

Keeping It Real

Rick Bragg, in *Where I Come From – Stories from the Deep South*
(copied without permission, but I don't think he'd mind)

I saw a tag on the back of a big SUV that proudly proclaimed its driver to be SUTHUN.

I think this would be a good thing for some of my kinfolks, the ones who are still drinking, in case they wake up one morning after a twelve-pack, having forgotten in which region they went to bed. I understand the need to stamp it into metal. It can be confusing these days.

I saw about ten thousand people at the grocery store searching for yogurt, passing up a perfectly good rack of pork rinds. I saw sleds for sale in the window of a hardware store, in Birmingham.

Hardly anyone makes cornbread anymore, even from a mix. And they wear John Deere hats just to appear ironic.

I saw a great sign (painted on a skyscraper) advertising professional hockey in Tampa. It must take a lot of Frigidaires to make an icy spot that wide in the Florida heat.

My point is that the South has changed so much that some people feel they will just float away, perhaps to New Jersey, and some try to anchor themselves with clichés, clutching at magnolias. My people never had much luck with magnolias.

Our South grows from a stone garden, the cemetery where we have buried the treasure – the answer to what Southern is. Some of the names have worn away but not their language. It sings up from the ground.

My Uncle John's daddy, Homer Crouch, is here. He wore overalls every day of his life and used to scare us by taking out his teeth. He raised tall cotton and wide hogs and married a woman named Mag. He liked to say, of shiftless men: "He ain't lazy. He was just born tired." When he died, the South shrank a little.

Jimmy Sweat is here. He married my Aunt Sue, drove hot rods, and had the shiniest penny loafers I ever saw. Near the end of his life, his daughter Connie would take him to get fish in a box, though sometimes he seemed unaware. On one trip, he looked over at her and said, "Connie Sue, I just love your guts." He wasn't saying he loved her toughness, her devotion. He was saying he even loved her guts.

Jim Bennett would have understood. He drove a dump truck for my Uncle Ed, though not very well. He drove it right into a house but wasn't fired. My Uncle Ed knew what a man's livelihood meant. "I love that man," Bennett once said of him. "I even love his guts and the ol' belly that carries 'em."

My Grandma Ava is here, though it is still hard to believe – Ava, who balled up her fist and shoved it under the nose of her husband after he'd had a few. "I'll knock you out and no water hot!" she told him. I do not even know what that means but it still beats the heck out of a cliché.

When I forget who I am, I will wander in the weeds among them all, till I find my way again.