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To learn more about this month's featured author, Meredith Sue Willis, visit her website at <http://www.meredithsuewillis.com>. Her story in this *Extra*, "First Day of Teaching" is from a novel, [Trespassers](#) (Hamilton Stone Editions, 1997), part of the Blair Morgan trilogy, three novels that cover growing up in the nineteen-sixties from a small town in West Virginia to anti-war activity in New York City.

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**Meredith Sue Willis**  
***"First Day of Teaching"***  
***from Trespassers***

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# First Day of Teaching

(from [\*Trespassers\*](#), final novel of the Blair Morgan trilogy)

Meredith Sue Willis

This scene is a diner in New York City in the late nineteen-sixties. Blair has just moved to New York to be where things are happening; Aaron has lived in New York all his life. He writes poetry, but is teaching fourth grade as an alternative to going to Vietnam.

He said he knew a restaurant called Tom's, which had nothing really bad, and the hand-cut steak fries were top quality. It was a diner with big stainless steel coffee pots and red vinyl booths. I think I had hoped for something darker and more atmospheric, but after I'd looked around at the coat racks, desserts under glass, the steam in the air, I thought, But this is the real New York: this is what is.

He studied the menu. "I wouldn't get the onion rings. They usually sit around too long." He ordered the cheese omelette deluxe, with Swiss cheese. It came with fries and a coke. He closed his menu, and sat back deep in the booth, looking at me.

I couldn't remember if there had been a five tucked behind the dollar bill in my wallet or only another dollar. I thought there was a lot of change, but wasn't sure of that either, so I said I'd just have a muffin.

"Oh come on and eat," said Aaron. "You didn't have dinner, did you?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm not sure I have enough money with me, and I started a bank account, and I won't get a pay check for two weeks--"

"But I'm paying," he said. "It's a celebration for your new job, and it isn't a celebration if you pay for yourself."

The waitress shifted from one foot to the other.

"I can pay you back--"

"Let me buy it," he said.

The waitress said, "Do you want the omelette deluxe too?"

"Yes, please," I said.

"What kind of cheese?"

"Cheddar," I said. And when she was gone, "I just don't like to owe anything."

“Okay,” said Aaron. “Okay, so you'll pay me back.”

“You're annoyed.”

“I invited you out, Blair, I intended to pay. But do what you want.”

I could feel a pile of errors beginning to accumulate. I wanted the clean slate, the fresh start, just a little longer.

Aaron said, “You asked to see some of my poems. I brought a couple of them.” The waitress came back with our cokes. Aaron had a leather binder inside his coat. It was an odd size, brown, with the corners worn, as if it came from another country or another time. He said, “You're still sure you want to expose yourself to this stuff?”

“Absolutely! I mean, I'm not a critic or anything, but I really want to read it.”

A short breath exploded from his chest. “Okay. I'm going to show you a couple. I did not bring the one called 'Going Crazy in New York' because you have to write that one sometime during your undergraduate career or you don't get to graduate. That's a joke.” The notebook had sheets of onion skin paper with poems typed on them, some with inked corrections. He turned over the sheets with care. “Here's one you can read.”

You move through the house

Like a thoughtful whirlwind

I am sitting at your kitchen table.

Gentle tornado,

Blue hurricane—

Phenomenon!

When will you come down to earth?

When may I speak your name?

“That's very nice,” I said. “I mean, not nice. Nice is a terrible word. It's strong. Phenomenon is a girl?”

He grimaced. “Margo. A woman I used to know.” He took the notebook back and found another for me to read:

I want my lines to draw blood--  
Razors make me dizzy  
If I see a knife  
unattended on the table  
I have to walk away from it.  
Every time I close my eyes  
I see the razor  
opening the cow's eye.  
Waking or asleep,  
no matter where I go  
I can't escape  
your voice.

I felt a flush of triumph. "I know that movie with the cow eye-- the surrealist one! Is it about Margo again?"

"Partly." He shrugged his shrug that included his hands. The waitress came with our platters, and Aaron hastily pulled back his poems. The platters were heavy and white, the omelettes lapping over the sides, the steak fries like logs. Aaron put away the poems. "I haven't shown them to anyone in a long, long time. Tell me about your job."

"Partly." He shrugged his shrug that included his hands, the same as his father and Shelley's father. The waitress came with our platters, heavy and white, the omelettes lapping over the sides, the steak fries like logs. "Tell me about your job."

"I don't have much to tell yet, but it looks like it will be okay. It's at least vaguely useful to society, although I guess I was hoping to do something to alleviate social conditions."

"And get paid for it? Don't fool yourself."

"But you're teaching poor kids! Teaching is so important--"

"Maybe, but not the way I do it."

"Oh, Aaron, I bet you're great at it."

"I walked in there the first day, and they were all grinning and sitting on their desks saying, 'Hey Teach,' so I sat on my desk too, and pretty soon they were turning over desks, so I turned over a desk too to show I was on their wavelength--"

"Are you making this up?"

"No, this happened. I turned over a desk too, and we were all sitting on the undersides of the desks using the legs for controls and pretending they were cars. Then one of the boys starts pretending to shoot at the others, and I tried to explain that we were having friendly races instead of a war,

and meanwhile the girls got bored and decided to stand on the window sills and roll up their shirts to show their stomachs and be go-go dancers, and then the principal walked in. This was my first day.”

