

Allie Light's Journal Entry
June 20, 1974

On the desert this morning I found a strange, mad woman.

Julia* and I took the turnoff to Calico Ghost Town and on the way we passed what looked like a yard filled with scarecrows, dummies or mannequins. I pulled the car over and backed up. What we saw were carved wooden figures—wooden dolls. They stood alone or in groups and some were mounted on carousels. Along the back of the yard was a building—actually a shack—and doll figures were mounted in niches and arranged along the edge of the roof. Whatever could move creaked in the heat.

After taking photographs I noticed a woman sitting on the porch near the end of the building. I felt uneasy, I didn't know if I was trespassing. We moved towards the car and then I thought, No, I want to speak to her. I walked to the porch, passing a sign: We don't know where MOM is but we have cold POP inside.

And so I met Ruby Black. I said, "This is a nice place you have here." She said, "Yes, it is and the dolls were all carved by my husband." She told me that she made all the clothes and that she "had to cut down a lot of dresses that was too big". Ruby was about sixty-five years old and wild looking. She was wearing a dress that she appeared to have worn for ages and her arms and face were dried and sunburned. Her hair was matted and full of bobby pins. She was hard of hearing but after a time I realized that she had two kinds of deafness: one was physical, the other an extreme need to talk, making her unable to listen, unable to pay attention to what a visitor might say. She said her husband had a lot of dolls inside, one with carved teeth. "I'm asking you in, not to get your money, but to show you what he's making." I then realized the building was a store on one end and a theater on the other. The dolls were arranged in one corner of the store and the rest of the space was filled with trash—broken furniture and piles of garbage. In the center was a rocking chair next to a potbelly stove. Display cases crowded with junk divided the room. Piles of rocks for sale filled the remaining spaces.

The dolls were exquisite—especially the one with carved teeth. The teeth looked like the insides of a harmonica. I asked her when her husband would finish the dolls. "He's no longer with me," she said. She continued talking and I somehow got the idea that he died in March**. I said, "You're all alone." She said, "Oh, no. The Lord is with me." She told me about her husband's illness. He had tried to make a living panning for gold and had stood in cold-water streams for so long his circulation was affected. Then he developed diabetes and couldn't walk very well. They came to the Mojave Desert, hoping the climate would heal him, and that's when he started carving dolls. I said, "Sounds like you took good care of him." She said, "Yes, but in March he had a heart attack trying to fix the windmill and he fell down in the yard." He told her he was dying. She had no help, no telephone and no one passed on the road. So he died. He lay in the yard all afternoon because she couldn't move him. "How long were you married?" I asked. "Thirty-nine years." We sat together and she showed me clippings and pictures of her husband, Calvin Black, and of herself with the dolls. One picture was on the front page of a Tennessee newspaper. A large photo of them was in a book called *Sweet Life*. She told me there are more than eighty carved dolls. She also said that she would finish the dolls when she was able to hear

her husband's voice again. Evidently he left tapes where he spoke in the dolls' voices. I realized that the dolls moved and their voices came from a small tape-recorder. Each doll had a speaker attached to the back of its head. Ruby explained that the batteries were dead, there was no money to buy more and she had no electricity. Also the carousels, though originally wind-driven, were now broken. This must account for the frozen stances of the outside dolls—caught in the act of movement when their machinery stopped.

Julia, freaked out by this place, Possum Trot, had waited in the car. She refused to take one step into the “creepy store”. So I had to be on my way. Ruby Black, this lonely woman tried, with the sheer quantity of her words, to pin me to her spot on the desert. When she saw that I was, indeed, leaving, she stood on her porch in a distracted and distant manner saying, “Goodbye.” I walked down the steps and crossed the yard, passing a carousel of wooden dolls, one on roller skates wearing the nametag RHODA.

*My 14 year-old daughter.

**Calvin's actual death date: March 2, 1972.