

# ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



Winter 1992-93

Volume 6, Number 1







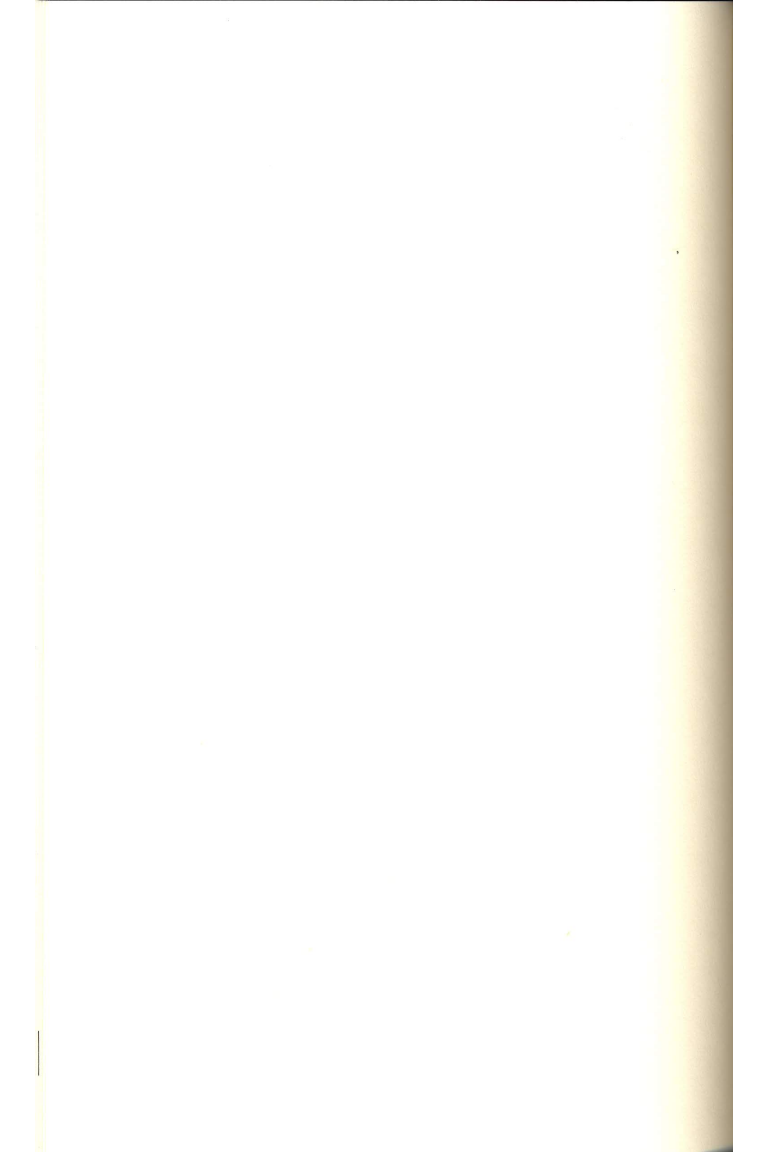
**A**LABAMA  
**L**ITERARY  
**R**EVUE

*Winter*  
1992-93

*Volume 6*  
*Number 1*



Anne Sexton



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*My friend, my friend, I was born  
doing reference work in sin, and born  
confessing it. This is what poems are:  
with mercy  
for the greedy,  
they are the tongue's wrangle,  
the world's pottage, the rat's star.*

—ANNE SEXTON  
from "With Mercy for the Greedy"

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Grateful acknowledgment is made for the use of Anne Sexton's quote from "With Mercy for the Greedy," (pp. 61-63) in *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Used by permission.

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*Alabama Literary Review* is a state literary medium representing local and national submissions, supported by Troy State University and in part by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. *Alabama Literary Review* is published twice a year under the direction of the *Alabama Literary Review* staff. Subscription rates are \$9 a year, which includes \$1.00 for postage; or \$4.50 per issue, \$.50 postage. Rates are subject to change without notice.

*Alabama Literary Review* publishes fiction, poetry, essays, reviews, short drama, and photographs. Photographs must be 8x10 black and white glossies. Essays must follow MLA Handbook, Third Edition. Pays in copies. First Serial Rights returned to author upon publication. Manuscripts and editorial or business correspondence should be addressed to *Alabama Literary Review*, Smith 253, Troy State University, Troy, Alabama 36082. Submissions will not be returned nor queries answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Please allow two months for our response. Copyright 1991 *Alabama Literary Review*. All rights reserved. ISSN 0890-1554.

*Alabama Literary Review* is listed in American Humanities Index.



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*Patrick Hood*

## Bright Eyes

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Mary Sue Weston

The night Grover met the woman he pulled up in front of The Silver Dollar Saloon, parked his truck, and pushed the button that played *Yellow Rose of Texas* on the horn. Everybody in the saloon could hear it and they knew the next one that walked down those stairs was a real cowboy. In fact they knew it was Grover Burris because he had been doing that every Saturday night since he got his truck.

