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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

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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.