

TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE

NOT SO STRANGE AFTER ALL

IN THE SPRING OF MY FRESHMAN year in college, I took a Brit Lit class in which we spent nearly half the semester on George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. The professor was energetic, charming, occasionally subversive, and hysterically funny—and I could not for the life of me understand what he saw in the book. (It's been exactly fifteen years; I should probably give it another try.)

I have a clear memory of just a snippet of one lecture. Professor Nunokawa turned to the blackboard and wrote, in letters large enough to read from the back of the English department's largest lecture hall, TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE. "Where does that lyric come from?" he asked.

"David Bowie!" exclaimed a voice a few rows ahead of me. It came from a girl named Lauren, a tall sophomore in two of my classes who seemed, from a distance, to be intimidatingly cool without trying very hard.

I had heard of David Bowie, but I could not have named any of his songs, including "Changes." The professor seemed pleased, even a bit impressed. I remember feeling jealous. Much of my freshman year felt like a constant reminder of how little I knew.

That's it. That's the memory. I can no longer recall how "turn and face the strange" led to the nugget of literary

theory that would have framed that day's lecture. And it could only have led to theory—one thing you learn in college is that your own interpretation of a text no longer counts.

My opinion counts for something now, insofar as I get to choose the stories that appear in these pages. And as we worked on this issue, I kept returning to the words, "turn and face the strange." I love this issue for shaking me—and, I hope, you, dear reader—out of my comfortable assumptions about this region. Out of unquestioned, or underquestioned, notions about the American South's past, present, and future. Of who stakes a claim; who calls this place home. Of who comes to visit, and why, and what they find.

The stories in this issue make the strange familiar, and they make the familiar strange. They are stories from native daughters, adopted sons, and perceptive tourists. I encourage you to turn and face the strange—to engage with it, to explore it, to ingest it—until it becomes familiar, until it becomes everyday. I think we'll find a place, and a future, for all to claim. —*Sara Camp Milam*



FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR NABEN RUTHNUM

IN HIS 2017 BOOK, *CURRY: Eating, Reading, and Race*, Naben Ruthnum argues that too much writing about South Asia— and too much thinking about people of the Indian diaspora—tends to use curry as a simple cliché for a complicated range of ingredients, tastes, and identities. The SFA asked him to apply that same notion to writing and thinking about the American South—an equally complicated place often rendered in the language of moonlight and magnolias, of Grandma's lard can and Aunt Sissy's biscuits. The result was a lecture that Ruthnum delivered as scholar-in-residence at this year's Blackberry Farm Taste of the South. We've adapted it as a feature in this issue. Ruthnum lives in Toronto, where he writes in a range of genres for a variety of Canadian and international

publications. He will also speak at our Fall Symposium.

You write both fiction and nonfiction. What appeals to you about each of the two forms, and how (if at all) does one inform the other in your work?

I started in fiction and it's still the primary lens through which I view the world—so when it came to writing critical prose, and then other forms of essayistic nonfiction, I had a sense that the story was still the thing. I still find myself creating a narrative, even when I'm writing a book review. Fiction will always be my primary home, whether I'm writing a literary short story or a crime novel, but there is something about nonfiction that allows writers to access a different audience, to communicate with a certain kind of directness that I really enjoy.

How did you decide to write your new thriller, *Find You in the Dark*, under the pseudonym Nathan Ripley?

I came up with that pseudonym back when I was a teenager, because it's a longstanding tradition for writers who work in different genres to use different names—not everyone does it, but John Banville and Craig Davidson come to mind as examples of writers who do. I wanted to write literary fiction and also thrillers, and it seemed that a transparent pseudonym was a good way of letting readers know what they were getting.

Midway through my career, as I was starting to see expectations placed on me to write an immigrant fiction novel, or a book that fit loosely into that "currybook" category I talk about in my essay, I found another value to having a WASPy-sounding pseudonym. I felt, and I think there is at least some truth to this, that I was able to submit manuscripts and have people read them without expecting them to be a certain kind of story.

You poke fun at what you call "currybooks," but you clearly know the genre. If you had to pick a favorite currybook, what would it be?

Ah! I think Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* does a great job of using, then exploding, the currybook conventions. And as for an "immigrant novel" that shows how broad the category can be, and how distinct a book that fits into this category can be, I'd pick Akhil Sharma's *Family Life*.



THE DESI DREAM TEAM: FIVE CHEFS TO KNOW

In January of this year, five Indian American chefs staged a dinner at Meherwan Irani's Chai Pani in Decatur, Georgia. It was the first in a planned "Brown in the South" supper series, featuring chefs of Indian descent who have made the American South their home. Read more about the dinner and what it meant to an adopted Southerner—our deputy editor, Osayi Endolyn, in her column on page 8. First, though, meet the chefs.

VISHWESH BHATT is a native of Gujarat state. He moved to the United States to attend college at the University of Kentucky, where he was student body president. He began graduate school at the University of Mississippi, before restaurant kitchens pulled him down a different path.

Bhatt is the chef at Snackbar in Oxford—don't miss his okra chaat.

MANEET CHAUHAN graduated from the premier school of hospitality & hotel management in India before making her way to the United States. She earned a degree from the

Culinary Institute of America and ran restaurants in New Jersey, New York, and Chicago. Since 2014, Chauhan and her family have made Nashville their home. Chauhan Ale & Masala House is the flagship of her growing empire.