Grover had showered and shaved after a long day at the U-Stor-It. He put on his jeans and a western-cut checked shirt unbuttoned to the third button so you could see some hair on his chest and the Saint Christopher medal with the gold-like chain. He pulled on his cowboy boots, put on his hat, dashed some Brut on his face and neck, and hung his key ring with the long chain on his belt. There were 34 keys on it, one for each mini-storage unit plus his apartment and his truck. He didn't really need one for each unit because they were master-keyed, but it looked better to the customers. They liked to think each one was private. He clipped his beeper to a belt loop on the other hip. That was just in case a customer had to get into a storage unit for some emergency. You never could tell. Some woman might have a baby and need to get her baby crib out of there. Anything could happen. No matter what business a man is in, he thought, it can't hurt to have a beeper. For one thing, women are impressed by beepers. They might think he's a doctor or an oil man.

Grover couldn't decide which he hoped women would think he was. He knew he looked like a young Clint Eastwood, with his piercing blue eyes and the way he walked. Looking like a movie star, especially Clint Eastwood, naturally drew older

women to him. Grover didn't mind that as long as they weren't *too* old. In fact he was partial to ladies in their late forties, early fifties, and a little plump. As he always said, he liked some meat on the bone. Ladies that age were easy to please, even anxious to please. They didn't have all the problems that these young split-tails have. They never pushed you to buy them a "friendship" ring, shit like that.

From the beginning, the woman was a puzzlement. She was sitting at the bar looking straight into the mirror. She had on a fuzzy sweater in pale lavender and tight blue jeans. Her hips poured over the barstool a bit, well, quite a bit, but just enough so you'd know she was soft. Her pale blond hair was piled up on her head and caught with a big purple ribbon. She had a mixed drink in front of her with a cherry in it. That told you something. She wasn't local.

Locals didn't drink anything fancy, just Lone Star or Pearl, an occasional Corona. This was Bandera, Texas, not San Antonio. Bandera calls itself The Cowboy Capital of the World. It would be called a one-horse town by some people, but the truth is there are more horses than people. The Silver Dollar was practically the only place in town, saloon-wise. That was before the horse racing track came in. Now it's built up some.

What puzzled Grover was the way she looked at herself in the mirror. Her lips smiled just a little bit, but something as cold as death flickered through her eyes. Grover slid onto the stool next to her. Arky Blue handed him a Lone Star long neck.

Old Arky had owned the Silver Dollar for years. He bought the place and decorated it just the way he wanted it. There were deer heads, stuffed wild cats, old cross-cut saws, a rusty plow, six clocks showing different times, some ancient greasy cowboy boots, hats, and all manner of parts and pieces off of farm machinery hanging from the ceiling and walls.

Grover had known Arky Blue all his life. When he was knee-high he used to come wandering into the bar looking for his mama. He remembered the warm smooth wood on his bare feet, how the sawdust caught between his toes when he crossed the dance floor. A blue haze of cigarette smoke hung over the pool table, and there was always a tear-jerker on the jukebox. A Patsy Cline or an Earnest Tubb.

The woman caught his eye in the mirror, then looked down

at her glass. She dipped a plastic straw in her drink and drew a tic-tac-toe game on the bar with it, filling in x's and o's until neither could win.

"Do you come here often?" he said, knowing very well that she didn't. Knowing it was a stupid opening line but not being able to think of anything else.

"Only when I'm horny," she said, lighting a cigarette. She looked at the ceiling and blew smoke straight up. Smart ass.

Arky Blue chuckled and winked from behind the bar. Grover spit in the trash container at the end of the bar and got out his can of Copenhagen. So it was going to be like that. Well, he was up to it.

"Who do I look like?" he asked, leaning back and squinting his eyes at her.

"Like a near-sighted drugstore cowboy," she said, "with a *faux* Stetson on his head."

He leaned a bit further back, and pointed his finger at her chest. "Guess," he said in a low voice. "Go ahead, *make my day*."

"I got it," she said. "You're a *faux* Clint Eastwood."

"What's this *foe* stuff? What's that mean?"

"Never mind," she blew another stream of smoke toward the ceiling. "It's French."

God, he wished somebody would beep him. She had a ring on every finger and diamonds on her ears. She was educated, he could tell. Probably foreign, too.

"Is it true what they say about French women?" He whispered so close to her ear that her hair tickled his lips. He considered getting Arky Blue to page him.

She looked at him for about four seconds like she was going to say something smart-ass, then she looked at herself in the mirror behind the bar. "Yeah," she said, "it's true."

"Set 'em up over here in the booth," he winked at Arky, took her arm gently and led her to the corner booth.

Pocketknife-carved graffiti covered the table top. *George loves Mary. Grace fucks Toby. Don't mess with Tex.* She slipped her whiskey sour through a straw.

My name is Joy Lynn, what's yours? She looked up and lit a cigarette. Her eyes were green and crinkled deep at the edges. Wisps of hair fell in loose strands around her face and move lightly when she blew smoke rings. He guessed her age at late

forties. Could be wrong though, with all that makeup. Anyway, she was a real lady. He could tell.

