

M A R C H 2 0 0 3

SUSAN STRAIGHT

[WRITER]

"MY WHOLE LIFE IS ON THIS STREET"

AN INTERVIEW IN SIX PARTS

I. AC/DC

II. James Baldwin

III. Crossing The Border

IV. Firefighters That Keep Showing Up

V. The Great Social Novel

VI. Running To The Game

Susan Straight drives a minivan with a Van Halen tape in the cassette player. Neatly arranged on the floor, between the front seats, are her oldest daughter's overdue library book, a novel for one of Straight's students at UC Riverside, where she is a professor of creative writing, and a box of candy bars that she's helping her middle daughter's friend sell to raise money for a summer science camp.

At forty-two, Straight is the author of Aquaboogie (1990), I Been In Sorrow's Kitchen And Licked Out All the Pots (1992), Blacker Than A Thousand Midnights (1994), The Gettin Place (1996), and Highwire Moon (2001), which was a finalist for the National Book Award. She is also the single mother of three girls, who are between the ages of seven and thirteen and whose heritage is part African, Creek and Cherokee, Irish, French, and Swiss. Among the protagonists of Straight's books are Marietta Cook, a large black basket maker who makes her way from South Carolina to California; Darnell Tucker, a black firefighter; and Serafina, a Mexican Indian woman who is deported from California and made to leave her daughter behind. Thus, it's surprising when meeting Straight to discover she is a petite white woman with blond hair and blue eyes. And yet, you don't for a second doubt her narrative command or the authenticity of the voices she captures.

Straight's prose is tight and her metaphors striking: In the arresting opening of Highwire Moon, Serafina is captured by the police while her daughter, Elvia, sits on the floor of a car, the "mouth" of which had "hit something hard, like a fist against teeth." Straight describes what lies beyond the daughter's vision with such original descriptions as: "Branches and leaves covered the windshield, pressed tight like a blanket of black knives," and "a pair of white hands pressed up like a snail's underside against the glass." And then there's Straight's dialogue, which is so perfect, so real, that even after you've turned the page—and your attention—to a new scene in a new locale, you're aware that the characters from the previous scene are still carrying on, still talking. You can almost hear them.

This interview took place over the course of one day in Riverside, California, which the National drug intelligence center recently referred to as the "methamphetamine capital of the United States" and which Straight calls "Rio Seco" in her fiction. As Straight drives through Riverside and its surroundings, she points out warehouses, old vineyards, early strawberry fields, the hospital where she, her brothers, and two of her daughters were born, the Laundromat her stepfather owned and the bank where her mother worked. "I would never bounce a check," says Straight, "It's my mom's bank. So if you bounce a check, that's who finds out. I've only bounced two checks in my whole life, and she found out and called me."

—Vendela Vida

*

THE BELIEVER: Some people would ask why you stay in Riverside, especially since many places you pass by on a daily basis are reminders of something unfortunate that happened—the sound of the train is a reminder of the guy who walked in front of it and you've said that when you drive up one street, you see some relatives and childhood friends doing things outside the law, marketing schemes you don't like to think about.

SUSAN STRAIGHT: Why do I stay? This is my home, my landscape, the trees and sky and rocks that I know, and when I was gone for two years, in graduate school in Amherst, I kept thinking I would write about snow and maples and bleeding hearts.

Instead, I missed tumbleweeds and chain-link and date palms and even the rustling sound the palm fronds make in the wind. They glisten, that's the only way I can put it, when they're high above you at night. I missed the language I knew from birth, rather than the more academic language I was learning then. I'm just a big chicken, face it, and I couldn't stay away from home.

Even now, I love to travel, but I miss dumb things like big tumbleweeds green-blue in the vacant lots. Like a huge quilt made by the Jolly Green Giant. And my whole family is here, and my parents come over every day, and who else would cook?

*

*The rest of this interview, along with more than twenty others like it—many appearing in print for the first time—will appear in **The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers**, forthcoming from Believer Books.*

Vendela Vida edits *The Believer*.