

# DECOR MAINE

| ARCHITECTURE ART DESIGN EXPERIENCE FOOD SUSTAINABILITY |

AN ELEGANTLY SIMPLE  
COTTAGE ON THE  
SCHOODIC PENINSULA

## the KITCHEN ISSUE

**WINTERGREEN:**  
AN ENGLISH COUNTRY  
COOK SPACE IN  
CUMBERLAND FORESIDE

WEEKENDS IN  
MAINE'S  
SKI TOWNS  
*(Beyond the Slopes)*

FOUR MORE  
**STANDOUT  
KITCHENS**



**MAKE THIS:**  
A WARMING PEAR &  
APPLE TART

ISSUE NO. 1



I wash the collard leaves and shake them dry. Tough, dark green, they remind me of underbrush, the live oak and palmetto, the slash pines of our Florida childhood, my brother's and mine, when things were still wild. Bill cut school, a whole month's worth of days, to hide out in those woods, braving the crack of the dean's paddle (full of holes, it whistled on the downswing) to know sweet truancy, pushing aside kudzu vines hunting for snakes or toads, any wildness he could catch and tame. He recalled the paddling story with proud glee—mimicking its whistling descent through closed teeth, the smack of contact with his skinny backside (a lick for every day skipped). "BLAM!" he'd holler, slapping his hands together. "BLAM!"

It is tedious work, making collards. They hold grit in their veins and must be rinsed, once, twice, thrice, flattened like fans, rolled up, and sliced into ribbons. In this unfamiliar kitchen, it takes me several attempts, opening cupboards and drawers, to find a cutting board, a large enough pot, a sharp enough knife. I use the blade to sever the leaves of their rigid spines. A memory of my brother, shirtless and whippet thin, sunburned after a day at the beach. He sits on the closed toilet lid as I loiter in the bathtub, pale as a frog's underbelly. I am 4 or 5 and worship him. When he bends above his faded cut-off jeans, I see the delicate knobs of his vertebrae, the articulation of his ribs. I watch, mesmerized, as he peels long strips from his scorched legs. This is what teenagers do. They abuse themselves with sunshine and shed their skin like snakes.

Rattlers, ringnecks, black racers. Bill's greatest prize, a coral snake (red and yellow kill a fellow) found blinded

and molting, smuggled to his boyhood bedroom to tame.

My snake charmer brother, now out of breath, songs, magic.

He has been failing all my life, leaving in increments. A combination of bad choices and bad luck. Alcohol, drugs. A heart attack. Colon cancer. Cirrhosis is the final, fatal diagnosis. I have come to this small bungalow of our cousins' twice removed, perched on stilts on an Alabama bayou, to spend the last days with him.

Bill barely eats now, but he will try for me. He asks for my collards. It is

## Making Collards

ALLISON PAIGE

*A sister's love for her brother suffuses the humblest of meals*

a joke—that his little sister, the only Yankee in the family, makes Southern food. I cling to certain traditions, making collards and black-eyed peas on New Year's Day. Eating my luck. I leave out onion, which Bill hates. "Onions is the devil's food," he'd complain. "They hurt me. They're just mean."

My body submits to the heat, the familiar, cloying humidity, a comfort after the Maine freeze. My skin warms, my hair curls, even my voice slows. Around our mother, I take care to say "y'all" and not "you guys," a phrase she despises. I have lived away from the South longer than I lived in it.

I am not a true Southerner but will never be a Northerner either, and now that I am losing Bill, I regret all the miles, years, and days we lived apart.

He is dying in the bedroom with the seashell sheets. His shipwrecked body swells and fills with choking bile. At night, he stumbles to the bathroom between our rooms to vomit again and again. The sound is wrenching, wretched. I lie awake and listen helplessly. It is too intimate. It is horrifying. But I am grateful even for this, to bear witness, to hold on to any minute of his life—of my life with him still in it.

He frets over the fate of his found creatures, his menagerie. His final snake, a gray rat, curls around a branch in a terrarium. His last squirrel, raised from a pup, nibbles a corncob and twitches his tail at the sound of my brother's voice. Over the years, Bill collected a rooster named Elvis, a Doberman named Spock. Luke, a long-lived tabby christened for the rogue on *General Hospital*.