"Grover Burris," he said, showing a nice expanse of white teeth. He leaned forward expecting a return smile.

"My husband died last week," she said, looking off into the distance, like there was a distance. Which there wasn't anything but the bar and the animal heads on the wall.

"You want to hear something on the jukebox?" He stood up and pulled some quarters out of his pocket.

"We were married fourteen years."

"What about a Willie Nelson?" he said. "Waylon Jennings?"

"No kids, but he was like a big kid. Great big blue eyes and a baby face." She blew smoke rings toward the boar head.

Grover sat back down. "My mama died a year ago last month," he said, laying the quarters on the table. He had gone out to the little cemetery on the hill in the middle of January. Cold wind blew through the mesquite and burned his eyes. The dirt over the grave had already sunk in six inches. Rock-hard caliche killed the mums he planted right after the funeral. He took a bouquet of plastic lilacs because purple was her favorite color. He forgot to bring a vase so he stuck them in an old RC bottle he found by the fence. He thought of the time just a week before she died; they'd been in the kitchen horsing around. He's razzed her about how old she was getting and she said, *I'll piss on your grave!* At the cemetery he had gone behind her little headstone and urinated and laughed.

But then he cried.

"Play *Stardust*," she said, looking across the dance floor to the jukebox.

"She died in her sleep," he said. "There was a dude sleeping right next to her and he didn't even know she was dead till morning."

"See if they've got a Merle Haggard slow waltz on there."

"I didn't even know the turkey's name. Still don't." He thought of his mother. His first memory as a kid was when he was lying on the floor across the doorway. She came from one room to the other and instead of asking him to move out of the way she said, *don't you look now Grovey*, and stepped over him. He thought *I could have looked up her dress. I could have seen something, but I didn't.* He always wished he'd looked up her dress.

He remembered going to the bar looking for his mama and finding her, cigarette in one hand and beer in the other. *Well lookit here, she'd say. Little Grovey.* She'd let him lick the foam off the top and give him a sip. When she leaned down from the bar stool he could see down her dress, the big soft tits. He wanted her to hug him, to hold him close, to feel the softness, smell the sweet powder sweat. She wore Blue Waltz perfume that came from a small, deep blue bottle with a silk tassel on it. Kept it in her purse.

"I hate having dead animals hanging over the table," Joy Lynn said. She was talking to the boar head. "It makes you feel like *hairs* could be falling in your drink."

"We could move to another booth," he said. "You want to dance?"

"The funeral was day before yesterday," she said, still talking to the boar head. "He isn't cold yet and here I am."

Grover went to the jukebox. He put in a handful of quarters and punched in numbers at random, never even read the names of the songs. What the hell, it was that kind of world.

He took her hand and led her onto the dance floor. She put her head against his shoulder. It was a slow waltz, Merle Haggard's *My Favorite Memory*. He held her body so close he could feel her nipples through the fuzz on her sweater, her warm breath tickled the hairs on his chest. Her cheek was damp. She smelled like Blue Waltz, but he knew it wasn't something cheap. He was glad he'd put on plenty of Brut. You could make slow love to that song. He didn't know whether to put his tongue in her ear or not. She was a real lady. He looked up and Arky Blue was watching them. They exchanged winks and Arky took another round over to the booth.

When they went back to the table Joy Lynn sat down and Grover eased in beside her instead of across from her like he had been. He told a few of his favorite Aggie jokes. She laughed a lot, laughed pretty loud really, for a lady. Then she asked to be excused so she could go powder her nose.

She was in there a good while and when she came back her eyes looked kind of red like she'd been crying; she sniffed and dabbed at her nose with a Kleenex. But she smiled a nice easy Sunday-morning smile.

"Let's go get a cup of coffee," Grover said. "How about it, sugar babe?"

"Okay," she said. Pretty easy for a lady.

They stepped out onto the night street. He could smell barbecue from across the street. Best barbecue in Texas. A neon sign blinked red and white. An old dog wandered down the sidewalk, looked in the door at the Silver Dollar, and walked on. The moon was just a sliver of light overhead.

"Your car or mine?" she said.

"Yours," he said, thinking about his old truck. She probably wouldn't want to ride in it, low on gas anyway.

It was one of those long Cadillacs, a dark red convertible. She got in and pushed a button and the top went down. When Grover got in he felt like a million dollars and half of it spent.

"Where to?" she said. "What direction?" Her eyes were dancing. There was some kind of craziness bubbling just below the surface. He didn't know if she was laughing at him or what. For a couple of seconds something told him he ought to get out and forget it. She tapped her long red fingernails on the steering wheel, waiting. She put her hand on his knee and gave it a soft squeeze. What the hell. He pointed down the road to the right. She pulled a bottle from under the seat and took a long drink, Johnny Walker Red, and handed it to him.

It was about the worst stuff he ever tasted. He coughed and spit it out on the road. Joy Lynn laughed. The sound of her laughter trailed after them as she went from zero to fifty-five before they got to the first light, the only light in town.

"Where you from?" Grover asked.

