my first role models in social justice.

by SILAS HOUSE

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GROWING UP, I NEVER WOULD HAVE BELIEVED THAT my elementary school—the center of our community, where we gathered for everything from ballgames to family portraits—would someday be shuttered. I can still conjure all of the life that once lived within the walls of the school, which was built in the 1920s and occupied by people who loved it for more than eighty years.

I left the sanctuary of Lily Elementary School in 1985 when I entered eighth grade at the junior high in town, but I can walk its hallways and visit its classrooms in my mind. I can taste the water from the tall drinking fountain across from the principal's office. I can see the shining basketball and football trophies in the large glass case that greeted us when we entered the front doors. I can smell the textbooks, and the coal that burned in the wintertime. I can hear the cries of the wooden stairs leading down to the dungeon of a boys' bathroom, where the communal urinal looked more like an elongated bathtub mounted to the blackish-gray cinder block walls. I can run across the playground, which was cut in two by a creek full of crawdads. I can still run my fingers over the spines of all the books in the library, ruled over by the heron-like Mrs. Bill. At the time I thought her stern and foreboding. Now I recall her smiling as she presided over the Scholastic Book Fair or leaned over to offer me a book.

Upon leaving the library and turning left I pass through the hallway of metal lockers whose interiors we decorated with pictures cut from magazines: the cast of *The Outsiders*, Michael Jackson moonwalking, the TV character ALF. There is the stairwell where I received my first kiss from a pretty girl named Tiffany when we were both twelve. She slid her tongue between my teeth and I

reeled back, nearly falling down, looking at her as if she had just eased a knife into my belly. Then a left into the classroom where Sandra Stidham taught my seventh grade English class. One day she read a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay to us: "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why." We all laughed at the title, but by the end we had grown quiet. I noticed the beauty of phrases like "the rain is full of ghosts" and "thus in winter stands the lonely tree." When she finished, we saw that there were tears in her eyes. Nobody laughed then. Nobody said a word. I had never seen anyone so moved by literature, and her revelation of vulnerability unlocked a door for me.

But perhaps the most important place of all for us was the lunchroom, which stood unconnected from the school to keep its heat from invading our classrooms throughout the warm months. At the back of the lunchroom, a stainless-steel counter divided us from the lunch ladies, as everyone called them, who served our food. They wore white uniforms, white plastic aprons, and black hairnets. They smiled and joked with us in a way that the teachers never did. Our teachers had been taught that they must change their native way of speaking since they were college graduates, ridding themselves of accents and colloquialisms. The theory at the time in our parts was that children could best succeed if their ruralness, their Appalachian identity, was erased. Teachers were on the front lines of this initiative. Whereas they were expected to be stern, serious, and urbane in their speech and mannerisms, the lunch ladies were kind, jovial, and unapologetically country. They reared back to laugh with open mouths. They knew us all by name but usually called us by terms of endearment: Honey, Sweetheart, Baby. We were allowed to call them by their first names: Roberta, Cotha, Billie, Sadie, Carolyn. One of them was my mother. Betty.

She had taken the job shortly after I entered the elementary school for two reasons: We needed the income, and she wanted to be near me. Upon learning that my mother worked at my school lunchroom, a few people have asked me if I was ever ashamed of this. It never occurred to me to be embarrassed of her in any way, shape, or form. I was proud of her, especially because the other children loved her. We loved all of the lunch ladies.

Looking back, I understand that they were my first role models in social justice. They were charitable, and they stood up for what they believed in. I saw Carolyn and Sadie slip extra food to the poorer kids. I knew, even though she never told me, that my mother gave money to children whom she had found had some specific need. All throughout my elementary school years my mother took them to B&H Shoes or Bob's Ready-to-Wear, where she bought them pairs of PONY high tops or Easter dresses.

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My least favorite teacher once caught the poorest boy in my class chewing Fruit Stripe gum. She demanded that he spread the gum across his nose and wear it there the entire day. When we went into the lunchroom, Billie, my mother's closest

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friend, demanded he tell her why the gum was there. She listened with her hands on her hips, though she already knew the answer. After he explained, she took the hardened gum from his nose and told him that if the teacher had a problem to come see her. She was bucking a strict class hierarchy by stepping in, but that teacher knew better than to say a word to her. Billie was never able to have any children of her own. Later I would find out that she, too, bought many of my peers school clothes or notebooks and crayons. She eventually adopted one of the students.

They made us feel loved, that most important thing for a child. And what better act of loving than to feed someone? The lunchroom food was delicious back then, before the board of education contracted with large food suppliers who mostly sold them prepared meals and canned products. Our lunch ladies prepared almost everything from scratch. The yeast rolls were so perfect they might have floated up off the plate before us. There was the homemade pizza covered in thick commodity-style cheese, red sauce, and brown blooms of sausage. Soup beans, beef stew, squares of cornbread with real butter, chicken and dumplings, coconut cake. For some of the kids, these were the only hot meals of the day. Always on the last days of school before Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter break they served us heaping mounds of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, fried corn, and bowls of banana pudding with crunchy wafers.

Most of the students didn't realize how hard they worked, but I sometimes got to go back in the kitchen, so I knew that the floors were slick with grease, that the space broiled with the heat from the big ovens and stove. I knew the way their hands shriveled and wrinkled from the scorching dishwater. I saw my mother's swollen ankles and the blisters on her big toes from standing all day. I smelled the scent of bleach she could

Photo of Lily School courtesy of the author

never wash out. Yet we thought the lunch ladies were all having a ball as they cooked and cleaned for us. We saw them push through their days with laughter and jokes and singing, my mother leading them in gospel hymns or Loretta Lynn songs as they mopped and wiped down tables.

All of those women are gone now, except for my mother. The lunchroom was torn down years ago. But I can still move about it as if in a dream.

By the time I had children of my own, the school had been closed and consolidated with another one a few miles down the road. This was cheaper, the school board said, than trying to remodel Lily School into a useable space. The campus stood silent and empty for years. The beating heart of the little town was removed, and the life around it has been seeping out ever since.

I went back there recently and walked around outside. The coal pile was long gone but had left a stain by the basement wall. The river flowed on behind the school, green as the first acorns of summer. Down the entire back wall of the main school building someone had spray-painted DO METH AND HAIL SATAN HAHAHA. I tried all of the doors, but they had been chained and locked. I peered in through the old windows and saw that the beautiful floor of the gymnasium—once so painstakingly shellacked and polished—was buckling. One of the basketball goals hung askew. I thought I heard the bounce of basketballs, the whoosh of kickballs, the stark whistle of our PE teacher ringing out. The library was empty of books and shelves. The windows to the classroom where Ms. Stidham had given me permission to be passionate about words were too high for me to look into, so it will remain the same in my mind, just as the demolished lunchroom will.

Not long after I visited, a Christian school bought the campus and repaired some of the classrooms. One hundred or so students now attend, but they bring their own lunches. Most of the students do not even live in Lily. There are no 4-H meetings or school dances or cake walks like there used to be at Lily School. The children of Lily are now crowded onto buses and no longer walk to school in laughing groups, the way we did. If I had my way, it would still be a public school, but I am glad the rooms are at least occupied once again; the life there will sustain the old walls for a few more years, even if it will never be the same again.

The lunchroom is gone, but the lessons I learned there remain. Someday the entire school will be gone. One by one the people who walked its hallways when it was Lily School are leaving this world. But for now the boy who first felt the thrill of poetry there, the boy who felt safe when he heard the lunch ladies calling his name—he's still here, and many others who knew that place are, too.

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