ASHA GOMEZ founded

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
Vishwesh Bhatt, Meherwan Irani,
Maneet Chauhan, Asha Gomez,
John T. Edge, and Cheetie Kumar

Cardamom Hill and Spice to Table in Atlanta. She now operates Third Space and recently launched DYAD Tea & Spice Company. Gomez's Kerala fried chicken put her on the map; less known but equally sublime is her black-pepper-inflected carrot cake.

MEHERWAN IRANI directs Chai Pani, an Indian street-food restaurant with locations in Decatur and Asheville. He takes inspiration from his grandfather, who owned a café serving tea, kababs, and Indo-Persian cuisine in the family's hometown of Ahmednagar, India.

Thanks to **CHEETIE KUMAR**, 14 W. Martin Street is the coolest spot in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina. There, Kumar and her husband, Paul Siler, operate three businesses: Garland, an Indian and Asian restaurant; Neptune's Parlour, an underground cocktail bar; and Kings, a live-music venue that Kumar and Siler revived after a much-lamented closure by the previous owners.

Above: Molly Milroy. Right: Kendyll Hillegas

SOUTHERN SIP

YAUPON HOLLY IS MORE THAN ORNAMENTAL SHRUB

BY STEPHANIE BURT



SET ASIDE THAT YERBA MATE. ITS CLOSE North American cousin, yaupon holly, is poised to become a breakout American beverage. Southern drink makers have tapped this ancient plant as a black tea alternative that lends itself to culinary applications with a caffeinated kick.

Once brewed by Native American tribes like the Cherokee, Choctaw, and the Ais of Florida, "black drink," later called, yaupon tea was widely consumed in the North Carolina Outer Banks and other pockets of the South. As indigenous knowledge and foraging waned, so did sipping yaupon.

But the tea is making a comeback. "It tastes like green tea with more earthy maltiness," says Scott Blackwell of High Wire Distilling in Charleston, South Carolina. It's a star ingredient in the distillery's Southern Amaro Liqueur. Dai Due in Austin, Texas, serves black yaupon iced tea, and Asi Yaupon Tea outside Savannah, Georgia, distributes a bottled yaupon tea product. Although most yaupon is still foraged or grown on small plots, Asi owner Lou Thomann farms the shrub on seventy-six acres and expects to produce 30,000 pounds of tea in 2018.

The University of Mississippi, Mississippi State, the University of North Carolina, Clemson, and the University of Georgia are conducting yaupon research. "It's America's most important and neglected economic plant," says Arkansas-based herbalist and author Steven Foster. If Southern producers have a say, that disregard won't last much longer.

Stephanie Burt hosts The Southern Fork podcast and is a writer based in Charleston, South Carolina.

THE EVERYDAY RADICAL

JULIA TURSHEN ON THE QUIET POWER OF COOKBOOKS

*In late February, the SFA held our Winter Symposium in Birmingham, Alabama. One hundred and eighty curious writers, readers, thinkers, eaters, and chefs joined us for a day of talks about the power of narratives to effect change. One of the speakers was cookbook writer Julia Turshen, whose most recent titles are Feed the Resistance and Small Victories. Her wife, Grace Bonney, is the founder of the website Design*Sponge. What follows is a snippet of Turshen's talk, one that has stuck with us and prompted thoughtful discussion in our office and in our homes.*

I have loved to cook since before I can remember and taught myself how to do so through cookbooks. I was the kid who couldn't fall asleep without reading a cookbook. It was like looking at a forecast of the meals I might get to cook one day in my own home when I was a grown up. It was pure fantasy on the page.

As I got older, though, I realized that these pages that meant so much to me didn't actually fully reflect me. It is why I intentionally bring my full self to my work, which means my identity as a proud gay woman. It is why I'll intentionally do things like title a favorite cake recipe "Happy Wife, Happy Life Cake." The most gratifying part of what I do has nothing to do with the food. It's hearing from other gay women what it means to see the word "wife" written so often by another woman. This moment of connection is such a powerful moment of



Julia Turshen at the SFA Winter Symposium

feeling seen and heard and illustrates what my friend Sara Franklin calls "the quiet power of cookbooks."

Cookbooks might not be an obvious flag for the LGBT community to fly. But it's exactly that that makes cookbooks so unexpectedly powerful. They reflect our everyday. They normalize anything that is other. They live in intimate spaces and moreover people can cook from them! They bring your not only onto their coffee tables, but into their bodies and their memories. Cookbook

readers put out a veritable welcome mat for cookbook authors. This is incredible access. And with this access we get a chance to tell our stories and create more visibility, understanding, and even change.

Maybe next time you cook at home, you'll use a recipe written by someone who doesn't look like you and understand what the food means to that person. Or maybe you'll choose to go to a restaurant run by someone who is not from where you're from and you'll ask them about the thing on the menu you don't recognize. Maybe you'll invite a neighbor over and get to better know them or break bread with someone with opposing views and talk about the differences in a safe space. When it comes to expanding our perspectives, exercising compassion, and feeding change, there is no such thing as too many cooks in the kitchen.

Celestia Morgan



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