"San Antonio," she said, lighting a cigarette. She turned on the radio. *Fair skies and seventy-eight degrees*. Jerry Lee Lewis singing *When Two Worlds Collide*. The purple bow flew from her head and her long hair rose with the wind like a pale silver cloud. He wanted to touch her, just touch her hair. He didn't know where they were going. It was Medina Highway, he knew that, going toward Medina Lake. Not another car on the road. A good thing, too, what with her going about eighty miles an hour, crossing the yellow line, hell, straddling the yellow line.

"He was eighteen years older than me," she said. "He was long past my prime. But I loved him. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah," he said.



A half-grown deer started across the road and froze in the headlights. She whipped around it on the left, spinning gravel into the night behind her.

"How would you know what I mean, cowboy?" she said, tipping the bottle to her lips. She was shouting her words into the wind. "You're just a babe. You don't know anything yet."

"I know enough," he said.

They rode in silence for ten minutes, silence except for the radio playing sad songs, cheating songs, *fair skies and seventy-eight degrees*, and the wind whooshing around the car at eighty. He should have stayed at the bar and talked to Arky. He should have waited around for one of the regular honky-tonk specials that always showed up. Hell, he could have the forty miles to San Antonio and had a blast at The Bluebonnet Palace. Women outnumber men ten to one, crawl all over you.

"You know what I'm going to miss the most?" She slowed for a bright-eyed armadillo waddling across the road.

"What?"

"Sleep," she said. "I haven't slept since he died. I can't sleep alone in that king-size bed. I've got three king pillows, one on each side and one under my head, but I can't sleep. I drink scotch till I can't hold a glass, then I close my eyes. I dream. I wouldn't call it sleep. I dream that I am holding a gun to my temple, a thirty-eight Special. I have one. Slowly, I pull the trigger. There is a bright light; a blinding light, and then warmth and blackness spreads across my brain. Peace."

She had slowed to thirty-five. Her hair fell around her shoulders, tangled, like spun glass on a Christmas tree.

"That's what happened to me after my daddy came back from Nam." Grover pushed the button to recline his seat and leaned back. "I mean about sleeping; not sleeping, that is." He remembered how it was when his daddy was sent to Viet Nam. He was six years old. He was glad. Get the son-of-a-bitch out of the house; have his mama all to himself then. Cold mornings he'd wake up just before daylight and go out in the yard to take a piss. The outhouse was too far; spiders and booger men stayed there at night. Then he'd come back in and sneak to his mama's bed; crawl under the flannel sheets and snuggle up to her back. *You're getting too big to sleep with your mama, she'd say.*

*Daddy's bigger than me, he said, and he slept with you.* Then she

turned over and hugged him up close and laughed. He hoped it would never end. But then Daddy came home. He wished the Viet Cong had blown his fucking head off. The way his daddy backhanded his mama, knocked her across the kitchen and into the wall, he didn't deserve to live. Then he left out for Denver with a chick he met in San Antone.

"How long do you think I can go on like this?" Joy Lynn said, slowing the car to a crawl. She pulled onto a side road and rocked along, bouncing over stones and through dry creek beds. Bright eyes appeared and disappeared behind cactus and mesquite. She had a catch in her voice. If she cried he was going to get out and walk back to Medina Highway and hitch a ride with the next vehicle. He couldn't stand a bawling woman.

"I don't know," he said. "This road probably leads to the lake."

"Hey, cowboy," she said, "you want to go with me?"

"Sure, where we going?"

"The lake, Medina Lake."

"We'll be there any minute now," he said, "unless we get lost out here."

"I know where we are, I've been there," she said. "We've got a boat down there at the marina. No, I have a boat. It's mine now. He is dead."

"What are we going to do?" A moonlight boat ride would be something to tell the guys about at work Monday. He wished he'd brought his tackle box.

"We're going to fly off the pier at sixty miles an hour."

"Into the lake?" Shit. He should have known better. He knew there was something weird about her.

"You know the last time I dreamed?" She was staring straight ahead like in a trance. "Of course you don't. How could you? I saw a lake. It was Medina Lake. I saw a figure, a wispy, gray figure. It was beckoning to me. *Come on over to this side of the lake, Joy Lynn*, it said. You know what that means, don't you? No? How could you know, cowboy? It was death." Her voice kind of trembled. "Or it was my husband. Calling to me. The lake was glassy, you know? There was a fog, like mist coming up, hovering just over the water. Still, you could see the reflection of the trees, the hills. It was in color but the figure was gray." Her eyes were dark and wild. She looked over at him and laughed. "You're not afraid of death are you, *Mister Eastwood*?"

Grover decided he'd have a chug of that scotch after all. It burned his throat and brought tears to his eyes, but he swallowed it. His life was passing before him. He remembered when he and his mama flew out to his granddaddy's funeral in California. It was the first and only time he'd been on a plane. He looked down on the clouds and thought how it would be to jump out the window and land on them. He wondered would he bounce, or would he just drop through and land in the Grand Canyon or somewhere. His mama said Granddaddy had gone to heaven, way up in the sky. And here he was up in the sky. Where was Granddaddy? He peered into the sunset and thought he saw him. "Lookit there, Mama," he said, "it's *him*." But she said it was just another plane or something, a bird.

