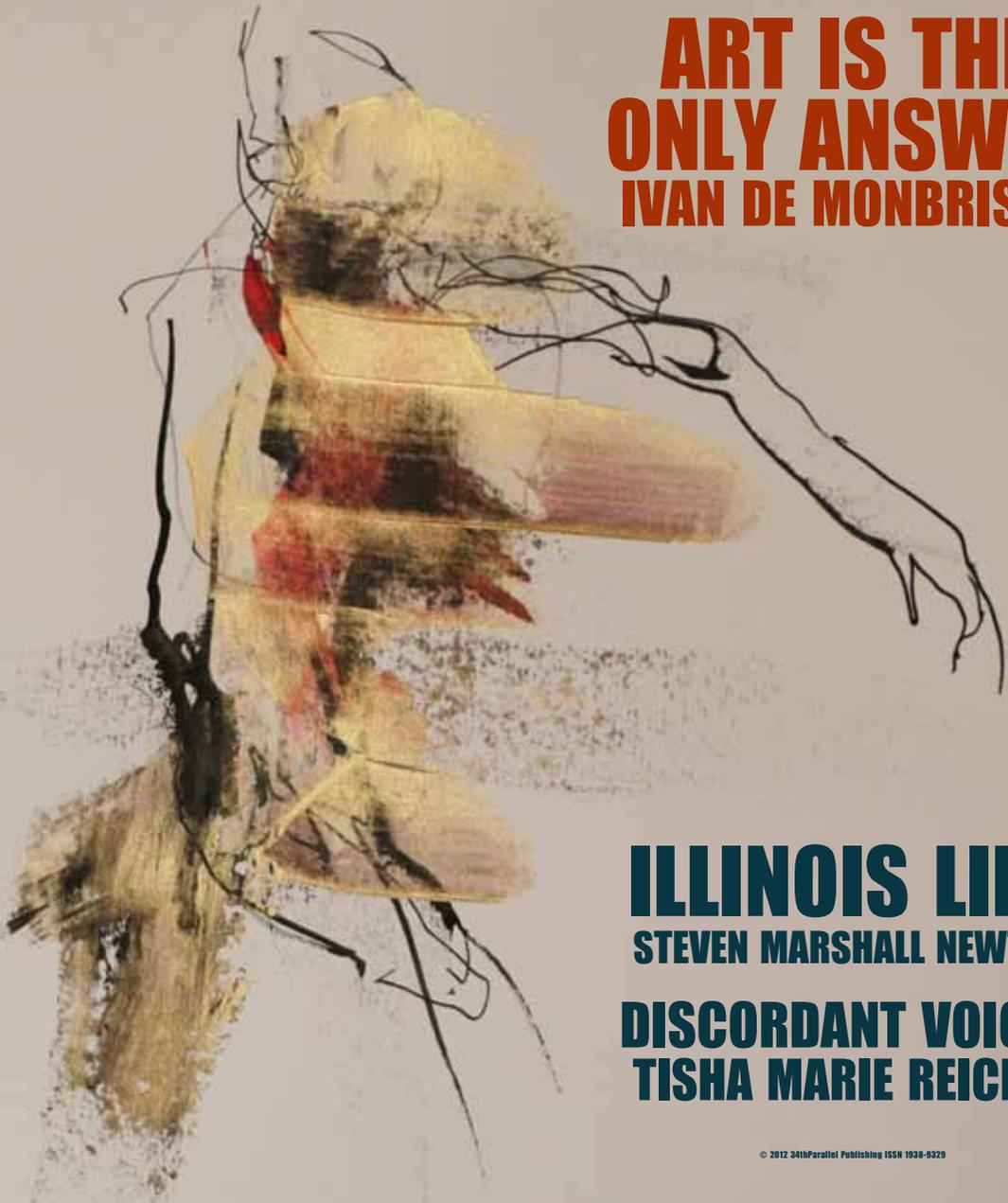


34thParallel

Issue 18

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RICK NEUMAYER

**SNAKE
CANE**

**When the sky was red and the rooster
crowed, the hoodoo was at the door.
He showed her the serpent cane.**

"Have you thought about what I asked you?"