The collards smell of bitter swamp—of mangroves and cypress knees. Growing up, I hated the fust of such suppers, sullenly refusing our mother's turnip or mustard greens—dramatic as Bill with his onions—swore the smell alone could gag me. Through a strange culinary evolution, I grew to love the dank vegetables, doused in Tabasco, brightened with vinegar. The water turns murky, what our father called pot likker. There's no fatback, so I add bacon and watch the fibers soften, their abundance dwindle and concentrate. Once a burly six-foot three-inch mason who built homes from scratch, my brother is broken, softened with age, shrunken with illness. Stooped

and frail—when we hug, his weight rocks back on his heels, this, the big brother who used to pick me up and swing me around.

To Bill's friends, I was always his "baby sister." Boys who drove too fast, who grew out their hair, who blared music and smelled of skunk. When I arrived, the last child of six, it seemed predetermined I be the goody-goody to his bad boy. If my brother skipped school and snuck our parents' liquor, I was the teacher's pet and head choir girl. But music joined us together. Bill introduced me to The Beatles, a shared passion that transcended the difference in our ages and temperaments. In the meantime, I've become a mother myself. I am no longer the scrawny, bucktoothed kid who wrote him letters made entirely of Beatles lyrics. My son is now 10, the age I was when I wrote Bill a letter like this:

*Hey Bungalow Bill,  
Hello, Hello, I don't know why you  
say good-bye, I say hello.  
It's been a Hard Day's Night, but  
I Feel Fine. It's Getting Better all the  
time. Love Me Do. Won't you Please,  
Please Me and send me a post-card,  
drop me a line, stating point of view,  
indicate precisely what you mean to  
say, Yours Sincerely, Wasting Away.  
Sending All My Loving, Allison  
P.S. I Love You.*

The night John Lennon was shot four times in the back by Mark David Chapman, my brother punched a wall and broke his hand. Every December 8th after that, he called, and we would listen to his music and cry. It occurs to me now that we were sorrowing for two people, for John, yes, but also our long-lost brother.

At 7, Bill saw his own big brother die. Eight-year-old Bobby, shot right in

front of him. A neighbor boy showing off his father's shotgun didn't realize it was loaded. A blow to the head. The image burned on Bill's retinas, his brain. The blast, the blood. An inescapable loss, an unquenchable pain. At 13, he began sneaking our parents' vodka, replacing it with water. During cocktail hour, they must've wondered over the weakness of their martinis. Bill was still a boy, not yet a man, when he began to drink like one, and smoke pot, and pop pills, to feel high, to feel numb, to forget. Over the years, he called to be bailed out of DUIs, jail, rehab. "Collect call from Ringo?" the operator would say. "Will you accept the charges?" Always.

As I stir the pot, I will this meal to be restorative, bewitched—a tonic, an elixir. But I am no witch and Bill is beyond magic now.

It is sunset when I walk down

will cradle it to his ear so that I can sing to him across the line:

*Blackbird singing in the dead of  
night  
Take these broken wings and learn  
to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this  
moment to arise.*

I want to offer a benediction, a hymn, to unlock his soul, to urge it up and away. His body like a cage he must spring. ("He could hear you," our mother will say. "He's moving his hands.") That is weeks from now (an interim both shorter than I'd feared and longer than I'd hoped), as I stand in the kitchen, lift the lid from the pot, and lower my head to the steam. When the greens are done, I ladle them out. My brother walks unsteadily

He sits on the closed toilet lid as I loiter in the bathtub, pale as a frog's underbelly.

**I am 4 or 5 and worship him.**

to the dock. The sky is a riotous, livid pink. It does not seem fair that the world be so beautiful when Bill is leaving it. He has slept through another day, and I panic over the lost minutes. The tide is high now in the lagoon where fish roil and flip. Inside, my brother lies flat on the mattress like a fish out of water, gills gasping.

Without his liver to process bile, ammonia builds up in Bill's blood, clouding his brain. I will be over 1,500 miles away, back in the snowy cold of Maine when I call for the last time. Bill will no longer be able to hold the phone or speak; our mother

from his room and eases himself into a ladder-back chair. His hair, long as ever, is pure pewter now. He looks like a sorcerer, a sage, a wild man. He eats little but appreciatively, his large blue eyes, clear and lucent, still free of jaundice, lift to meet mine.

In this strange kitchen on the Alabama bayou, where fish jump in the canal and hawks crouch on a branch, I make collards for my brother. With a wooden spoon I stir in my tears, my terror, my love and disappointment. We will not grow old together, crooning songs over the phone. We have only these last days together, this meal, this moment, this sustenance. ■