

WHEN THINGS WERE GREEN  
by Sion Dayson

PROLOGUE

*(1961/1977)*

It should have been harder for a young black boy to slip undetected from a small Southern town. To hitch rides, travel back roads, set sail for who knows where.

And yet he did. A boy, green to the world, has power. A boy freshly cut can move unseen. Greer might have thought demons had come to claim him at the time, but in fact, he had angels, too.

Now sixteen years later, Greer took his first steps back into Banning. On the exterior, very little had changed since he had last seen it. He, on the other hand, had doubled in age. Expanded exponentially in experience.

Greer wouldn't say he had left Banning without a trace. He had sent intermittent postcards, though nothing more than signs he was alive. He knew that some of them arrived, because he received a few notes in return, "forgive me" or "come home" scrawled on scraps of unlined paper. He didn't expect more words than that. Why would he? He read these things as he sat amidst foreign people, under different skies.

It wasn't Elizabeth who told him she was sick. Greer had always thought of his mother as sick, but this was something different. Reverend Smith wrote to him about his mother in an unsure hand. Greer pictured it, the illness, and it wasn't too far from the image he'd always carried of her – that of a tumor resting too close to her heart.

\* \* \*

Greer bought the bike on a whim. It was a rusty old thing resting against Banning's worn bus station when he pulled in, a "for sale" sign hanging on the handlebars. He sussed out who it belonged to within the day and the bike was his before nightfall. His purchase had to do with finding a new way to travel these streets from a former life. To move faster, to pick up speed if he needed. He would not be pulled back in.

"Well, I'll be," people would say, people like Wilson, who Greer wasn't even sure would still be around. An idle thought among the more serious. But there he was, alive and kicking.

That first day back Wilson looked him up and down: "Greer, we 'bout thought you was a ghost."

"And how do you know I'm not," Greer said, only half joking.

Greer's mother, used to ghosts, gave him what seemed at first a genuine smile, a rare thing, until it turned into something of a grimace, tears rolling down her face.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, like an incantation.

"Mama, it's ok," he said, putting his arms around this woman so fragile he could think of nothing but bones.

"I'm so glad you're back, baby. Everyone always leaves me. I'm so glad you're back."

ONE (1977)

Ceiley grew up hearing of her own immaculate conception. Kids in the schoolyard would ask her who her father was, goading her to say God. She never did, but that didn't stop their taunts. Stories thick as kudzu in that town. Everyone knew about her mother.

The town, Banning, was a small one in middle Georgia, made of dirt roads and modest homes; the air heavy, ground loamy. Oak trees and chickenfeed, the Cherokee Rose that offered a second flowering in the fall if lucky; these were things you saw from the front steps of Wilson's General. People said they could smell Sicama River, better known as Snake Creek, from half a mile away – about as far as anyone ever went. On warm summer evenings, a remote train whistle would sound, a reminder of other places in the distance. Mainly, though, like the train's call, a town not Banning was a reality fleeting, then gone.

Ceiley hadn't heard the whistle, was still sitting at the dinner table, moving the lima beans across her plate into pleasing geometric patterns. Trapezoids, hexagons, equilateral triangles. Esse, her mother, clanged dishes behind her, as if a chorus could be made of pots and pans. When the tap stopped running, one final gurgling sound issuing from the drain, Ceiley heard her mother's familiar huff. Ceiley didn't need to turn around to know her mother was looking critically at the back of her head, finding fault with her

unraveling cornrows, or the unsatisfactory way she slumped her shoulders. Ceiley ignored these silent assessments and waited for Esse to move to the closet for the broom.

“Mama,” she said, “Sheila asked me to come over to her house after school tomorrow.”

“Who’s Sheila?” Esse asked, starting to sweep near the stove.

“Someone in my class. You know, one of Mrs. Steven’s. She’s nice. It would be nice to go. She lives over on Hickory.” A vegetal rhombus, perpendicular lines intersecting.

“You know we have plans.”

“Mama, really,” Ceiley said, “do I have to go to church with you *every* day?”

“Child, what kind of question is that? The Lord is with us every day. *He* always shows up.”

Ceiley shifted her beans into straight lines, the flanks of a regiment. “Mama,” she would try to put it in her mother’s language, “I’ve already prayed for everything – peace, love, health, humility. Not much more to do.”

“Humility?” Esse said, the broom’s rapid scratches on the worn linoleum floor coming to a halt. “Girl, you like looking up words in that big dictionary of yours, I think you need to look that one up again. You prayed for every living being already? There are more creatures on this earth than days you’ll be alive, you could start with that.”

Ceiley dropped her fork on the plate, the bang louder than she expected.

“Damn it, Mama, I’m fifteen. You never let me do anything,” she said, the words flying from her mouth before she could stop them.

“There will be no swearing in this house,” Esse said, coming round to face her, gripping the broom’s handle so tight Ceiley imagined splinters of wood suddenly shooting forth from her mother’s fisted hand.

“Nothing’s allowed in this house!” she said, butting her chair away. She ran out the back door and circled around the small house, muttering what her mother would think further indecencies. In her agitated state and not looking where she was going, she collided with a man on a bicycle.

“Are you all right?” the man asked, jumping off, laying the bike on its side. He reached a hand out to Ceiley, who was splayed on the ground, and helped lift her up. Ceiley dusted her shorts off and looked down, dazed, unable to meet the man’s eye.