“The principal!”

“Yeah. The principal walks in. This lady, my principal, is about six feet tall and built like a fullback— and she says 'Boys and Girls, we will all turn our seats right side up now and sit down like ladies and gentlemen.' And they scurry around, and I was about to explain the educational aspect of this activity--”

I said, “You were just trying to speak their language--”

“Right. And the only *intelligent* thing I did was change my mind and *not* explain to the principal. I just let her get everything in order. And when all the desks were right side up, and all the kids were at their seats, then she started laying into them. 'Boys and Girls,' she said, 'Let us wipe those smiles off our faces—’”

“She sounds awful.”

“She's a genius. She said, 'Wipe off those smiles, and let me see no more smiles today, because you have not shown Mr. Labin that we know the meaning of respect.' And then she put a spelling lesson on the board and told them to copy it down word for word, and then she told me not to forget our little meeting at lunch hour. I figured I was going to be fired.”

“But it was your first day! She hadn't given you a chance.”

“I almost walked out without waiting to get fired. Maybe I should have. But I thought about the giant mosquitoes in the jungle in Vietnam, so I stood there for the rest of the morning telling the kids no they couldn't go to the bathroom until the first kid came back, and meanwhile keep copying those words.”

“But she didn't fire you?”

“No, she just handed me a manila folder full of rexograph masters and told me to make enough copies for those kids to be busy every minute of every day until I figured out something better to do with them.”

“I bet you figured out something interesting for them to do.”

He shrugged. “About once a week I feel brave enough to read aloud to them. Sometimes, if one particular kid named Tyrone is absent, we write poems. If Tyrone is in school, we only do rexograph sheets. I go forty-five minutes early every morning to make my rexographs. No one is there but me and the principal, and she gives me the high sign, and says, 'That's the secret, Mr. Labin. Never leave them unoccupied, not for an instant.' So now I know how to keep order, at least when Tyrone is absent, and he's out more than half the time. But at the same time, I know the purple sheets are

crap. I know I am making these kids waste hours and hours of energy. I don't believe this discipline is preparation for anything in their futures-- this discipline is just a way for me to keep my job. I look at those kids and think they deserve better. I wasn't cut out for this. I get a pay check, I don't have to go to jail or Canada. I get to practice living a contradiction.”

“It's your first year.” I watched his square palmed hands, his heavy but mobile shoulders. He was such a solid presence in his denim pants and fisherman's wool sweater, his dark chin. “After all,” I said, “If you read them one good book all year, that's probably more than they would have gotten any other way. My parents are both teachers, you know. They can go on and on for hours about all the mistakes they made when they first started.”

Aaron shook his head. “It's not just me. The main thing the successful teachers are doing is training the kids to sit in rows--”

I broke in. “So they'll be better soldiers!”

“You've got it. And these rexographs are all lies about patriotism, about how the U.S.A. never made a mistake.”

“At least kids don't get beat up in your school.”

“Not when Tyrone is absent. I'm joking. Tyrone is my nemesis. He's just hyperactive. He doesn't attack people. My father, now, he would have known how to handle Tyrone. My father always wanted to be a teacher, but he ended up running a Linotype machine. He probably would have been fired for being a Communist even if he had been a teacher. He was all wrong about the USSR, but at the same time, he had a point: people have jobs over there. People have medical care. The subways in Moscow are clean. There are works of art in the stations, and you could sleep on the train with your wallet hanging out and wake up with the same amount of money.”

I felt compelled to say, “Well, as I understand it, the New York subways are the oldest in the world.”

“I'm not talking about subways, I'm talking about why an education system is failing.” He had finished his omelette, and I had eaten most of mine too, hardly noticing that I ate. He said, “Do you want dessert?”

I shook my head. He called the waitress, and I admired how simply he could order coffee, talk to her as if he did it every day. I suppose he did. I said, “But what do you really want to do, if you don't want to be a teacher and you don't want to be a poet?”

“But I do want to be a poet, I just don't think I'm good enough. What I want— what I really want, is to be engaged in literature, at a university, writing about it and talking about it.”

“Not me,” I said. “I want to make the world less awful. Stop the

war--get people decent houses and cheap groceries.”

The coffee came. Other people were standing around the entrance to the restaurant. I could see they would want our booth, we would have to leave.

Aaron drank deeply. “As far as I'm concerned, the reason to change social conditions is to make a world where every Fellini who is now dying of malnutrition or digging in someone else's diamond mines or getting shot in Vietnam will have a chance to make his films.”

I loved this idea. I loved it that I thought it was wrong. “Are you saying the reason to change society is for *art*?”

“For human potential. I'm opposed to oversimplification and wrapping everything in a banner.”

“I'm opposed to oversimplification too, but there is such a thing as Justice--”

“Of course there's justice, but it's not simple. I mean, I'm against the war, I refuse to be part of it. I wouldn't go over there to fight in an unjust war. But at the same time, I'm also afraid. Refusing to fight ensures that I stay alive. And it also makes sure that some other guy, probably a poor guy, is being sent.”

What I really wanted was to keep on having this conversation forever. I had been waiting for this conversation for years.

