

The Word of the Lord

Jay Snodgrass

First Place—Short Story Competition
The Chris Read Award for Fiction

With Brother Schultz’s droning, preacherly voice slowly fading into the background of my mind, the growing picture of my New York City neighborhood taking its place became crisper and more defined. Tenement fire escapes zigzag skyward, cracks in the sidewalk make hopscotch for the local kids, my mother waters the banana plants on the iron landing outside our window. I could almost believe I was back there again...

“Jacob. *Jacob!*” Grandma’s sharp whisper woke me from my reverie. Nails on a chalkboard. I winced.

“Yeah, Grandma? What is it?”

“Don’t you ‘Yeah, Grandma’ me! You say ‘Yes ma’am’ right now, you hear?”

“Yes ma’am. What’s the matter?”

“Don’t you play dumb, boy. You’re fallin’ asleep in church again, Jacob, an’ I won’t have it.”

“I expect the Lord doesn’t care too much,” I replied with a grin.

“Well how’re you gonna know what the Lord do an’ don’t care about if you’re asleepin’ while he’s talkin’?” Grandma retorted.

“If the Lord wanted me awake, I figure He’d’a woken me up himself.”

It was getting awful hot in the tiny church. Every one of the twelve double-hung windows was open as wide as could be, but the chance of a breeze that didn’t feel like

Satan breathing down my neck was slim to none, and the little paper fans stuck in between the hymnals on the backs of the pews were no match for the brutal Mississippi weather. A mosquito buzzed annoyingly close to my left ear. I had noticed none of this when wrapped up in my New York daydream, and I longed to return to it, but it was slipping away from my mind, just like the minnows that slipped through my fingers when I tried to catch them bare-handed in the creek behind Grandma and Grandpa’s house. I tugged at the tie around my neck.

“The Word of the Lord,” came Brother Schultz’s voice.

“Thanks be to God,” the parish responded.

Lately I hadn’t been thanking God for much. Momma and Daddy had decided I needed to “rediscover my roots” and “connect with my relatives,” so they shipped me back to the Mississippi Delta to live with Grandma and Grandpa for the summer.

“Try to understand them,” Momma had said. “They’re your family too, all those folks down in Cleveland.”



I didn’t see the family resemblance. I was miserable. I missed my friends—Aaron and Esperanza, Luis and Katie. I even missed my whiney baby sister Grace. I wanted to wander the streets of New York with them, not be trapped in the middle of nowhere in a house

Over the Garden Wall

Audrey Paige Robinson

Photography

that still didn't have air conditioning. I may have been born here, but we moved when I was three. This isn't my home; I don't come from any place but New York.

When we got home from church, Grandpa and I sat on the screen porch with our shirts off and tall glasses of lemonade in hand, the only way to cool off unless you felt like taking a swim in the muddy creek.

"Why doesn't this place make me feel like I'm home again?" I asked.

"Well, that's quite a question, all sudden-like," he replied, eyebrows raised. "I reckon you gotta figure that out yourself, but maybe I can help just a little." He and I pulled on fresh shirts, and in a moment, we were bouncing down the road in his beat-up 1962 C-10, headed for the Mississippi River.

And twenty minutes later, there it was, stretching across the horizon: a vast expanse of brownish green water, hundreds of yards wide. Beyond it, Arkansas.

My breath caught in my throat. I had seen big rivers before—the Hudson, the East—but this was different. The sun caught the tips of the waves, a million fairies dancing on the water. Mystical.

"You know your great-great grandpa was a ferryman? Took people back and forth across the river to McGehee. I think he's got a name on a ferrymen's memorial somewhere 'round here," Grandpa rambled.

We took some backroads and parked the C-10 under a magnolia near the bank. Slowly, I climbed out. The sight of the river had stirred something in me. I began to stumble towards it, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster, ripping off my shoes and socks as I ran, until I was sprinting into the shallow water at the edge.

"Grandpa, I'm gettin' it! I think I'm gettin' it now!"

Grandpa just stood by the truck and smiled his big, sideways smile.

My feet sank into the mud. Mud that my ancestors could have stood in. What would that old ferryman think of his great-great grandson, come all the way back from the big city just to stand where he stood?

"Jesus," I whispered, a whole prayer contained in that one word. △

The Chris Read Award for Fiction

The Chris Read Award for Fiction, instituted with the 1994 issue of *Southern Voices*, honors a member of the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science's Class of 1991. Christopher David Read was an active leader at MSMS as a member of Emissaries, the Debate Club, and the *Southern Voices* staff. Chris's first love, however, was writing. Southern style.

Chris often wove his Southern tales late at night. Chris would compose either on the computer or on (his favorite) the old, brown Royal typewriter he had bought from the pawn shop down 13th Street South. Faking sleep, I would watch the grin on Chris's face as he worked out the next great story. When he finished, Chris would always "wake me" and excitedly read his new story to me. He never knew that I had been hiding, watching his creative process with admiration. I was not the only one to admire Chris's work. This award stands as testimony to the admiration that we all held for Chris and his work and as a memorial to the Southern writing tradition which Chris loved.

Chris had the potential to become a great writer. Unfortunately, Chris never reached this potential: he was killed in a car wreck on January 17, 1993. Though Chris will never attain his dream of writing a great novel, all of those who loved and respected Chris hope that the recipient of this Award, as well as all the other aspiring writers at MSMS, will achieve their dreams.

Michael D. Goggans
Class of 1991