Joshua Lanier—small, slightly humpbacked, wispy white hair at his temples—tightened his grip on his cane. "I don't know about that, young fella." Although aware that the goateed academic in the tan corduroy sport coat and black turtleneck was tonight's lecturer, Joshua had forgotten his name.

"Come on, Joshua. Everybody's heard about it. They all want a good look."

The noted African American folk artist glanced shyly at the crowd gathered in his honor. The former Victorian warehouse, recently gutted and renovated into a contemporary exhibition space, was jammed with mostly stylish, middle-aged white women he couldn't place, but they all seemed to know him. Perhaps from his trademark clip-on suspenders, white dress shirt, and khakis. Or the cane, which he now needed to walk.

"I've had this cane since I was a boy." Joshua shook his head. "I'd hate for anything to happen to it."

The cane resembled a snake crawling up a branch, its mouth open as if about to strike. The serpent's head was carved on the tip of the crook, and a hand grip below it. The eyes and fangs were life-like. The interesting natural bark pattern came from vines that had twisted and curled the branch as it grew.

"At least think about it, okay? It'll never be out of your sight."

Rubbing his thumb over the handle's well-worn surface, Joshua remained dubious. Somebody was always trying to get their hands on this cane. But they didn't know its history or what it had cost him. He thought of his baby brother Isaiah and felt a sudden urge to weep. Instead, he rubbed the cane.

It was a conversation piece, like a flashy piece of jewelry. Strangers would come up and ask, "Where did you get that?"

"I made it," he'd say.

Some, wanting to add a dangerous looking accessory to their wardrobe, asked, "Would you make one for me?"

"No, I don't make canes any more, but I make toys."

Or if he didn't feel like talking any more, Joshua would just mumble something and move on. He considered this a prerogative of old age, and it's what he did now, giving Brinkman's arm a pat and heading for a reserved seat in the front row, where a pair of wealthy art collectors he knew greeted him with a nod. Joshua nodded back, but all at once felt light-headed and dropped onto a folding chair before he fell.

How he hated being seventy-six.

Dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief, he realized if he'd gotten here on time he could've had coffee or wine. Maybe some of those almonds and grapes and fancy cookies they served here. But too late now. That whiskered young fella was already up at the podium, adjusting the gooseneck microphone.

"Good evening," he said. "I'm Brad Brinkman."

So that was his name. "We're here tonight to celebrate the work of a master folk artist. By a show of hands, how many of you already have a Lanier in your own private collection?"

Looking over his shoulder, Joshua saw a thin frizzy-haired woman with a mole above her lip raise both her hands. She smiled at him in a way suggesting familiarity, but he couldn't place her. This, too, seemed to happen to him more and more lately.

"As you can tell, we have quite an amazing display tonight," Brinkman continued. "Joshua's work is in many collections, private as well as public. Many remain in the hands of the original buyers. People don't let go of them. This means most of Joshua's sculptures have never made the secondary markets, or been auctioned. So nobody knows what any of them is really worth."

Joshua wished he'd gotten more for them, though he'd never made toys for money alone.

He wondered how many of his fans

Rick Neumayer wrote Snake Cane after seeing a show of amazing sculptures at the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft by a renowned local folk artist, on whom his protagonist is very loosely based. The snake cane scenario, however, is purely imaginary. Rick, who has a BA and an MA, currently is a grad student at Spalding U. He has taught in high school and college, co-edited a literary journal, been lead singer in rock'n'roll bands, and published short stories in such magazines as Bartleby Snopes, Eunoia Review, New Southerner, and The Louisville Review. He also writes Broadway-style original musicals, three of which have been produced at RiverStage in Jeffersonville, Indiana. RickNeumayer.com



It had jaws he knew were gorged with poison. This was a cottonmouth, the most dangerous snake in the swamp.

knew he was poor, or had any idea how frugally he lived in his tiny apartment.