Joy Lynn turned onto another highway. The tires spun rocks across the road as she pulled out. "This is it, Clint baby," she said. "I'm going to make your day."

From the top of the hill he could see some lights on the marina, the road running straight down to the pier. He heard the roar of the engine as she stomped on the accelerator. She laughed.

He grabbed for the steering wheel. The car jumped a gully and a tree came at them.

When he opened his eyes he was on the floorboard of the car with his legs all cockeyed. The car wasn't moving. It was quiet except for the crickets and a slow pinging in the engine. The smell of oil and gas was heavy in the night air.

There was blood dripping from his nose. The stars and a sliver of moon hung just above his head. He smelled blood, and Brut. He tasted tears and blood rolling into his mouth as he sobbed.

A hand with long red fingernails moved against his crumpled hat. Then the woman's voice. "Hey, cowboy," she said, "can't you reach me the scotch? I'm not asleep yet." ❧

## Two Photographs in Siesta

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*Rhonda Morrison*

Pots line the stucco walkway, sunburnt flowers  
squat and curl like a seventeenth-century  
still life,  
and bow to the simmer of mortality.  
A small space to admit air,  
the lazy squire of out and in  
cut into the corridor  
of clay air  
Is the sixth hour.

She sits on the step spreading limbs in disarray—  
messy as morning.  
Her eyes are brown fringe, shadows a V  
on her heavy cheeks. A mole, looks drawn, plumped on  
top of her knee  
which is bent and crushed, calf to thigh,  
ankle over foot, hand over hand, arms  
a triangle around one half of her body.

In half shade are two photos, one  
a mother in love with her child  
at body temperature,  
rubbing his head and warm breath her own;  
fingers absently tangled  
through a silky diction,  
The youth of her own.  
The other hand around his waist  
carelessly, yet holding the body together  
in a soft cross of protection.

Two is Mezo at the Fabada, "the alley of the kiss," her black  
hair hanging between them like Baja, their fingers  
a river diverted  
into each other.  
Whereabouts unknown.

But night is coming soon, tapered and lit,  
hidden in a cave  
like the Virgin Mary.  
Night is better, they will be hungry, stupid,  
drunk and tangled in their own past.  
The smell of pig and rum will make her forget  
hers.



*Kelly Hoffman*

## Mardi Gras

---

*Pete Fromm*

Ron had never been attracted by speed, but with the windy plain's slope down from the mountains, he was running at over one hundred miles an hour. This wasn't fun or thrilling. In fact, it scared him, but he wished he could go faster. A rocket wouldn't be fast enough of course. He could still see with perfect clarity, and all he could see were Kay's legs wrapped so tightly around a stranger's bare waist. When he had opened his front door his eye had taken it in, but he had backed away before the image could work its way into his brain. Now it would not go away. They hadn't seen or heard him, and he had set his briefcase back down in his Buick and driven away. After the stop at the bank, where he left the family car, he walked to the import dealer and bought the little Triumph Spitfire he had been driving by for weeks. His hands shook and the man in the lot had to help him lower the ragtop.

Three hours out of Denver the radar detector squealed and Ron cut his speed in half. He snapped off the radio. He would use this time to think. He had to come up with a destination. He would drive into the Atlantic eventually, if he kept on like this.

Seeing the patrol car ahead of him, driving in the same direction, made the first decision easy. Ron took the next exit, and worked the Spitfire back up to speed, more gently this time.

Dusk was not far away and he was in Kansas. Kansas for god's sake. It was nearly two hours before he flashed through Oklahoma and into Texas. He had lived his whole life around Denver and had never once set foot in these flat, desolate states. But it made him feel like he was getting somewhere, crossing through Oklahoma in twenty minutes.

It was fully dark now, the night broken only by his head-

lights and the odd glare of isolated homes, and Ron slowed under the cover of the darkness. He turned on the radio and chanced upon a live report of Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. There would be a crashing finale on Fat Tuesday. Ron could hear the revelry in the background. Instead of remembering coming home early to the surprise, Ron remembered leaving for work that morning, and he realized it was almost Tuesday now.

Ron slowed again, enough to keep the map from blowing out of the car. He caught snatches of roads and numbers and turned onto the first road that led in the direction of New Orleans. He stopped for gas when he had to, buying candy bars and chips and sodas for road food. He had never driven like this in his life, but he had heard of younger men doing it and it made him feel that way. Young. He was going to a party and he couldn't even take the time to sleep, he was that wild and that young.

It was something to have a convertible sports car, he thought. And to be driving at one in the morning in the first week of March with the top down. The south was a good place just for that. The wind, deflecting off his leather flight jacket, had just the right chill to keep him from losing track of the driving.

When he drove fast enough it was as if there was nothing behind him. If he drove far enough, he thought, it might even be like he had never laid eyes on his wife's legs in his entire life. If he got far enough into the French Quarter it might be like being born again, with everything before him instead of behind him.

