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Road Kill Art

by Niles Reddick

Driving home from work, I noticed some remains on the side of the road. I may not have even noticed the litter dotting the landscape had the radio not announced earlier that the Tennessee legislature was considering the Road Kill Bill, which would give the hungry Volunteers the right to pick up, cook, and eat animals murdered by cars along the road. I slowed the vehicle from 55 mph to 30 mph to see. The obliterated carcass had once been a deer, and the only way I could really tell was because of two legs with hooves, which lay over the white line at the edge of the asphalt. The brief glimpse created a gnawing feeling to pull over and salvage what I could; however, the beeping horn from the car behind caused me to resume speed, curse, and rationalize that I had no gloves with which to collect the road kill.

My Aunt Elizabeth would be proud of me, I imagined, had she known I even thought about stopping for the road kill. After all, she had collected road kill a lot, not for food but art, and I believed she secretly admired those who were like her regardless of how much. My mother, on the other hand, would say, "I knew you would turn out like her. I always said you would."

I wasn't aware of all my aunt's eccentric behaviors. I was, nevertheless, cognizant of some of her oddities. When my father's family would gather for a reunion, I remembered, everyone brought something. Fried chicken, ham, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, pumpkin pie, and fried pies are a few of the morsels which conjure orgasmic memories. My aunt brought tea (peroxide tea). I was the only relative who knew the sweetened iced tea in recycled milk jugs contained peroxide.

"Aunt Elizabeth," I had inquired. "How come this tea has a fizz?"

She'd half-smiled, non-verbally complimenting my perceptive abilities, cupped her hand, and whispered, "It's got peroxide in it. Don't tell nobody. Peroxide has one extra atom of oxygen. With all the pollution, we

need the extra oxygen."

My inquisitive expression turned to horror. "But won't it eat the lining of the digestive track?"

"No. It's only got a smidgen. I've been doing it for years."

"Oh," I'd responded, not really knowing what to say and watching as she waltzed across the wooden floors of the lake cabin, filling empty cups and smiling when she was complimented for her tea-making abilities. Personally, I drank Coke, feared a repeat of Jonestown, and longed for a psychology class to help me understand and alleviate my fear of inheriting her genes.

Being unchurched, divorced, and free-spirited were reasons enough for family members to label her nuts. With looks like Anne Bancroft and a personality like Auntie Mame, Aunt Elizabeth was surreal to me. The black sheep of my dad's family, Aunt Elizabeth was often lonely, I believed, because of her convictions, which were contrary to my family's Christian fundamentalism and precipitated lengthy phone calls about their sadness at her going to hell. A family member would most likely hear from Aunt Elizabeth lengthy sermons about the reality of Big Foot; aliens; the government cover-up of Kennedy's assassination; the untapped powers of the human psyche to time-travel and levitate; E.S.P.; psychokinesis; reincarnation; and ghosts. To contradict her was to call her a liar, resulting in ostracism, till the next family reunion; then, the family member would consume the peroxide tea, compliment her, and all would be forgiven because she'd ultimately won, albeit secretly because Aunt Elizabeth never gloated.

I first became aware of my aunt's extensive road kill collection when I visited her. I was taking a psychology course with best selling near death experience author Raymond Moody, who was rather eccentric himself. I had heard stories of his burying a fortune in his yard. Nearly destitute in college, I fantasized borrowing a metal detector and shovel and

digging up his money late one night. Much to my dismay, I learned the gold and silver he buried (when he feared the economy might collapse in the 80s before the wall came down) had been dug up and cashed in when the economy improved; he'd made even more money because the day he cashed in, gold and silver hit an all-time high on the stock market. Moody had enjoyed my stories of Aunt Elizabeth, alleviated my fear of bad genes, and felt I should record them for later.

Armed with Moody's inspiration and new batteries in my tape recorder, I had paid my aunt a visit. I knew going in about her tea, her beliefs, her personality, but I did not know of her collection. Sipping peroxide tea on her screened-in porch, I was surrounded by road kill. Deer legs were propped in corners. Clothespinned by their wings, birds dangled from wire coat hangers hung on rusty nails sticking out from the wall. Various types of snakes, their heads missing, lay across a card table. Crisp frogs, lizards, and insects lined the baseboard, reminding me of the plastic soldiers I'd had as a child. Finally, opossum, raccoon, and skunk skins lay across the back of an adirondack chair. Interestingly enough, nothing stunk.

"You mind if I record?"

"What you gonna do with it?" my aunt asked, her eyes squinting. "I've had enough people make fun of me."

"No," I stammered. "I wouldn't do that. I might write about you one day. Plus, I want to learn."

I don't know if it was the thought of her being in print or that one relative wanted to be like her that made her point a finger toward the recorder and nod. Nearing sixty then, Aunt Elizabeth sat cross-legged in cut-off blue jeans, a Tweety bird sweat shirt, and flip-flops. She lit a cigarette, tilted her head back, and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"First, why do you collect road kill?"

"To make stuff."

"Like what?"

"Well," she turned toward the birds. "Once the birds are ready, I will use the feathers to make hand-held fans. Dove's the

newest. I was out walking the other morning and saw it on the side of the road. Must've been hit by a car. Doves aren't as fast as other birds. Anyway, I said to myself, 'If that thing is still there on my way back, I'll get it.' It was, so I knew it was meant for me to get."

