

*- Winner of the Richardo Sanchez Poetry Prize -  
Chattahoochie Scribble*

by Kurt Hemmer

Rain pellets pounce on an empty dog house;  
Severed fingers bounce off typewriter keys:

“All lives are sad because they end with death.”  
“What happens last happens forever.”

When I saw what I had written,  
I knew I had to leave.

And then went down to the Ford,  
Mad Mike driving.

Mad Mike, who saw the southern trip  
As escape from our gray North.

“The cops are only working the other side,” said Mad Mike,  
As we passed broken dogs on the highway,  
Refinery towers blazing, poised elegant  
To light planes afire,  
Giant lighters in the toxic night of Jersey.  
We drove past the Walt Whitman Service Area  
Heading South.

On the anniversary  
Of the famine that sent the Irish to America  
In search of fresh potatoes,

We went South  
Searching for color.

The sun set in Virginia  
Like the orange blaze from a cross  
Beneath the yellow moon  
Above the SS of the Southern States building.

We decided not to venture down Squirrel Love Road  
Fearing the name, which we took as a warning,

And stopped in South Elio,  
Played pool with shiny-eyed Jimmy,

Shaking and sweating as if to a sermon,  
Swooning to the cover band beat,  
Who had no place to sleep,  
And didn't see us sneak  
Out the back.

"The Civil War took five years," I said  
To Mad Mike as we left Richmond,  
"Because it took two years for the North  
To get South, a year to fight, and  
Another two years to get back North  
To say it's over."

The Chattahoochie slithered through the Spanish moss  
Keeping our secrets like a shroud covering cypress trees.

We found Guiseppe and Baby Pop  
In Marietta.

Guiseppe, who had lost it in Providence,  
And tried to tear through the boredom  
Breaking a bottle against the chatter:  
"Who wants to go!"  
And only managed to get bounced  
Without any appreciation or laughter.

Baby Pop, who danced stiff and oblivious  
Into the inamoratas, soaking up the night.

"You can get free burritos at Tortilla's," said Guiseppe.  
"If the burrito in your pants is bigger than theirs."

"I saw a guy walk in and lay his burrito right on the counter,"  
Said Baby Pop.

"He walked out with a free burrito and a T-shirt:  
"I ate for free at Tortilla's."

On the overpass in Atlanta I gazed at the girls  
Dressed in red and hazed by their sisters,  
Wondering if they saw my thoughts  
Swoop like dirty talons.

Acappella singers hovered like cold apparitions  
Shuddering with each passing crowd's breeze.

Dead end kids traded razorblade words

Dulled by the surrounding concrete.  
I watched my unknown Beatrice  
Grind her thighs around a girlfriend's leg  
Clattering down the exit stairs.

Baby Pop bare ass:  
"Peek-a-boo!"

Of all the things that happened there  
This I remember most:  
Two children in the sand.  
A blonde girl and a small boy  
Who says, "We are seven."  
Raising his fingers when asked his age.  
Wiping a soiled hand on her dress,  
Her other hand beating  
His rollerblade helmet with a twig,  
"Should I call you Negro, black or nigger?"

I built a tunnel  
For holding hands  
Under the castle  
In the sand.

And they ran off together  
Chasing the ice-cream man's bell  
Who didn't see them  
And disappeared behind the bend.

Some shit doesn't flush  
Spills over the edge  
Onto the bathroom floor.

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Keeping our secrets like a shroud covering cypress trees.

I told Mad Mike loud into the night.  
"Close it down," said Baby Pop,  
Work in the morning.  
"No consideration for friends who need a drink," I said.  
"That's rich," said Guiseppe.

So in the morning we crawled through the Appalachians  
Missing Guiseppe and Baby Pop,  
Though we kept it to ourselves.

And we thought of Athens  
And all the peaches  
We didn't dare to eat, or even talk to.

In Nashville the people looked into the river  
And Mad Mike and I looked into the river  
But we couldn't see why the people looked into the river  
And we left before seeing the body choked blue.

Driving all day and all night North,  
Learning what it means to sit  
Next to another person, even a friend,  
For nineteen straight hours,  
Secretly plotting the other's death.  
Trembling on the graffiti streets of D.C.;  
Passing out in toll booth traffic,  
Awakened by forehead into the horn,  
Arriving in Manhattan in the morning.

Where we met up with the Bastard.  
The Bastard, who specialized in the  
Drunken-monkey style,  
Picking up women  
While he himself was asleep.  
"Really," said the Bastard,  
"I have no defense,"  
And he took us out  
Into the subway night.

And when crippled  
I finished this story  
Straight into morning to Sandy,  
Sandy whose eyes were red rivers,  
And my words had weak knees,  
And back South  
The Chattahoochie slithered through the Spanish moss  
Keeping our secrets like a shroud covering cypress trees,  
And she stood up and wrote in my notebook:  
"And then she left,  
But they hung out  
At the beach  
During the summer,  
Drinking pina coladas  
With whipped cream."  
What happens last happens forever ...