Seeing that she was fine, the man laughed. “Kid, maybe you should look up, see where you’re going.”

The front door flung open. “Girl, don’t think you can run out like that,” Esse shouted. She looked liable to say a lot more, but seeing the man standing there stopped her short. Esse looked at him for a few long moments, then nodded slightly, as if she had just decided something in her head. “Greer?”

“Is that you, Esse? Been a long time.”

“Didn’t know you were back.”

Ceiley looked at her mother in wonder, speaking to a stranger like he wasn’t.

“Yeah, just got in yesterday. Came to check on my mother. How has she seemed to you?”

“She don’t get out of the house, can’t say that I seen her much.”

“Of course,” he said, as if this were helpful information.

“Well,” Esse said, turning, “we’d best be going.”

“Ok,” Greer said. “We’ll be seeing you.”

Esse grabbed Ceiley’s hand and started pulling her towards the house.

“Mama, I was on my way somewhere.”

“Get in the house,” Esse said, flashing her get-in-the-house gaze. “Now.”

Ceiley glanced at the man, this Greer her mother had called him, and felt a flush.

He was beautiful, soft-looking skin the color of cocoa butter, an open carriage, a wide smile.

“Who was that, Mama?” Ceiley asked as soon as the front door clanged behind them, too curious to even fear her mother’s reprisal.

“Just a man. A man who left Banning,” she said. Ceiley felt her mother’s look grow hot. “Don’t you get any ideas,” she said.

And what was that supposed to mean?

TWO (1977)

Greer looked around his old room. It was almost eerie; everything appeared just as he'd left it. Not a single book out of place, the wooden desk still wobbly, its right leg too short. The finish on the one dresser seemed dull as ever, the shelf above bare. The bed was made; that was the only change.

Of course, Greer didn't notice this at first. You expect a bed to be made when you enter a room. But after setting down his suitcase and taking it all in, letting the strange weight of return settle, he realized this one detail didn't match the memory. He had left that night in such a hurry. Would he have thought to straighten the sheets? Plump the pillows? No. He had fled in a fury.

Greer opened his suitcase and started unpacking his few belongings: clothes, compass, diary. He had learned to travel light. Still, his possessions seemed to take up a disproportionate amount of space. Had his room always been this small? It seemed he could barely fit. Then again, he'd always felt too big for this house. This house, small and silent and still.

Greer picked up the small, black pouch that had almost gotten buried in the corner of his suitcase. He held it for a moment. He didn't need to take out its contents to know everything about it. He'd memorized its shape long ago. Caroline's necklace like a chain binding him to the past in a way he'd rather forget. Yet he'd never been able to let it go.

He went to see about the business with the bike, glad for an excuse to leave. Only, he might be here for a while now, who could say how long. And he felt suffocated already?

As he lay down that first night back, he wondered how many days his mother had waited before making his bed. Or had she done it right away? When she smoothed out the sheets, had she imagined sixteen years in between?

Greer got up again, too restless to sleep. He went to the bookshelf pushed against the far wall. So many times he'd read late into the night as a means of escape – it had all started here. He scanned the titles, most of them familiar, except a small group at the end. He'd never had a chance to really look at the last shipment he'd received before leaving. He remembered how his mother had always insisted on getting to those boxes of books first – and how life turned upside down the one time she didn't.

Greer pulled a book off the shelf, flipped absently through the pages before replacing it. He ran his finger over the spines, stopped at another book, the largest tome on the shelf. *War and Peace*. Well that about summed it up, didn't it?

Greer flipped right to the end of the book, as if the answer to it all could be found that easily. Something fell to the floor as he did. He leaned over and picked it up, a faded black and white photograph, the left corner severely bent. He unfolded it; the extreme crease sliced the photo with a thick white line. The picture must have been tucked in the book's pages for years.

He looked at the photo for a long time. It was disconcerting, but hypnotic somehow. Two white babies stared back at him. In the picture they held hands. He studied each tiny face, identical, their little mouths, their small ears mirroring each other.



He turned the photo over, found an inscription written in a right-leaning script he'd seen just once before: *Daniel and Caroline, 1943*.

Greer turned the photo over again. Which one was she? He jammed the photo back into the book and returned it to the shelf. But he changed his mind almost immediately and picked it up again. He walked to the closet and threw the book with the photo toward the back.

He flopped onto the bed again. He still couldn't believe he was back in Banning. He must have known that one day he'd return, but he sure didn't feel ready. Reminders would be everywhere.

He closed his eyes tight, though sleep was nowhere in sight. Maybe, he thought, this was what his mother felt when she'd found his room empty, realized he was gone: disbelief, yet with the unspoken knowledge that eventually it all catches up. It always does.

## WHEN THINGS WERE GREEN

*\*Short List for Finalists, William Faulkner – William Wisdom Competition, 2012*

*\*Semifinalist, James Jones First Novel Fellowship, 2012*

*\*Still seeking a home!*

Bio: Sion Dayson is an American writer living in Paris, France. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Utne Reader*, *Numero Cinq*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Smokelong Quarterly* (contest winner) and the anthologies *Strangers in Paris* (Tightrope Books) and *Seek It: Writers and Artists Do Sleep* (Red Claw Press), among other venues. She holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College and blogs about the City of Light's quirkier side at *paris (im)perfect*. Her website is <http://siondayson.com/>.