My arm is as long as hers. I will reach out and snatch her bald-headed if she fools with me. She must not know who I am. I am Jesse B. Semple. I loves that girl, and I have come to the point where I will not take no tea for the fever. In fact, I will get rough. -- No Tea for the Fever, The Best of Simple, Langston Hughes.

We were always stared at. Whenever we went outside the neighborhood that knew us, we were inspected like specimens under glass. My mother prepared us. As she marched us down our front stairs, she would say what our smiles were on tiptoe to hear. "Come on children, let's go out and drive the white folks crazy." She said it without rancor, and she said it in that outrageous way to make us laugh. She was easing our entry into a world that outranked us and outnumbered us. If she could not help us see ourselves with the humor, however wry, that gives the heart its grace, she would never have forgiven herself for letting our spirits be crushed before we had learned to sheathe them with pride. -- The Richer, the Poorer, Dorothy West

My mother was child number nine. She is 4 feet, 11 ½ inches tall. My father once said to her in his endearing Southern manner, "Girl, you as pretty as a speckled trout." Her full name is Ruby Ester Marie Jackson West, a name worthy of a 6 foot tall person. Sometimes, just for the sake of devilment, I call her all fives names at the same time.

My mother hails from a cussing African grandmother, a sharecropping, white-lightening-drinking father, a racially conscious step-father, and a Bible-literate, white-skinned mother. Without shame, she revealed to me that she was glad Africans were brought to America. She is part of the "I ain't left nothing in Africa," school of thought. My mother felt saved and uplifted from the life she felt Africans led, a Hollywood-movie-tainted image handed to Americans in the 1950s through a tree-swinging, yodeling, Tarzan. Nevertheless, she knew how sadistic slavery had been, and she tirelessly fought white people for their hand in it and for their racist hold on her life. My mother knew about slavery first hand. Her own grandmother was an African raised in North Carolina bondage. Her name was Vinie Nobles. We called her Muh, short for Muhther-

Dear (Mother Dear).

Muh was blind. I don't know if she once had sight and became blind during the trauma of slavery or not. Being raised during the era when black families held carnal knowledge and other secrets from their children, I gathered only bits and pieces my family allowed me to hear. I knew a little from what I saw under Muh's dark, draped clothing when she was propped up in a corner of the front bedroom at 609 Oak Street. I saw that the angry, cussing African grandmother had a wing.

The children in the Oak Street household were told by parents, aunts and uncles not to ask Muh anything about her wing. The extra piece of skin grew up her arm, draped from lower arm pit to near her wrist. We were forbidden to ask her anything about slavery too. I certainly would have asked. I would have asked her in such a way that she would have spit out venom in the slop jar first, and answered me second.

‘‘Muh, Muh-dear. I was just wondering … how hot was it out there in the woods back when you was a slave, Muh-dear. I bet you didn't like it. I wouldn't like it. I don't like it now when Uncle Roy takes me out in the field to put out tobacco, all that sweat coming down my face. How could you stand it ! And, my teacher say slaves never did sleep. Muh, did you sleep when you was a slave ? We had Negro History Week at St. James and Rev. Blake told us kids in Sunday School that slaves tried to get away. Why was that, Muh ? They was ‘scaping ? And, they planned it when nobody was listenin' ? Did you ever hear any whisperings of slaves planning to ‘scape, Muh ? Did you want to ‘scape ? Muh, how come you so black and tall and Grandma Janie so white and small? Muh ? Muh, what wrong with your arm? “

That's what I would have asked this former slave, had I been free.

The adults in my life knew I had a million questions. They watched me like a hawk as I paced up and down the hallway near Muh's room. They watched me from left shoulders and through the holes in the back of the head, holes all grownups have. They thought that if I talked with Muh about slavery, I would upset her. They thought that if I learned from her mouth how brutal and salacious slavery had been that I, the most sensitive one out of all the children, might not ever recover to function without malice in the new world. Slavery was dead at 609 Oak Street, and my folks wanted to tie it up and kill it again.

I did hear some things. Winged but unable to fly away, in 1869 Muh was raped by a white man. I guess that's why she cussed so much. I would have too. I wish I could have examined her Dalton-dead-eyes and breathed life into them for just one question long, to look into her soul for myself, without any detail from her lips, and see just how much he hurt her, and how furiously she hated him back.