"Hmmm" was all I could say. For some reason, I found her story strange. Where would the dead dove go? I wondered.

"The snake skins'll be made into belts. I cut their heads off, cleaned them, soaked them in bleach, and made necklaces. I gave one to your cousin [her only child by her second husband who had abandoned them]. She was offered two thousand dollars for it in Atlanta."

"Wow," I said. "Did she sell it?"

"No, it's worth more than that," she said.

Fool, I thought. She should have sold it; there were plenty more snake heads out there.

"The deer legs I'm going to use for table legs on a coffee table. That will be an interesting sight, don't you think?"

"Yeah." I visualized family members visiting my aunt and trying to place coffee cups into saucers, and just when they were about to put the cups down, the table would move just a little to the left or right.

"I've already used a couple of raccoon skins for a toilet seat cover. I haven't decided what to do with those other skins. I don't really want to make a coat. Those [she pointed to the frogs, lizards, and insects] I ran across and thought they were different."

"Why?"

"Look at that frog. Looks like he's leaping. I came out of the drug store and saw him on the curb. I thought he must've wanted to cross the highway, but with all the cars speeding by, he was so scared that he just had a heart attack and froze."

A memory of my mother telling me my face would stick in a contorted position suddenly became more real than ever. "That's kind of funny," I said.

She smiled, nodded. "Wanna go inside?"

My fear of insanity had somewhat sub-

sided, being replaced with admiration for Aunt Elizabeth's creativity, but it was like the eye of a hurricane. I had not been inside her cottage since childhood, and when I entered, I was shocked. The impending feelings of doom resurfaced. The house was a combination flea market and antique store. Beautiful antique furniture (sofa, chairs, dining suit, and beds) decorated the cottage, yet every piece was covered with plastic or sheets. Cardboard boxes stacked to the ceiling formed walls, creating a maze-like atmosphere.

"What do you think?" My aunt asked.

"What's in the boxes?"

"Stuff I've collected over the years."

I'd hoped she would elaborate, but she didn't. "You don't think this is a fire hazard?"

"No," she said. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

We walked into the bathroom, and she pointed at the claw-foot bathtub, which looked brand new. "I redid it myself."

"I'm impressed," I said. Glancing around, I noticed a giant pickle jar, the sort one might notice on the counter of a convenience store, except this jar had no pickles. "What in the world is that?"

"Soap chips. Every time the bar of soap gets so small it's not effective, I put it in the jar."

"Why?"

"One day I might need some soap. I could melt those down and form new bars."

"Interesting," I said. We turned and

headed down the hallway to the kitchen, and I felt my aunt's behavior though a bit different was ultimately harmless enough and certainly not worthy of the harsh judgments dished out by family members.

A hidden nook in the kitchen revealed a door. Inside, shelves on either side held bottles of various colors, shapes, and sizes.

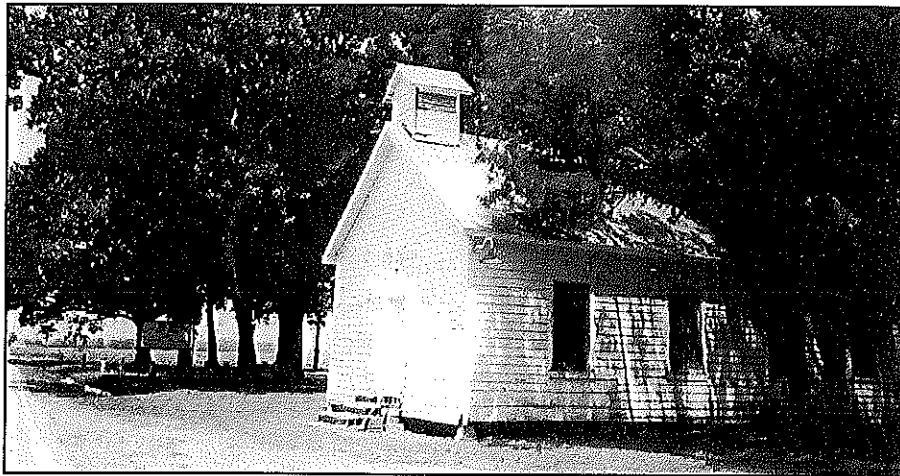
"Here you go," my aunt said, pulling a green bottle from a shelf.

"Thanks," I said, wiping the thick dust from the bottle. "What is it?"

"Muscadine wine," she said, smiling. "I made it forty years ago. It ought to be ready to drink now. If you like it, you can come back and get more."

I wondered if the wine, too, contained peroxide. "Okay," I said, knowing her gift was also a signal that it was time for me to leave. I wanted to share my bottle and stories and wondered if Moody would like this wine. After all, he had once brought Mogen David to an academic gathering, professing it to be a fine wine. While the stiffs were horrified, I understood his humor and his frugality. Certainly, Aunt Elizabeth's wine would be good, and after all, it was free.

Hugging my aunt goodbye, I hopped in my vehicle. It would be a while before we would visit again, but I left with a sense of relief and hope: relief that she did not fit neatly into a psychological box; hope that I, too, might one day bend the frame of normality just a bit. ▲▼▲



Roadside Worship. Photograph by Guy Lancaster.