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1962 – A Poem

by Gail Acuff

1962

(Marietta GA)

Is that me at the end of my pencil?
It's part of the pencil, at least--the lead.
Graphite, I mean. And these letters aren't me
but somehow signify, the curves and strokes.
They certainly don't make what I look like
up here, looking down. Teacher's been at this

a long time. *Hold your in-stru-ment like this*,
she says. *Use your free hand to hold the paper
down*. Free hand? Then my writing hand's a slave.
That makes sense--I live in Georgia. Negroes
used to work for white people for nothing.
It's 1962--now they work for

next to nothing. Like Billie Ruth, who cleans
for us three times a week, and makes supper
to boot. My parents work. I come home at
3:30 or so. Annie Ruth leaves at
four. Sometimes someone, another Negro,
picks her up. She's on the porch. The driver
never gets out of the car. Heck, he could
if he wanted to--we're Democrats, we

like Negroes, anywhere. Sometimes Father
drives her home and I ride in the back seat.
Get in the back seat, he orders. Yes, sir,
I say. But you don't need to tell me. I
know. *Attaboy*, he says. I smile. We take her home,
across rusty railroad tracks. The houses
are falling down. Billie Ruth's needs painting.
We let her off. I get in the front seat
now. Father, can we paint Annie Ruth's house
for her? *Uh*, he says. *Well, maybe someday.*
Not today. No, not today, I say. I

can write my own name, I say. *Well, good for you*,
he says. *That's really something*. Yeah, I say.
I mean, Yes, sir--that's really something. I
can hold the pencil good and the paper
it writes on so it won't fall off my desk

and I can make the letters in my name

and then I put the pencil down and hold
the paper in front of my face and see
the letters--they make my name, you know--and
the light that comes through from behind. Can I
show Billie Ruth tomorrow? *Sure, why not,*
he says. Tomorrow comes, like the clean side

of my paper, fresh and not written on, and
I come home with my piece of paper and
my name behind my back and go into
the kitchen and say, Miss Billie Ruth, look
what I got to show you. I hold it up
and she looks and tweaks her spectacles and
says, *My, my, would you look at that,* and I

do, I always do what my elders bid,
and darned if it's not upside down, so I
turn me over, I mean my name, and say,
There, looky here again, and she does, and
asks, *What's it signify,* and I say, Why,

it's me. You can read, can't you? But she can't
--I'm sorry that I asked her so I say,
*I don't write too good yet--it's hard to make
out, I know.* And she smiles and I smile and
she leans over to me like I'm her own
and whispers, *God bless the child,* and I think,

What child?--oh, she means *me*--and I'm red-faced.
Then Father comes home and I greet him and
say, Hello, Father, God bless the child and
God bless you. Then he tickles me and says,
God bless us everyone. That's from some book.

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Gail Acuff has had poetry published in *Ascent, Ohio Journal, Florida Review, Poem, Maryland Poetry Review, Adirondack Review, Danse Macabre, Worcester Review, South Dakota Review, Santa Barbara Review,* and many other journals. She has authored three books of poetry: *Buffalo Nickel* (BrickHouse, 2004), *The Weight of the World* (BrickHouse, 2006), and *The Story of My Lives* (BrickHouse, 2008). She has taught English at universities in the U.S., China, and the Palestinian West Bank.