"There is no doubt that Joshua is in the front rank of the most original folk artists ever, so appreciation of his work is bound to continue growing. You can tell that by simply looking around this room," Brinkman said.

Every brightly-hued cat, dog, or signature chicken hanging on the wall bore his characteristic marks, textures, dots, dashes, and stripes. In fact, the entire exhibit vibrated with color. Joshua was pleased to see so many of his toys in one place.

"Joshua Lanier makes art from found materials, wood scraps others have thrown away." Brinkman held up a spattered white can. "He uses bargain-bin house paint and whatever else he can find. Yet these whimsical sculptures are a testament to his undeniable talent, as well as his yen for outrageous fun."

Being praised so lavishly always made Joshua feel a bit strange, but judging by the volume of their applause, the crowd agreed with the speaker.

"Joshua," Brinkman said, "I know normally you prefer to let your work speak for itself. But tonight, just this once, I think this audience would love to hear a little about your art from you. Wouldn't you folks? Ladies and gentlemen, Joshua Lanier."

This time, the applause was even louder and more sustained.

Joshua got to his feet, feeling a little breathless, and leaned on his cane for support.

"Thank y'all. I'm not used to talking

in front of people, but the main thing is I still can't believe y'all like my toys so much. For some reason, people always been crazy about them. In a way, I hate to give them up 'cause they're like my children. Sometimes, I got to hide one of my new toys from people who want to buy it before the paint's even dry. They come all the way down here from New York, buy up every toy in the house. But I guess it's a blessing."

As he spoke, a buxom woman of color wearing a long blue gown and bright silk head scarf took a seat on the back row. Although Joshua couldn't see her face clearly, there was something vaguely familiar about her. Did he know her?

"Joshua?"

Turning back to Brinkman, Joshua said, "Oh, yes. Sorry, young fella. Thank you for giving tonight's talk. Thanks to the museum for showing my work. And thank y'all for coming."

Then he sat down, conscious that he hadn't mentioned the cane. Sorry 'bout that, young fella.

"This is a special night as we honor Joshua," Brinkman said. "Before I go on, if anyone else wants to say a few words, now's the time."

Several hands were raised, and praise duly bestowed upon the artist.

"I came tonight," said a short little redhead with freckles sprayed across her cheeks, "because I admire Joshua Lanier and am privileged to be among others who feel the same way. I'm proud to say I own more than one of his pieces."

She passed Joshua two photographs: the first, of a spotted black cat with a

curved tail clawing a red ball; the second, a brown and white beagle with alert ears. For Joshua, seeing these pieces was akin to running into old friends unexpectedly. While the photos moved through the audience, Brinkman sketched out Joshua's difficult early life, a subject that always made him restless. Worse, a dull ache had set up in his jaw. Did he need to see the dentist? But he'd just been.

"As the son of a Louisiana sharecropper, Joshua will be the first to tell you that he grew up poor. Third youngest of twelve children, he was taken out of school in first grade and sent to work in the fields. For his sixth birthday, his father gave him a pocketknife with an inch and a half-long blade and taught him how to keep it razor sharp. I guess you could say that was the beginning of his illustrious career."

Listening to Brinkman, Joshua's mind wandered.

He'd always loved watching the old men sit out on wood-plank porches, whittling and carving. Once he got a knife of his own, he began to pay even closer attention to their methods. Learning to wait for the leaves to fall and the sap to settle. How to select crabapple or dogwood branches that weren't too hard or soft. Hanging them up to dry for a year. Holding the blade downward as if peeling an apple. Carving diagonally, parallel to the grain, never upward because that would cause it to splinter.