Out of this rape came my family. Muh's daughter, my white-skinned Grandma Janie, was born. Janie ran away from home at the age of 15 when a man Muh married tried to rape her. It is an earth-sinking feeling to realize that over 100 years ago your reat-grandmother didn't stand up for your grandmother in her time of need. Maybe Janie told on Mr., but even if she did she left home in the same breath. She ran into a marital bed with a Falling Creek, white-lightening-drinking sharecropper named Edgar, became respected elder of the church, and vowed not to be bitter like the angry, cussing African. She had ten head of children, most of them with Grandpa Edgar, and one with Mr. Lofton after Edgar died.

Mr. Lofton was all that we called him. He seemed mean to me, but was just old and stern, I was always told. I never saw him smile or stand up in all the years I knew him. I heard that he paid a poll tax of $1.00 to $5.00, but could never vote because he was poor and black and white folk wanted to keep him and his kind weak. In my own adult years, when I fret and vent about voting for people I deem unfit for political office, I just remember Mr. Lofton and cast my vote in

his name.

Mr. Lofton would have been a “race” man, had he been lettered. He helped to establish Hull Road Free Will Baptist Church, out in the Falling Creek area. The church was originally named Desciple Off-Spring of Africa, according to information I found in the Lenoir County Library out there on Queen Street, so it appears that he and his fellow share-croppers had a bit of racial consciousness, even if the only letter they knew to write for their names was “X.” Maybe that is why Grandma married him, because he had a strength she could see behind the mask he wore for white people. I do know for sure that she could not conceive of a woman, especially a farming woman with so many children, living without a husband. She married him even though he never smiled and even though she was menopausal, because Edgar had taken his last earthly drink and left her with a house full plus a two-year-old toddler, my mother, Ruby.

Ruby Jackson was born in Falling Creek in 1926 where oak trees shaded row after row of sharecropper shanties. Sharecropping was big business, the only business for black people in the country, ‘less you cooked for a school or something like that.

In 1926 North Carolina, black people had to take low. Talking up or talking back was not allowed. Taking low was an understandable survival tool. Shuffling could add years to one’s very life. My mother never took low. She refused to shuffle. She took no tea for the fever then, and she takes none now.

When she was born, everybody in the neighborhood wanted to name her. That’s how she got more than the usual amount of names. Her names are taken straight from the 1611 A.D. King James version of the Christian Bible, the one book Falling Creekers could “read” even if they were illiterate.

The first name is lifted from Proverbs 31:10, about the virtuous woman whose “value is far above rubies.” Her second name honors gutsy Queen Esther. The third name, Marie, is a derivative of Mary, as in “mother of Jesus.”

My mother also has a double-scoop of nicknames. Her family nicknamed her Honey Bee because of her red-bone beauty and the arched bee-stung form of her lips. But her other nickname is Butch. Butch is a powerful calling, a gangster name. There is an edge of danger to it. My father named her that. When he was away from her in the Navy, right before they got married in the mid-1940s, he used to write the nickname “Butch,” all over her photographs that decorated his dorm. Honey Bee is her family name but Butch is probably who she really is.

When she was a toddler, my mother was taken to Harlem to live with family. She was taken because, even though her mother wanted her to stay, she didn’t want her to grow up, fair and pretty as she was destined to be, to work in a white man’s kitchen and to concubine in a white man’s bed. She was taken by her older sister Helen who, knowing her grandmother’s tale of sexual violation and her mother’s tale of sexual abduction, did not want a stepfather and did not want her little sister to have one. The die was cast. My mother would not be a submissive Falling Creek daughter. She would be an uncompromising, take-no-prisoners, Harlem-hell-fighting, New Yorker. She returned to North Carolina regularly to visit.

