

Ghost Swamp Blues

Laraine Herring



White River Press
Amherst, Massachusetts

Ghost Swamp Blues
©2010 Laraine Herring. All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or used in any form, or
by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

First published June 2010

White River Press
P.O. Box 3561
Amherst, MA 01004

www.whiteriverpress.com

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-935052-27-2

Book and cover design by The Concentrium
www.theconcentrium.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and dialogue are
imagined and not intended to represent real people, living or dead.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herring, Laraine, 1968-
Ghost swamp blues / by Laraine Herring.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-935052-27-2

1. Race relations--Fiction. 2. North Carolina--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3608.E7755G48 2010

813'.6--dc22

2010005621

for dad

*The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe.
I know that ghosts have wandered on earth.
Be with me always -- take any form -- drive me mad!
Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!*

Emily Brontë – Wuthering Heights



1
The Single Step



Roberta Du Bois

The sun was unusually hot for October on that morning in 1859 when I walked into Snaky Swamp, just south of our rice plantation in Alderman, North Carolina, wearing nothing but my pink feathered hat. The water was thick as wool and it clung to my skin like a net. Moccasin snakes swam near me, skirting the top of the water, their eyes and fangs cracking the surface. I wiggled my toes in the soft mud of the swamp floor until the weight of the marsh was too much and my toes stopped moving. I walked forward into the swamp until my legs stopped lifting and I fell forward, my cheek hitting the water with a slap before sinking into the blanket of algae and mosses, branches and vines, their tentacles covering my nostrils, wrapping my jaw tightly closed, my teeth fitted perfectly together until my skin fell away in clumps for the fish.

On the day of my death, my husband, Jonathan du Bois, ordered one of his slaves, my half sister Claudia, whipped. The overseer poured salt onto her open back and I screamed from the silence of the marsh. Claudia's eyes rolled in her skull and her tongue dripped saliva onto the earth.

On the day of my death, talk of an uprising was beginning. A man named Douglass was going to be the next Moses. Jonathan believed it and took to craziness. Our plantation, our livelihood, depended entirely on the men and women who worked our rice fields. We depended entirely on that human property of ours, bought and paid for with United States currency, now sweating under the Carolina sun.

Idyllic Grove Rice Plantation, as I knew it, has long since re-

turned to the swamp. It's me who's still around. Poking in and around the tall pines, crunching my feet over the dried pinecones just enough to make you jump. Me who drips clear water down the hallway, my nakedness shivering in the air. The house that's there now, in the very spot where our big house used to be, is a five-room clapboard with a black shingled roof. The property has been divided and divided and divided until nobody knows who owned what or whom or even why much anymore. The clapboard house is on about a hundred acres of woods and bottomlands, bordered to the west by Snaky Swamp.

The folks who live there, Lillian and Hannah Green, keep a really nice garden in the back by the septic tank. They grow corn and tomatoes and butter beans and even okra. The soil is gray loose sand that washes away when the hurricanes come. There are shells here now, brought from trips to Wrightsville Beach, and a rusted green chair out by the back steps that sometimes shelters a white cat. It's been almost one hundred and twenty years, and to people driving by in their motorcars on the new paved street, everything is as it should be. Beautiful land, a carpet of pine needles and leaves, a quiet house overlooking the water. Idyllic.

But I still smell the broken bodies and bloody hearts. I press myself into the walls of this clapboard house and the vibrations are there still and again, still and again. When I dissolve through the walls into their living room with the single square of gray carpet in front of the fireplace, I see not Lillian and Hannah moving about, but the others: The shadow figures draped in blue with empty eye sockets and twisted fingers. The little girls dancing in white flowing dresses.

Ring around the rosies

Pocket full of posies

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!

The men, backs arched forward, arms over their heads swaying like reeds beside the swamp. The grinding sound of the wagon

wheels plodding through the wet clay earth. The mosquitoes, big as big toes, swarming around the algae-coated water. All of this I see, through eyes that never close. All of this wraps around my mind like satin ribbon, one layer at a time.

When I walked into Snaky Swamp I fully expected that would be the end of it. At least the end of it for Roberta du Bois, daughter of Thomas Saunders, wife of Jonathan du Bois, mistress of Idyllic Grove rice plantation. I had no idea it would just be the beginning of my story. Time looped around me, caught me in its square knot, and held me tight. Held me here. Watching all of this madness unfolding in front of me, unwinding like snakeskin, dragging everyone along.

I see others like me walking this property. It is an odd place though. I see them. They see me. But most of us can't speak to one another. We can't touch each other. We can only pass by, feel the coolness from each other's paths, see the wildness in each other's eyes. The only ones I can talk to are the ones directly connected to my own sorrows, and sometimes all I want is for them to go on back to their own sadness and leave me be.

On the day that I walked into Snaky Swamp, I was eighteen years old. I had been married less than six months. I had no noble intentions. I wasn't protesting the plight of the Negroes. I wasn't lamenting my own role in the Southern society of oppression. I wasn't even mourning my own wretched marriage. It was the four girls, really, who called me into the water. The swamp sirens.

Over and over they sang their rhyme. The rosies. The posies. These little girls. Two white, golden hair flying around them like capes. Two black, hair full and wild on their heads as the four of them spun in endless circles just on the other side of the swamp from me.

Roberta! Play with us!

Oh, yes! Roberta, come dance with us!

Over here! Over here!

We'll wait for you!

Come! Just a little bit closer!

The little girls played on the sand bar in the middle of the swamp. You can't see the exact place anymore, but it was right over there where the pier ends now. They danced and danced. They came to my room and danced on the ceiling, carrying vines and pine knots. They danced in my dreams, bound together at the waist with snakes.

When we were little girls, Claudia and I used to dance with these four spirits. We both saw them, and when the six of us played together, we laughed as loud as the Carolina parakeets. Now I only see glimpses of them in the trees. A bit of a dark ankle. A strand of blonde hair entangled in a branch. A square of indigo fabric. A whisper in my ear when the ospreys take flight.

I have walked these acres for over a century trying to come up with the best way to tell my story to you. How to describe to you the slaves? The way it was for a white woman then? How to say these things to you without preaching, without being condescending, without telling you what to feel? The only solution I have come up with is just to tell you, and to hope that in the telling I can reach some truth. Perhaps the facts are wrong. Perhaps they never existed at all. It has been a long time. I am left with memory, unreliable in the best of times. I can only tell you what I know and how all this is wrapped up with Lillian and her daughter Hannah Green and Gabriel Wilson and Jay Transom and the mad boy Tommy Green in the crazy house up in Mecklenburg County. I can only hope you trust me enough to believe that what I'm telling you is truth.



2

Closed For Winter



Lillian Green

October 17, 1949

Yesterday didn't happen.

I pulled some of the batting out of my quilt and stuffed it in my ears so I wouldn't hear his sounds anymore.

But it didn't work.

I stood for over an hour in a scalding shower, but I couldn't wash the black boy's fingerprints off my wrist. They circled around my bone, knotted together where his thumb and middle finger had pressed, and settled in.