To Be Born in the Briar Patch

SEAN HILL

Our family had been in Statesboro a little over a month and a half, and we were still learning our way around. Some of that orienting happened while driving our toddler around so he would nap. That's how I found the local water park and recreational center my cousin J had told me about when she learned I was moving here. This Sunday afternoon seemed like a good time to take our not-quite-two-year-old son across town to play and give his mom some time to herself.

We started at the playground that turned out to be for slightly older kids. It had higher slides, and there were too many kids—taller, surer on their feet, and running to prove it. This all seemed a little imposing for my son. We went to the younger kids' playground, and my son and I had a great time for a while. As I played with him, I noticed as he entered the tunnel connecting the two sections of the playset for perhaps the thirtieth time that above and just to the right of where his curly hair brushed the top, someone had carved *KKK* into the plastic

and, apparently, someone else had carved *Amen* and perhaps yet another person had carved an arrow from the box carved around *Amen* to the *KKK*.

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I'd applied for and came close to getting the job I was in a few years earlier. On that first interview, I was asked whether I was trying to leave Bemidji, Minnesota, the place I lived at the time. My honest answer was that I wasn't trying to leave northern Minnesota, but rather I was trying to get to southern Georgia. That was the case in the second interview as well. I had, in Alaska, great colleagues and fantastic students; Fairbanks is endlessly fascinating, and there's a very supportive artistic and literary community in Alaska. And I could stare at Denali from my office window on clear days. The job in southern Georgia was "much desired" because of the colleagues and the students and the scope of the program and the department. And, perhaps most importantly, it was two short hours south of Milledgeville. I desired to get closer to home—my parents and the rest of my kinfolks. By the time I had the second interview, I'd been living outside of Georgia for seventeen years—mostly in the Upper Midwest, on the West Coast, and in Alaska. This would be a homecoming.

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Central Georgia has a rich literary history. The nineteenth-century poet Sidney Lanier was from Macon; Jean Toomer's groundbreaking book, *Cane*, was inspired by his stint as a school principal in Sparta; and Flannery O'Connor called Milledgeville home. And Milledgeville is just twenty miles south and east of Eatonton, the home of Joel Chandler Harris and Alice Walker. Of them all, it may be Harris's characters who are the most widely recognized around the world. Harris was a writer and folklorist. He collected the folktales of the African Americans enslaved on the plantation where he apprenticed as a printer's devil on a newspaper. He retold those tales years later in the newspaper he worked for using a character he invented, Uncle Remus, to tell the tales.

KKK Amen—I'm not sure how many hands were involved or in what order these things were scratched, but it read to me as if someone made a succinct statement endorsing white supremacy, and someone else, perhaps, seconded that notion

with *Amen*, and, perhaps, a third person carved an arrow from *Amen* to *KKK* for clarity and emphasis. As he stood assessing the tunnel each time before entering, my son's head and hands were inches from this message/declaration/warning. I was born and raised in Georgia, and I'd brought my family here. This was our new home, and I had to think about what I would eventually tell my son about this place and how to read its signs.

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At some point in my childhood, I was introduced to the Uncle Remus character Br'er Rabbit. I've heard *br'er* pronounced so that it rhymes with *care* or *fair*. I wondered at the word for a while until I came to understand it as the result of a contrived dialectal elision of the *o*, *t*, and *h* in *brother*, as Joel Chandler Harris heard it and chose to represent it in his stories. I've always translated it in my head to *bruh*. Growing up in Milledgeville, that's the way I heard it come out of the mouths of folks in my community in church and on the street. I like *br'er* as a kind of shibboleth. I know the speaker is referencing Harris and not the vernacular or community I grew up with when I hear that rhyme with *fair*. And it doesn't sound too far off from *briar* as in the briar patch, the setting that plays an important role in the Tar Baby tale. Bruh Rabbit triumphs at the end of this tale by convincing Bruh Fox that throwing him in the briar patch with all of its sharp thorns would be the cruelest torture Bruh Fox could use to punish Bruh Rabbit. Surely the thorns would rip Bruh Rabbit to ribbons. But as it turns out, Bruh Rabbit was born and raised in the briar patch; it's his home. This extreme environment is where he thrives.

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Before moving to Georgia with me, my wife, a Westerner, had never been to the South—to a Southern state—except for two brief visits the previous two winter breaks so I could introduce her and our son to my family and friends. Wanting to prepare her for the move, I said the South would likely feel more foreign than moving to Canada. It's my home, but I think it's the part of the country that would feel most culturally and historically unique to someone not born there.

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In Alaska, my wife and I had bound ourselves to each other, and she had given birth to our beautiful boy there. And in some ways, I think, that place and the community there made those actions feel possible for her. And she was game to move to the South, but she was uncertain and anxious about the reception our family would get living here.

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Moving from one place to another, no matter the distance, becomes an adventure when danger enters the picture. The way one is able to face the danger—whether one can move through it or is stopped—delineates adventure from disaster or even catastrophe.

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My and my son's encounter with the white supremacist graffiti visually brought home the threat to non-white folk in that environment. It complicated the briar patch. I understood and felt the threat written on that playground toy differently in the company of my son than I would have when I was growing up there, before I'd traveled away or even after I'd return as an adult before he was in the world. Living my life had given me a sense that I'll be able to handle myself in whatever situation arises. But the failure of not protecting my family, my son, would be unlivable.

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Bruh Rabbit convinces Bruh Fox to view the briar patch as an inhospitable, even unlivable, environment. Extremophiles are organisms, microbes, that live in what we humans consider extreme environments like down in the deepest, darkest part of the ocean, the Mariana Trench, beside volcanic vents, in an unlikely lake deep under Antarctic ice, in the scalding waters of geysers in Yellowstone. They also live in manmade extreme environments like toxic waste sites.

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As a Black Southerner who's traveled and lived outside of the South, ofttimes in rural (read overwhelmingly white) parts of the nation, I've been viewed as

an extremophile. Northerners have wondered what it's like in the South and assumed I must be glad to be away from the extreme racism they imagine while being blind to the racism practiced in the North aimed at native folk. And Black folk have wondered what it's like to live outside of the safety of a Black community in such predominantly white places as northern Minnesota, Alaska, and Montana—extreme environments for Black people.

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The economic system of chattel slavery based on the invented concept of race that was imposed by English colonists upon Africans from various peoples that were brought to these shores is the foundation upon which America and its wealth was built. This racist structure is the origin of the extreme environment Black folk have lived in for four hundred years. And though the fact that when they constructed a race, we made a culture—something we can live in—might lead one to conclude that Black people in this country in general are extremophiles; we're not. When talking about "extremophiles" and "extreme environments," we're using relative terms based on what we humans find comfortable or simply livable. It's ridiculous and incensing that I have to write this: Black people are human, and our Black lives matter.

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I am not an extremophile. Black folk are not Bruh Rabbit, and white people aren't Bruh Fox, though they understand the concept of home differently as they shelter in the power structure that is the privilege of whiteness.

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But America is our home, our briar patch. Black folk were born here. And while the best of America's ideals protects us and all its citizens when realized, often in practice what happens in this briar patch cuts Black lives to ribbons.

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