Whenever he thought about his wife he would turn away from her and drive a little faster, remembering what it was like to be young and going to a party. He had goose bumps under the leather of his heavy jacket. Sometimes he would get as far as to wonder what she was telling their daughters, about where Daddy was. He pictured the traces of fear and doubt that must be eating at her, the slick taste of guilt crinkling and blackening the glossy edges of her successful deceit. But ever since he had decided he was going to Mardi Gras he had been able to funnel his thoughts back to the happy noises of the revelers and he smiled, knowing he would soon join in that.

By dawn Wichita Falls was behind him and he figured if he



could average seventy-five miles an hour he could be in New Orleans by two in the afternoon. He flicked through the radio stations, settling for recorded Dixieland Jazz, which he had never listened to before in his life.

They may have found his car in the bank lot by now. When they did she would discover the withdrawal from their savings and she would know she had been caught. As awful as that would be, it would be easier for her to know it absolutely. Ron wished he had been thinking clearly enough to cover his tracks, to leave her in doubt a bit longer.

He drove faster as he wondered at how simple he had been for never suspecting a thing. He tried to comfort himself by saying that it wasn't a requirement that he be suspicious. That was not a part of marriage. But her bridge nights and all her meetings as a realtor danced about before him and it was hard not to see what an incredible dupe he had been. The thought of everyone he knew chuckling over the way his wife spent days groveling with a stranger nearly made him sick.

He flicked through the radio stations again, but couldn't find anymore live reports with the happy noises of the crowds. He was sweating from the way he had been thinking and he wriggled out of his jacket, keeping first one hand, then the other, on the wheel while he fought with the binding material. He threw the coat into the narrow slit of the back seat and studied the map again, adding up all the small red numbers alongside his route, detouring around Dallas.

By ten he had side-slipped Shreveport and was in Louisiana. That made four new states for him. A pretty successful trip, he decided, for a man who had only been in three states in his entire life. He lay out a course for Baton Rouge and drove on, buoyed up by the new state and the unfamiliar heavy, wet heat spilling past his bug smeared windshield. He glanced at the bushy trees with their never ending foldings of greens and darker greens, and thought he might lose himself forever in foliage like that.

He filled up once more in Baton Rouge and climbed stiffly back into the low seat which had already formed to his body. The freeway was on stilts now, riding over a mucky wasteland of black water and grey-green trees that Ron assumed was the bayou.

The traffic clotted near New Orleans and for a long time Ron

watched the red reflection of his entire car mirrored in the hub of a semi tire. He took the next exit he could.

He had never seen such a confusion of diagonal cross streets, missing street signs, and run down buildings. He took every street that ran south or east, for as far as it would go, until he was on what would be more accurately described as a trail. Even without his jacket, he was sweating. But he liked the smell of the air; it was full of water and some gentle decay. It was not like the Denver slums. The buildings he drove by were so different, with their porches and scraggling yards, that he wasn't even sure if this was a slum. He had never imagined a slum with palm trees.

Ron came to the Mississippi. He stopped and stared, liking how it moved as if there was nothing else in the world to do. He turned onto a dirty road that followed the river. He couldn't be lost now, with the slow, brown river to guide him. He could almost hear those people hooting and shouting and laughing. He drove slowly along the deserted river, and couldn't help thinking of the quietness that had always surrounded his wife. He had thought it meant that everything was all right. He guessed now that it had probably meant something else.

He had never been wild, and sometimes he thought he had never been young. But Kay had been so soothing and calm that Ron thought she loved him for his lack of wildness. They never fought. In bed they read to each other. Ron let her have her way and that maintained the calm. Now he wondered if he should have been wilder for her.

He looked at the placid water oozing between the concrete and metal banks, and knew that he was wrong. It was Kay who had taken her feet off the ground to wrap her legs around something strange and unknown. Ron would have followed the lazy, opaque waters forever.

The quiet died out gradually and Ron saw barricades up ahead. A policeman waved an orange baton at him and Ron followed it to his left. He was the only one following the river in, and the bored policemen kept waving their sticks at him.

Their path led to the Superdome. There was a steady trickle of people pouring from its exits, adding to the throng that filled all the streets to the east. Ron followed the car in front of him and parked next to it in the dark concrete shelter. Two men and

two women got out of the car that he had followed. They were happy and young and they said hello.

Ron walked down the smooth ramps with them, and they faltered in the brightness at the exit together. But when their eyes adjusted the four young people dashed across the street and, though he tried to follow, they were swallowed by the crowd. So was Ron.

He hustled along, smiling with all these people, and the next time he looked up he saw a sign on the boulevard that said Canal Street. Floats kept going by and women on the floats threw things into the crowds, plastic bracelets and necklaces and coins. A coin hit Ron in the chest and he caught it before it bounced away. A girl who could have been one of his daughters was pushed against him by the crowd. Ron held the coin out to her and she took it from him, smiling. A moment later she held a bead necklace up to him, holding it open with both hands. Ron bowed and she slipped the beads over his head. He felt it on his neck and said thank you.

