

## "Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

### **Cockfight** By John Gaines

We wanted meat pies,  
so my mother took us to Natchitoches in her old red Ford,  
air from the dashboard cold as a meat locker

We flew a foot above the north Louisiana blacktop between cotton fields and pecan groves while she told me about a diner she and her second husband liked,  
But when we got there, it had burned

We found it boarded up and left after the fire,  
and she said, "Oh, I see now dey be close" like she and the husband must have talked  
when he was alive and no one else was around,  
except that I was around and I'd never heard her talk like she had grown up in a tent and  
been taken to school in a pirogue in a parish where there was no law but who you knew  
and who you took care of.

Then she started talking about arson and I saw how a lot of the building had some  
scorches and she talked about a cockfight that some backwoods chapter of the  
American  
Heart Association put together to raise money  
Telling how the sheriff passed the hat on the way in and again on the way out since  
there  
wasn't but one road that went deep enough into the cane to where on a hot night you  
could drink and watch the roosters fight and sell things out of the trunk of your car

Just one road because on was enough and everybody knew what went on at the end of  
that road and they didn't go down there for any reason at all but stayed up with the  
fields  
and houses and company stores where field hands got plate lunches parted out a  
window  
because they weren't allowed to cross the threshold

They tended to stay up where the rest of the world could keep an eye on them, know  
that  
they were good people not prone to nights on the river bottom that might end with a car

full of seating, bleeding drunks skidding into a clinic  
Parking lot  
Calling for help in French or Vietnamese,  
Strange and dangerous people if you could never find what it took to go down into the  
cane yourself or is you could never see why they did what they did down there,  
Staying alive on half a lunch for a day's work,  
and instead of coming out at night to where it was cool and maybe had a breeze,  
They were coming alive down there needing the cover and space of the cane getting  
meaner and stranger in the heat,  
heat the way it must have been the old countries,  
only nodding to white reality when the sheriff passed the hat,

smiling and kicking in twenties because there was no law except who you knew and  
who  
you took care of

Unless you were one of the seventeen white men who owned every inch of land in the  
county, and then there was no law at all it you didn't piss off the Feds and nobody cared  
it you wanted to have your friends over at nightfall to drink whiskey and shoot thirty-  
thousand dollar English shotguns at live birds that your working man let fly from a box

Only he didn't just let them fly like they did when you walked up on a farm pond in a  
pasture at dusk, they flew crazy and wild because his real job was to break the wing of  
this one or the leg of that one to keep them from flying the way a man with a shotgun  
would expect, and if you wanted to bet a year's worth of your working man's wages on  
whether your cousin could hit the next one with his twelve gauge Holland & Holland  
Royal nobody was going to say anything,  
And even though there was no law but the barest of legal threads you would still never  
set foot down into the cane because there was no law but who you knew and who you  
took care of

And down there you were just another man and all your money and shacks and tractors  
didn't mean a thing after dark when it was hot and the roosters were fighting

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