



First Helpings

JUST VISITIN'

I CAN HARDLY REMEMBER A time the SFA wasn't a part of my life. You are my chosen family. So I was flattered, honored, and, quite frankly, terrified when Sara Camp Milam asked me to take the reins of this issue of *Gravy*. SFA is my home. You take care of your home.

Though I'm a proud daughter of the red clay hills of central Mississippi, in this issue, I've chosen to pay tribute to Alabama, where I went to college (Auburn), and where I've stashed my bourbon and welcomed friends to my humble porch for the past decade. Languid afternoons on the swing and late-night revelry have reinforced my appreciation for this place and its people. Some of us have therapists. I have the porch. The repertory act of gathering for good food and drink, breathing fresh air, and connecting with kith and kin restores and rejuvenates. The bourbon is really just a bonus.

This time of year, nothing sustains like submersion in Alabama's robust lake culture, a scene I know well from many (*many*) days dock sitting and



JVC (right) with SFA member Caroline Rosen in New Orleans

star-flecked nights skinny dipping. In "Nothing Green but the Plates" (page 46), David Hagedorn reflects on the ritual and pageantry of the experience.

As this issue hits your hands, I will be moving from Birmingham for a new adventure in New Orleans, where I plan to post up often at Cafe Henri (on the cover). So, while this issue is my swan song to this state and its lakes, dynamic immigrant populations, and Chez Fonfon chicken liver mousse, Alabama will always resonate. Maybe, in another decade Sara Camp will ask me to edit the JVC Louisiana edition. They have porches there, too. —Jennifer V. Cole

Courtesy of Jennifer V. Cole

FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR NATALIE NELSON

When *Gravy* thinks about adding visual elements to a story, the choice between illustration and photograph is usually straightforward. Over the past year, when we aimed to evoke a playful approach, we've called on **NATALIE NELSON**. Her drawings are lighthearted; they can poke fun, and are often charmingly unexpected. In *Gravy*, her work has illustrated Sandra Beasley's poetry and David Wondrich's futuristic drink recipes. She's contributed to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and has two picture books to her credit. This issue, you'll find her take on John Kessler's experience at Nashville's Treehouse on page 65.

What are you working on these days?

I'm illustrating a picture book about the collective nouns we use for groups of animals, which comes out in 2018 with Greenwood Books. I work on several editorial illustrations each month, which is always exciting because each new job offers the chance to read an interesting article and solve a new creative challenge. Additionally, I've been making bookstore and school visits to promote *The King of the Birds*, a picture book I illustrated that came out last fall. It was written by Acree Graham Macam and is inspired by Flannery O'Connor. The book weaves real events from O'Connor's childhood (like teaching her chicken to walk backwards) with an imagined tale about one of her beloved peacocks.

How did you develop your style of using mixed media and archival images?

It's hard to remember exactly how and when everything started to click. I had a wonderful high school art teacher who introduced me to mixed media artists like Robert Rauschenberg, and she challenged me to experiment and push boundaries with materials and processes. When I started

pursuing illustration more seriously, I found that combining photo pieces with my drawings lent a sense of humor and levity to my work, and for the first time I really connected with the pieces I was making.

What's your forthcoming book about?

My new picture book, *Uncle Holland*, written by JonArno Lawson, is essentially a story about making choices. The main character, Holland, has a mischievous streak and a problem with stealing things. Eventually, he is faced with a choice between two consequences for his theft: go to jail or join the army. He chooses to join the army, and while he is stationed on a tropical island, he learns to paint the exotic fish that he sees in the ocean. He eventually realizes, through painting, that "not everything that's pretty can be stuffed in your pockets." The book comes out April II.



What are you watching or reading that helps expand your work? How do you get ideas?

I try to get off of the internet as much as possible when I'm coming up with concepts for new projects. I like to go on walks or bike rides to clear my head and think through the tasks ahead of me. I just finished reading *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. And I started watching *The Crown* on Netflix because I got an assignment to illustrate an article about the show.

Justen Clay