

Poetic and pungent in detail, *The Gar Diaries* is a collection of stories fiercely wrought at the hand of one who learned life's lessons early. A melancholy child with sharp self-awareness and sense of purpose, Louis Bourgeois soaks the pages with images of his Southeastern Louisiana existence as a gar fisherman's son. The gar, considered a trash fish, is a delicacy among the poor and working class people Bourgeois grew up among. He is like the gar, offering a feast of evocative writing, redolent of violence and redemption. From the darkest of places, his pen began to move and the words came, weaving the fabric of a boy's coming of age and a man in a black crepe blazer on his way to fame.

Kathy Rhodes, *Muscadine Lines*

The Gar Diaries is, indeed, a testament to genuine survival. Written as a memoir, the boy-child Lucas, riddled with adult tribulation, transports the reader through bayous, suburbs, and cities of Southeastern Louisiana to discover his identity within the societal constraint of the working class. As Lucas matures, he delves further into the hardcore, personal realms of trial and error. The honest, yet sometimes, decisively derisive, deviant language of author Louis Bourgeois sets the tone for a smooth, provocative read — as Lucas reaps the whirlwind of good and evil.

Katherine Tracy, *L'Intrigue*

It's quite a badge of honor when a writer becomes so associated with his region that we treat him as though he created the place itself: Faulkner's Mississippi, Cheever's suburbia, Dickens's London, to name a few. To this list, we should add Bourgeois's Louisiana, for in the prose pieces that comprise *The Gar Diaries*, Louis E. Bourgeois brings to the reader a place—his corner of Southeast Louisiana—that is little seen and little known. In prose as dazzling as his poetry, he makes flora and fauna come alive, and populates this world with people we need to know. Warm and troubling all at once, *The Gar Diaries* is a one-of-a-kind book from a true original.

Thomas S. Williams, *Arkansas Review*

What happens to a child who grows up amid the polluted canals and bayous of Slidell, Louisiana? Told in the vernacular of working-class southeast Louisiana, Louis E. Bourgeois's memoir, *The Gar Diaries*, shows us a world where a child, out of loneliness and fear, tries to eat cockroaches, where men beat their wives unmercifully and take drugs in front of the children. This is a place where rabid dogs run in the streets and hideous worm-like creatures swim in the ditches. The book is about wounds — emotional, psychological, and physical — and about the scars that remain after these wounds have “healed.” More than that, as the wild chickens at the end of the book demonstrate, it is about survival. Louis E. Bourgeois is a survivor, and *The Gar Diaries* is fascinating.

Hiram Goza, author of *Birds of Paradise*

Louis Bourgeois's powerful stories shine an unflinching light into the backwater bayous of his childhood home, rich with the twisted beauty of that gothic imagery particular to the South. From crabbing and shrimping to can collecting and college, from gar smashing to pirogue racing, Bourgeois brings to life the personality and the haunting beauty that is deep-South Louisiana. *C'est bon gris-gris*.

Susan Swartwout, editor of *Big Muddy Magazine* and *Hurricane Blues: Poems about Katrina and Rita*

Excerpts from *The Gar Diaries* appeared in the following publications:

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THE GAR DIARIES

A Memoir

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Louis E. Bourgeois

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Dedicated to J.E. Pitts and Barry Hannah

Hell ain't a bad place to be.

In Memoriam
Wayne O'Brian Bourgeois
1949 - 2005

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I was stealin' when I should have been buying.

— Uriah Heep

THE GAR DIARIES

A Memoir

GOGO AND THE MR. BOJANGLES MAN

The house, now a church, had concrete walls and enormous archways and halls dividing the rooms. The place was always dimly lighted. There were cockroaches all over the floor and on the walls; that's what I remember for sure because that's what frightened me the most at first. My next memory is of my Acadian step-grandfather sipping from his cheap beer and cheaper gin in the large den, only lit by the grey light of the black and white Philco television. Apparently, my parents had dropped me off for the night. My step-grandfather didn't speak much, he always wore his army fatigues from his time in both Korea and Vietnam, Korea because he was young and could fire a rifle, Vietnam because he was from Marksville, Louisiana and could speak French well enough to communicate with deserters of the Viet Cong. Korea left him all but deaf and Vietnam all but speechless. This is the night of my first memory.

It wasn't fear I remember most at the root of my first memories, it was sadness, childhood sadness. I sat alone on the concrete floor in the adjoining hallway where the back door was and played with the roaches and an old rubber ball half gone, bitten in two by some dog I suppose, the faint voices of the television behind me. There was just enough light to illuminate the darkness. My step-grandfather's beer and gin filled the air, deepening my already deep melancholy. Every now and then in a kind of depressed but controlled drunkenness, he would

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call out to me “Où es tu, Lucas?” and I would answer “On the floor, Papa.” I was around three years old. I could understand simple commands in French but was not able to speak it. It was 1973, a year I remember only from certain angles in the shadows.

Finally, he fell asleep. The television went off the air, as television channels did in those days before cable and satellite dishes. My parents would not be coming to get me on this night. I was still on the floor, unattended, forgotten, in the cold concrete house on the outskirts of Slidell, Louisiana. It was then that Gogo came to me. How to describe him? Clownish, at least the hair of a clown, but it was silver, not orange or red. He was puppet-like, spindly and mechanistic in his haunting movements, standing about eight inches tall, and speaking incessantly without forming any true words—his mouth just moved and only the air of words escaped from his thick red lips. At moments, I thought he was trying to speak to me in French, and at other times, I thought he was trying to speak to me in Spanish, the language of my maternal grandmother, but only English thoughts came to me. Most of the short time of Gogo’s existence I spent showing him the cockroaches, and he showed me the inside of himself which was a mirror with emerald trim. I saw myself over and over again in Gogo’s magnificent mirror, a brown-headed boy with heavy but fine hair and a perfect Gaelic nose. Gogo would point, and I would offer him a cockroach as thanks for showing me his mirror, the inside of himself, but he didn’t seem to like the roaches

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and he would point to my mouth and I would eat them, as many as I could find, until finally I got sick and threw up all over myself. It startled me and I began to fear Gogo, to the point of real tears. Eventually, I quit crying long enough to somehow gather the courage to pick Gogo up by his silver hair and flush his wicked body down the toilet. I have yet to hear from him since.