Ron bumped through the crowds still dazed from twenty hours in his new car. He laughed out loud when he saw the sign for Bourbon Street. It was nearly impossible to move through the crowds, but everybody was happy and did not mind being nudged back and forth. Ron turned onto Bourbon Street, still laughing.

He bought a can of Dixie beer from a street vendor and dropped a piece of the ice that clung to the can down the neck of his shirt. The tingling felt just like he imagined the party would. A block later he bought a T-shirt with a row of leaping jesters across the chest. He unbuttoned his business shirt and stripped it off, letting it drop onto the pavement to be trampled. Someone hooted and clapped him on the back. Ron grinned and pulled the T-shirt over his head. He finished his beer and saw the man beside him squash an empty can on the side of his head. Ron tried it too. It hurt and he laughed again.

The buildings surrounding him had tall, narrow doors and windows and wrought-iron porches on the second story. People spilled from all the windows and all the doors and hung out over the iron railings of the porches. It was as noisy a place as Ron had ever heard. Kay would probably have hated it. But Ron wasn't sure anymore. He pretended that she would, then vowed

not to think of her anymore. The noise and the people would definitely frighten his daughters, who were too timid to ever put a necklace around a stranger.

A crescendo of laughing and hollering broke out in front of him and Ron followed the crowd's gaze up to see a lacy bra sailing out over the street. A second one followed.

The porch was packed with women, and a few men. The two bra flingers shook slim shoulders with breasts at the admirers below and disintegrated in giggling laughter. Coins and beads showered their section of balcony. One of the women tried to stretch a bracelet around her breast but it snapped off and spun into the crowd. Men struggled on the pavement for it.

Soon the women forgot the crowd and stood on the balcony, half naked, talking and drinking like anyone else, being occasionally pelted by a handful of beads when someone spotted them for the first time. They would laugh then and wave.

Ron stared at their nakedness, there for everyone to see, then turned suddenly away. He bought another beer and drank it in just a few swallows. His eyes watered with the sting of the carbonation but he was able to look at the woman and not see his wife's body in place of hers. He belched enormously, and someone beside him shouted 'Bravo!'

Ron slipped into a bar and the noise of the crowd was drowned by the throbbing of the drums and the blare of the horns.

The black men in the band were all sweating profusely and Ron bought a red drink called a Hurricane. It was what everybody was drinking and it tasted sweet and powerful at once. He drank it off and got another. He watched the trombone player's cheeks puff and fall until he was pushed away from the bar.

He was in the swirl of the crowd then and a woman grabbed his arm, took a drink from his Hurricane and danced several steps with him before swirling away and repeating her trick with the next man she bumped into. Ron watched her until she was out of sight. He bought one more Hurricane, in a plastic cup, and struggled out of the bar. The naked women on the balcony were gone.

Ron started to sip on his drink. He was jostled by the crowd and some of the drink slipped over the edge of the cup. He licked at the sticky red juice on his fingers.

He was going to have to slow down, he thought. After the long drive the drink was going to his head. He tried to add up the hours he had been awake, and the numbers lined up like little red mile markers on a map, starting with his wife under a stranger and ending here with a laughing naked woman trying to put a bracelet around her breast. He couldn't add up the tiny red numerals. He said out loud that he had been up for two days and someone toasted to that.

Dusk came and Ron gave himself up to whatever direction the crowd traveled in. The tumult kept increasing. There were people in confusing costumes jostling through the crowds. Ron tried to focus on them but they were too colorful and gaudy. Floats drifted about in the streets, broken away from their designated paths and lost in the unyielding crush of the party.

A man on stilts, dressed like a jester, lurched past and crashed into the crowd. He was caught before he reached their heads and thrown back up to a vertical position. But he couldn't find his legs under him and he crashed again. Ron helped catch him and he heard the man begging to be let down. Ron pushed with everyone else to throw him upright. He fell in the opposite direction and Ron dropped into the wake of a lost float. The people already on it pulled him up and he sat on its edge. Fireworks split the sky but Ron could only see snatches of them between the tall, close buildings. He lay back on the crepe paper of the float and watched the flashes of light and bright colors. The fireworks stayed visible on his eye after they had faded and died out. Everything swirled about the bits of color his eyes held, and Ron fingered the beads around his neck to anchor himself to something. More people were climbing on the float all the time. One of them stepped on Ron and fell over. He crawled back over and grasped Ron's head, laughing and apologizing. He fell off the float when Ron sat up and he lay on the street, laughing until the crowd swallowed him.

A sudden roar broke from the crowd, followed by a hush, and Ron felt the world begin to tilt. He gripped the necklace the girl had given him and felt himself rolling. He jumped toward the crowd that had opened for the first time since he had entered it.

