



Julie Sola

Hand-pulled linocuts by Julie Sola accompany the poetry in Vinegar & Char.

POETRY, IN MOTION

Behind the scenes of Vinegar & Char

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

AT THE END OF 2016, SHORTLY before I went on maternity leave, John T. Edge floated the idea of compiling an SFA poetry anthology—an idea he credited to the poet Kevin Young (a good friend of John T. and of the SFA). It would be published in the fall of 2018 to coincide with our food and literature symposium.

He asked me what I thought about the idea. What I thought was, Books take two years, minimum. This is not happening. What I said was, “Sure! We can do that!” I felt slightly less daunted when the wonderfully talented Sandra Beasley, a long-time SFA collaborator and frequent Gravy contributor, agreed to serve as the editor. Then, I became a mother and forgot the whole thing.

Toward the end of my leave, John T. texted to say that Sandra would be in town for a week at the end of April, and could we put our heads together about the poetry book? I was probably doing at least two of the following at that moment: holding Sally, strolling Sally, singing the alphabet to Sally in an unscientific attempt at fostering early literacy, folding laundry, or watching *The West Wing*. I read “April” as “August,” and again replied, “Sure!,” and again forgot the whole thing. (In my defense, I’d like to say that I put a stop to this pattern once I returned to work.)

April came around, Sally was four months old and reciting her ABCs (kidding!), Kirk and I were moving houses, and all of a sudden it was poetry week. Sandra doesn’t know this, but her visit gave me the most satisfying, energizing intellectual exercise I didn’t know I needed.

We sat on my porch and read and talked about poetry while Sally napped. Sandra brought with her sheaves of poems from dozens of poets. Some of them I knew as Gravy contributors or symposium presenters. Most were new

to me. There were female, male, and nonbinary voices. Voices from the Texas borderlands, from the hills of Appalachia, from the Cuban districts of Miami. Black voices, white voices, Latino and Asian American voices. Their poems spoke of gender. Of labor. Of class and race. They dealt with the past and the present. They were peopled with family, friends, and strangers. With one exception, these poets are all living, all still writing. Across geography and generation, two things connect their work: food and region.

It was a pleasure to work with Sandra on the selection of these poems, and a luxury to revel in their language and rhythms. Ultimately, fifty-five of them constitute Vinegar & Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance. Let me be clear: My role in this process was, at most, that of the little girl in the *Shake ‘n Bake* commercial. Sandra’s vision shaped this collection. And it shapes an expansive, inclusive view of the South—of its people and their foodways. That’s a view shared by the SFA, and it describes a place I want to live. A place I do live.

Here, we’ve gathered fourteen of those poems to share with Gravy readers, as well as a *lagniappe*: a new poem by Sandra Beasley that, for now at least, you’ll only find in these pages. Gravy image editor Danielle A. Scruggs commissioned Gabriella Demczuk to make the mixed-media art that accompanies the poems.

Savor this selection. Read each poem aloud. Share it with a friend, a coworker, a loved one. And when you’re finished, the rest of Vinegar & Char awaits at your local bookstore. 🍷