The next day they came for me but it was late in the evening. My step-grandfather had gone fishing that morning and brought back a string of fish, mostly gar, shoe pique and carp. Around noon, we had fish and rice for lunch, with water and coffee to drink. He took up the dishes from the Formica-topped, steel-legged table. I remember the methodical clanking of the dishes as he washed them.

He went to his chair and smoked his pipe for a while. He drank a beer and fell asleep with the sound off on the television. I stared out the kitchen window for a while watching an old lady from across the street feed her cats. She had dozens of them, different colors and shapes. She seemed to be very far away, as far away as my arms and legs, as far away as the sky. I have always been intoxicated by distances.

I slipped out the back door without waking him. The yard was large and was not fenced in. Rozo cane grew along the fetid ditch that ran along the front yard. The cat lady waved to me. In response, I threw my half-ball in her direction; it lopped into the ditch. I went for the ball, and the cat lady told me to stay out of the ditch. I stuck my hands into the viscous

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black water to find my ball, water bugs and crayfish swam about. I felt ancient, as if I had never been born. My step-grandfather was standing at the front door. I saw him before he spoke, then he said, "Lucas, rentrez maintenant." I went to him without saying anything. He picked me up with his short but strong arms and sat me in his huge white zinc tub. A roach began floating in circles in the yellow brackish water, and I picked it up and tried to put it in my mouth when he slapped me lightly on my face and said, "No Lucas, c'est caca. C'est caca!" For whatever reasons, those were the last French words he ever spoke to me.

My mother and father came for me and I climbed into the back seat of the white beat up Falcon. The inside had that old car smell, like the inside of an old person's Oldsmobile or Fairlane. But my parents were not old; they were young, good looking, hostile, slightly backward, and very tense. Normal attributes of the upper working class of Southeast Louisiana. My father was recently discharged from the Navy fleet at Long Beach, one of many fleets in the Navy that didn't see action in Vietnam. My mother was the first and only high school graduate of her family. That day, I remember her long autumn hair and red pantsuit, and his thick mustache and wide violent eyes.

We went down the long and dusty semi-rural road. Lines of pine trees mostly thin and short rolled rhythmically, the sky was a dark blue fading into ochre, crimson, and purple. I have never forgotten that sky. It was the first time I was mesmerized by it. I remember feeling as if I had become the sky

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or that the sky had become a part of me. There was sadness and glee, as if I could walk on air but in tears. It was then I became aware of the sound of nothingness and time. The song “Mr. Bojangles” was playing on our push-button AM radio:

*I knew a man Bojangles
And he danced for you
In worn out shoes*

*Mister Bojangles
Mister Bojangles
Come back and dance again*

The song blended with the colors of the evening. The evening and the song and the moldy smell of the car made me dizzy. I had the strange sense that I might disappear at any moment, but it didn’t frighten me. It was as if my body was being purged of all details, only the real poetic stuff of existence remained.

My father turned down the radio and slowly came to a stop in front of the mailbox of a large one-story brick house. “Mr. James died of a heart attack today,” he said to my mother. From the back seat, I could see Mr. James’ wife pulling flowers at the edge of the yard. Like the cat lady, she appeared to me to be very far away, as far away as I could see before she disappeared into the evening air. I imagined how the flowers would taste. I imagined my mouth full of purple petals, as I still do when I see such flowers.

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It must be that I had seen Mr. James before or imagined I had seen him, mowing his lawn in a pin-striped suit, a spindly man pushing his mower to and fro, his short overweight wife, androgynous, taciturn, and silent, edging the sidewalk and fertilizing the front yard's shrubs and flowers. The two of them, very quiet and nondescript, without want or ambition of great things, working together and speaking indirectly under the ambiguous sky of Slidell, Louisiana, he dead ten years before her, she living well off the insurance money with no hope of finding a replacement and existing in the shadow of his obscure memory. Perhaps I had only imagined him; he very much resembled Gogo, the apparition I had destroyed the night before. The poet-child takes in and digests phantoms, and produces phantoms all his life.

We arrived at home near sunset. I climbed out of the car and could hear a dog barking from a long way off. I remember seeing the quick movements of bats speckling the sky, although at that age I did not know they were called bats. An uncle of mine was sitting on the front steps of our two-story bungalow, a triangular looking home made of cheap cinder wood. He was drinking a Dixie beer and smoking a cigarette. He looked and talked like Johnny Cash, but he was a foot taller and skinnier. I had never seen him before and still don't know why he was waiting for us on the front steps. My father took a beer from my uncle's Styrofoam cooler and they talked for a while in the waning evening light. I remember my uncle telling how one evening a snake crawled under the door of

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his house while he and his wife were watching television. I also remember him saying how he wished he was back in the war overseas.

The Slidell sky was shrinking quickly on this day in 1973. I envisioned dragons eating up that sky. I looked into the horizon. I stared at it harder than I had ever stared at anything before or since; staring into the horizon until it almost drowned me.