During the 1930s Depression, when economic slump made little difference in the lives of rural North Carolinians, she returned to live and attend school down by the creek for a short span of years. On one of these visits, Grandma Janie took her ninth child shopping at Woolworth’s, the five-and-ten cents store on Queen Street in the town of Kinston, not far from Falling Creek. Queen Street was a main shopping center then, before the days of Vernon Park Mall. It was 1934 at the time of this particular visit. Inside Woolworth’s, my mother reminds me, was a shiny “white” water fountain and an old, beat-up “colored” water fountain. The fountain with the sign “white” was meant to be used by white patrons only. The fountain with the sign “colored” was meant to be used by black patrons only. It was the law. The black fountain was so low to the

ground you had to stoop and bend your body half in two just to get a sip of colored water.

The water fountains of my mother's youth were still around when I became a teen. Offended and with total disrespect for Jim Crow laws, on my visits to the southern homeland during summer vacations from New Jersey, I eyed each one before choosing the tall fountain for my drink. I was offended not only because the fountain designated for me was shabby, but because it was short and I had a complex about my height, being not that far from my mother's four foot eleven and a half inch status. All the cute girls at school were lithe and lanky and I was only ½ inch taller than my mother. How arrogant white southerners were, I believed, to conclude that all black people evolved from the dwarfish Pygmy tribe.

On my mother trip's to Woolworth this fateful day in 1934, she was a well-scrubbed little girl of eight, 100 percent diva in starched cotton dress with hair bows to match. My grandmother believed in a fastidious presentation, especially when you were going to town.

Just like Grandma and her daughter were shopping that day, a white mother and her little daughter were shopping too. All four found themselves in the same aisle. The little girl looked my mother up and down, jealously eye-balled the Argo-starched cotton dress and matching hair bows, took careful aim, and spit in my mother's Octagon soap scrubbed face.

My mother looked the little girl up and down, rared way back and slapped her, leaving a Harlem-on-my-mind, lithographed handprint on the child's shocked face.

Neither Grandma Janie nor the other mother said a word. Horrified and scared to death, I'm sure, at my mother's street-wise defense of self, the astounded mother ran out of Woolworth's with her flaming red-faced daughter in tow. Grandma Janie continued to shop. Once back home, my grandmother – a non-violent, fire-baptized daughter of Herring Grove Baptist Church – never once said, "Honey Bee, you shouldn't have done that." As a matter of fact, Grandma said nothing at all. It was an image she didn't see enough of in Falling Creek, and she was impressed.

Falling Creek was a peaceful hamlet. Its population pulsated with 300 or more people around the time was mother was born. In the very late 20th century, the population was still less than that of nearby Pink Hill with its 522 people, and less than that of Trenton, North Carolina, that was 200 strong. Seventy-three years after the birth of my mother, with only fifty head of people from stem to stern, it is still so quiet in Falling Creek that you can hear a rat pee on cotton.

By the time I was an adult and witnessed the Falling Creek shack my mother was born in, it was overcome with high grass and was leaning to, quite a different stance from the 1930s summer when my young-girl mother played outside that shack just as a pick-up truck, driven by a white man, roared up the road. The white man, often called "boss man" by the locals, stopped in front of the house and snarled from the truck window at my mother. "Gal, where's your mammy?" My mother pulled herself up to all of her height and answered him evenly, "I don't have a mammy, but my mother is inside the house cooking."

Flustered with embarrassment and rage because little Honey Bee did not accept his racial abuse and "Mammy" term of insult, boss man drove off in a whirl of country road dust. Next day, Falling Creek legend has it, he told everyone who would listen that Janie had a might sassy one who had better watch her nigra mouth. Grandma Janie heard the fallout but didn't miss a beat. Kept on frying, cobbling, boiling, broiling. My mother didn't take no tea for the fever, as Falling Creek elders still say.

There were plenty of times my mother was struck down and couldn't strike back. One of those times happened when she was going to school. She walked three miles one way to Banks Chapel School down roads either muddy or dusty. Lenoir County paid for white pupils to get picked up in the yellow school bus and driven to comfortable schools with new text books and

proper water fountains. There were no such accommodations for students like my mother.

The yellow school bus drove past her many a day when she walked to fifth grade on the country road. The kids on the bus did what they thought they should have done to her. Shouted "nigger" and other obscenities. Threw rocks at her. The bus driver put in his two cents worth. He made sure he hit the mud puddle just right so my mother's starched cotton dress would be nasty and wet by the time the colored school bell tolled. Many a day, her arms were too short to box the system.

