

Literature Relevant to the Art and Historical Period

“City people don’t settle back when they listen to one another tell stories. In the city, it’s the punch line you listen for. That was the difference I didn’t catch right away. In the city, you might even interrupt the storyteller with your own quip and raise the ante. In the city, you don’t settle back to listen, you lean forward.

Whereas, when my father was a boy and used to spend summers on Blackwater, Virginia, where both his parents were born, people sat way back. They sat in swings and on cane bottom rockers and on porch steps. They waited for the midday heat to ease and the cornbread and bacon-boiled beans to settle. Somebody would start telling a story, and if you’d heard it already, that didn’t matter anymore than it mattered that hymns and ballads were sung over. You never jumped in. You waited your turn. You might have to wait till you were a grownup, but you knew there would be time for you too, someday, the Lord willing.

So you gazed out at the shimmer of heat between you and the side of the unpainted barn, or maybe at a little dustcloud in the distance on the dirt road, or perhaps at the ripe tobacco in the field, and you let Uncle Eck reminisce about his time in the army in the first war. Then someone would tell about the aunt who was so pretty and smart as a button and went for a teacher, but died of influenza in 1919. Or it might be a story about finding a blacksnake in the bed you are supposed to sleep in . . .

To my father, Shinnston, West Virginia, represented grand new vistas. This was the great world to him in a way city people can hardly imagine. Shinnston had folks from Syria and Spain and Yugoslavia. Shinnston had a mansion on a hill built by an Italian immigrant, and a dark little shop in town where an elderly Jew repaired shoes. My father says the first day he was in Shinnston, he met Dave Hardesty, who told him: ‘We have a real tall man here in town named Short, and we have a little short man named Long. There is a black man named White and a white man named Black.’ A town of wonders: everything was possible . . .

What I want to say about his (my father’s) stories is that it didn’t matter that I didn’t understand. What mattered was the sound of the voice that seemed to unreel with the blacktop. What mattered was the wonder of the mulberries and the pain of Mrs. Romeo calling him professor. What matters is the translucence of experience itself, which can, retold, transmit light without being entirely clear.

What I love is when the storyteller says simply, Just listen to this. Just listen. Listen.” (Willis)



18th Century line art drawing