After making a lot of mistakes, he finally carved his first good toy, a long-necked chicken, out of a flat piece of wood. Each new farm animal he carved was better than the last. He could tell the old men were impressed by how quickly he'd picked up their tricks. By the time he was ten, Joshua was well-known around town for his toys, which were the only ones his sisters and baby brother ever got.

Joshua was always on the lookout for a good piece of carving wood, and searched miles of fence rows to find the right small supple trees. One cold

winter's day, he came upon an unusual branch tightly covered with vines. Not exactly what he was looking for, but interesting enough to take home. Later, though, when he pressed his knife into the wood, it proved too hard. Frustrated, he kicked the branch under his bed, where it lay forgotten.

As he grew older, Joshua worked more and more in the cane. It was hard, dirty, and sometimes dangerous work. But as long as he had a cane knife in his hand, he was unafraid. Mama didn't worry about him, though she was constantly nagging him to keep his little brother out of those fields until the dry leaves were burned in the fall. He was also expected to steer Isaiah clear of the bayou, with its soft wet banks and pockets of quicksand bogs, where it was easy to mistake a gator lying perfectly still for a log. But what did that leave them to explore? Where else could they catch a mess of shrimp and crawfish?

So despite Mama's warnings, he led Isaiah through the tangy wetlands choked with marsh grasses and vines, through willows half-sunk in slow-moving black water, and past oaks laden with Spanish moss and cypress roots in ghostly morning mist. Down into the bottoms they trekked, inhaling clouds of tiny insects, feeling cold spongy mud between their toes. Among clumps of sphagnum moss and Christmas ferns, he found bay leaves and crushed them so his little brother could savor the sweet aroma.

They watched white egrets and brown pelicans rise like a whisper from dense thickets of needle grass and float on updrafts in a sky resembling hammered pewter. Joshua, intent on capturing a snapping turtle about to drop off a log perch, didn't notice when Isaiah ran on ahead. He was reaching for the turtle when he heard screams. Rushing to his brother's aid, he spotted the danger.

"Don't move, Isaiah."

A dull-gold snake with dark spiraling rings, three feet long and thick as Joshua's arm, was sunning on a rock. It had cat's eyes, and hinged jaws he knew were gorged with poison. This was a

"I'm still hoping he'll change his mind. What do you say, folks? Do you want Joshua to show us his snake cane?"

cottonmouth, the most dangerous snake in the swamp, and from the way its head was flung back, exposing puffy white lining of gaping mouth and fangs, it was warning them both to stay away.

Knowing an unprovoked cottonmouth would usually slither off, Joshua remained motionless. But Isaiah couldn't stop shaking, and as he grew more agitated, the snake hissed and vibrated its tail. When it coiled to strike, Joshua stepped forward and with one swing of the cane knife cut the cottonmouth in two, but not before it had sunk its fangs into Isaiah's ankle. Joshua picked up his brother, who was shrieking, and tore through the swamp toward home with Isaiah in his arms.

Mama took one look at the swollen, discolored ankle and, aware that the venom could be fatal, called for the hoodoo woman, who knew all about herbs, poisons, charms, and amulets, which ones would protect, which would harm.

By the time she arrived in a bright silk head scarf and long flowing gown, Isaiah was unconscious.

If Mama wanted Damballah-Wedo, the serpent god, to heal Isaiah, she would have to kill a black cock and smear its blood on the bite. Also, Joshua must drum and chant, while the hoodoo herself danced and sang in Creole: "Vye Dambala m asire, Le a rive pou m ale o!"

It all was done as instructed, but neither sacrifice nor dance could appease

the spirits, and toward evening, when the sky was smeared purple and the light in the swamp had turned yellow-green, Isaiah died.

Mama threw herself on the ground, wailing and writhing.

"Anythin' da' chew do is de plan of God, undastan'?" the hoodoo said.

But Joshua was angry and cried out that this was not God's fault, but the hoodoo's.