During her teenage years in New York, there was an occasion where my mother had to travel back to North Carolina to take her nephew, Moses Jr., to visit Grandma Janie. From New York to Washington, D.C., she and little Moses, nicknamed Junie, sat where they wanted to sit. By the time they got to D.C., the seating arrangements changed: they switched so the Atlantic Coast Line could take them straight to Kinston, with a stop in Falling Creek, and there was a car for "white" and a car for "colored." It was the law.

Three-year-old Junie had asthma something awful and my mother was very protective of him. The conductor ordered my mother and her wheezing nephew into the car for colored patrons. The only available seat in that car was near a violently cracked window. No telling how long it had been sitting open like that, with cold air blowing like crazy on a stormy-weather day.

Thirteen years old and already with a "record" for slapping other folk's children, my mother told the conductor that this child had asthma and she wasn't about to subject him to the cold wind and rain gushing through an open window, no matter whose law said what.

They could have been thrown off the train. Or arrested. But, the conductor backed down and tucked it in and my mother and her nephew sat in the "white" car, unmolested all the way down behind the cotton curtain.

Now, her hands are swollen.

She no longer creates little pink tulled baskets of Mary Kaye cosmetics to sell down at the church. She used to bowl killer games three nights a week at Lyons Lanes, but no more.

Her shoulders ache.

My mother gave up volunteering at Beth Israel's neo-natal nursery. She used to hold and rock in her arms little babies addicted to crack cocaine. The neighborhood kids no longer have my mother to walk them to the library for summer story hour, something she did because their own parents wouldn't.

When she attends service at St. James A.M.E. Church, she rolls an oxygen tank behind her. She cannot breathe on her own.

A housekeeper comes in to clean. My father does marketing. He rubs the shoulders of the woman he once called "Butch" but now refers to as "My Bride."

She comes from cussing Africans. So, I was not at all surprised when my now elderly mother – member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and staunch supporter of Klan-Watch, a division of the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) that was organized by assassinated civil rights leader. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – emphatically told me she was not going to be left behind at the dawn of the new millennium: "I'm buying a computer. I'm going to be computer literate!" Her fierce will to survive through apartheid in both south and north permeated every facet of her life.

He lost 100 pounds in less than a year, that last year I went home. He trudged up and down stairs from their second floor apartment to the basement washer and dryer, washed nylon panties she would let no one else wash, then stood at the ironing board to press her silk blouses. He drove to Shop-Rite to buy albacore tuna and Perdue oven roasters for her to eat. His eyes sunk way back into his head. His already feeble heart failed. “Let me know when it gets to 35,” the emergency room doctor alerted me when my father’s jumping-bean heart rate was just 45 and 50. His liver and kidney failed too. The blood tests were a joke. I have spit thicker than that. His mind stopped, started, and parked on the curbside of the golden 1940s when she was young, he was impulsive and I arrived too soon, interrupting their romance.

At his funeral, she sported a new silver-fox, close-cut, natural hair-do. Her own shoulder-length mane fell out in clumps from steroids prescribed to clear her lungs. The tear-stained chorus of mourners filed out of the church. She was triumphant and strong. Later, she could barely stand at the sink to wash her own dishes, but her thoughts focused, she later let us know, on the new purse she would now buy. She wanted a large horizontal pocketbook in which to carry her portable oxygen tank to the bowling alley where she would throw her ball down the stretch for yet one more strike. That’s Sis Janie’s ninth child. Granddaughter of Muh. The one who takes no tea for the fever.

"No Tea For The Fever" by **Sandra L. West** is part of a manuscript entitled “The Falling Creek Stories: Race, Migration, and Black Family Life.” Co-author of *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003), she just completed research and writing on *Newark's Literary Lights* (2008), a commemorative book that celebrates Newark (NJ) Public Library (NPL) as a literary landmark. Other works have appeared in *Afrcian Voices Literary Journal, Pemberton Magazine*, and *Chickenbones: A Journal of Literary and Artistic African American Themes*. Educated at Rutgers University and Goucher College, West is a member of The Harlem Writers Guild and Carolina African American Writers Collective and is Director of Urban Voices II, a writers' collective at NPL.