Hearing this, the hoodoo drew herself up and spat, "Chew gonna need a gris-gris for the ouncongou."

Joshua turned away, refusing to look at her.

The charm, she explained, would prevent Damballah-Wedo from seeking vengeance for the cottonmouth's death. Noting from Joshua's trembling reaction that her powers were once again being respected, the hoodoo turned him around, smiled, and told him to carve a serpent walking cane, promising it would become a powerful amulet.

"I'll have it by first light," he vowed.

Scoffing at the notion that Joshua could make such a charm in only one night, the hoodoo vanished in a swirl of skirts and dust.

"First light," Joshua shouted after her.

He thought and worried, then got the old branch out from under the bed. The vines curling around the thick piece of wood reminded him of the cottonmouth, but would it still be too hard? He took out his blade and, this time, sliced through it like buttermilk pie. Again and again, he cut, working all night, unaware of time, blistered fingers, or hunger pains.

When the sky was red and the rooster crowed, the hoodoo was at the door.

He showed her the serpent cane. When she saw the gaping mouth and fangs and long sinuous body, she reached into her pocket for a small cloth bag containing a mixture of herbs, oils, stones, and old bones from the grave yard. She told Joshua to take it in exchange for the gris-gris, whose magic would prove too much for such a simple boy.

But reading the cunning in her eyes, he knew she only wanted the cane for herself.

When he wouldn't give it to her, she cursed him: "Keep dat cane by yo' side. Don' chew nevah sell or give it away coz Damballah-Wedo be very angry."

"Canes and serpents seem to go together," Professor Brinkman said. "In the Bible when Moses cast his rod on the ground, it turned into a snake. In ancient Greek mythology, the rod of Asclepius, which consisted of a serpent entwined around a staff, became associated with resurrection and healing. Today, it's the symbol of medicine, used by the AMA and many other medical societies. Did you know that, Joshua?"

Looking up, the folk artist, who was feeling a bit nauseous, saw the lecturer staring at him, and the cane. He shook his head, abashed to have been caught daydreaming.

"I've been begging Joshua to display his cane as part of this exhibition," Brinkman said. "But so far, he has declined. I'm still hoping he'll change his mind. What do you say, folks? Do you want Joshua to show us his snake cane?"

The room exploded with applause.

Joshua did not want to part with it, even for a second. But the applause refused to die, continuing like thunderclaps echoing over water, and he began to reconsider. What harm could it do after all these years? These were his friends and fans. Surely, he ought to try and please them, if he could. He ran his fingers along the serpent's head and down the scaly spine. Yes, this was his

masterwork. He should let these good people have a closer view.

He waved Brinkman over and handed him the cane. It was just for a few minutes. Surely that would be all right. But as the whiskered young fella hung it carefully on the wall, Joshua could've sworn he'd seen the cane move. Was it trying to come back to life? Apparently no one else had seen movement, so it must have been his imagination. Or was it his age—or eyesight?

As Brinkman stepped back to admire the cane, Joshua got to his feet and started toward it. But the woman in the head scarf got there first. Keep dat cane by yo' side. Don' chew nevah sell or give it away coz Damballah-Wedo be very angry.

Had she spoken? Or had he only imagined that, too? Joshua wasn't sure, but there was no doubting the spark of glee in her eyes before she turned and snatched his precious cane right off the wall.

Joshua lunged and the crowd drew back as he grappled with the woman over the cane. The struggle was brief but fierce, and he managed to rip the cane from her grasp. But the handle flew up and struck him in the cheek, the fangs breaking skin. As the woman in the head scarf ran off, Joshua stood rooted like a live oak, gasping, feeling pressure build up in his chest. The room grew darker, and he feared the worst, but instead of Damballah-Wedo it was Isaiah who appeared. They were in the bottoms among the mosses and ferns, and Joshua once again picked up a bay leaf and crushed it, smiling as his baby brother savored the honeyed fragrance.