Ron landed on his feet, staggered and sat down. He turned in time to see the float list slowly, irrevocably, with people leap-

ing off and away from it. It landed on its side, losing a little crepe paper, and the people closed back around it, jumping up and down, chanting and screaming. Someone pulled Ron to his feet and kissed him, shouting something about the captain and his ship. He tried to return the embrace but he stumbled against a wall of people. The laughing crowd shouted and shoved at him and Ron liked to have their hands on him like that. It wasn't a mean shoving, but something that friends might do.

Ron closed his eyes and sniffed at the perfume the kiss had left near his face. He started to dance with himself, but someone soft slipped under his arms and they danced together, to the music seeping out of a bar. Ron never opened his eyes and when the song was over his partner kissed him hard on the mouth and spun off into the crowd. Ron wondered if it could have been Kay. They used to dance slowly like that together, in their living room, before the girls were old enough to tease them.

Ron stumbled on and realized he had fallen out of the thickest part of the crowd. He turned a corner, looking for it again, and then another one. But the party had lost him. He could almost walk now, but it was hard to stand up without the support of the crowd.

He crossed a large cobblestoned square. He sat down once, unexpectedly, and traced the joints between the bricks with his fingers. He looked at all the moving legs and realized he was still surrounded by people. But not like before. He could see past these legs. They didn't block out everything else.

He stood and continued his crossing. At the other end of the square, past its wrought-iron fencing, was a cafe of some sort, brightly lit with colorful awnings. Ron steered away from it and sidled along a large dark building, edging farther out of the protection of the crowd.

Ron stopped at the huge log pilings edging the water. Fireworks still burst over his head and he watched them reflecting in the rolling surface of the big river. It was no longer muddy. The water sparkled and shined and flowered in the colorful bursts of the rockets. Yet it flowed the same as ever, and Ron knew it never once wrapped its legs around strangers. Even though it could change from muddy and drab to this colorful, quiet splendor, Ron knew it would never do that.

He stumbled to the ladder-like stairway that led strangely

right into the river. He walked slowly down the iron steps and felt the warm water close around his ankles. He took another step but there were no more on the stairway and Ron plunged into the river.

The surprising current took him away from the ladder immediately and Ron rolled onto his back and watched an enormous burst of color open up above him. He smiled. His ears were under the water and he could not hear the explosion. Ron let his body relax into the nudging flow of the river and he wished that everything had always stayed like this. Then he had the odd thought that maybe they had and that the naked stranger was simply one of those quick bursts of riotousness that flashed onto the river now and then, leaving it unchanged when it faded.

He turned over then and started to swim down the stream, quietly so he didn't disturb the surface. His ears were out of the water and the noise returned to him but he no longer had to watch the bright violent flashes of the fireworks.

A row of small, white lights looped from a stick framework on the left bank of the river and Ron could see people standing under them. One of them pointed and soon they were yelling at him and Ron dove under the surface. When he came up a few feet later there was more yelling and laughing and some cursing. A boat motor started and Ron told the man in it that he wanted to stay out here but was soon dragged back to shore. The man was a waiter and he was mad but laughing and he brought Ron a free cup of coffee, because he never saw a first at Mardi Gras anymore.

People crowded around Ron's table and laughed at him and wanted to know what he was doing. He told them he was swimming to Denver to a woman who was his wife. They laughed so hard one of them fell over and Ron looked at him on the floor and he started to smile too.

He told them he had been cheated by the quietist thing he had ever known, but that if it could be quiet again he thought he would go back. They cheered. It was a long, long drive though, and Ron stood back up and wandered away from the river, toward where the roar was at its most tumultuous. It was probably equally chaotic in his house in Denver right now, and he thought it wouldn't hurt for that to continue for a while yet.

When he did call Denver it was starting to get light and he had considerable trouble talking. He told her he was at the Mardi Gras and that it had been great fun and he wished she had come with him. She was crying hard and he looked down the street, at the colored men who were already beginning to hose down the cobblestone, and then he looked up to the iron balconies where no naked women hung.

His wife began to speak but Ron interrupted her and said again what a great, crowded party it had been but that it was over now, wasn't it, and he really wished she had come with him. 🍷



## Wind and Water

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*Larry McLeod*

We came down to the water late in a late summer evening  
Three men near forty and a boy  
A stick-legged white heron fished intently on an opposite  
shore  
His long bill striking  
Making ripples, eating fish we could not see

We strung our lines across the pond  
Then cast into the rising light  
Or falling  
Stars and moon came bright  
As though it were the same light  
Had only moved from here to there

We rode the water in the midlight of yesterday and today  
To check the hooks I did not care about  
The boy cared  
He had come to fish and his father cared  
If only for the son

Between this prose and poetry  
The subject is three men, a boy, water, stars,  
A white heron and where he sleeps in a leafless tree  
In the land of white birds  
In my morning sleep I have seen him  
Leave his perch with a great flapping  
Struggling into the morning fog that floats  
Upon the water

Like this, like that  
A slave in the bow of an ancient ship  
Counting the cadence  
Sh-roo-umm  
Of oars rising and falling  
A scene from a dream—  
Angels wildly dancing upon the water,  
A white smear disappearing in the black  
Leaves washing down a crevice in the mind  
The white heron rising  
Leaving the water until light returns

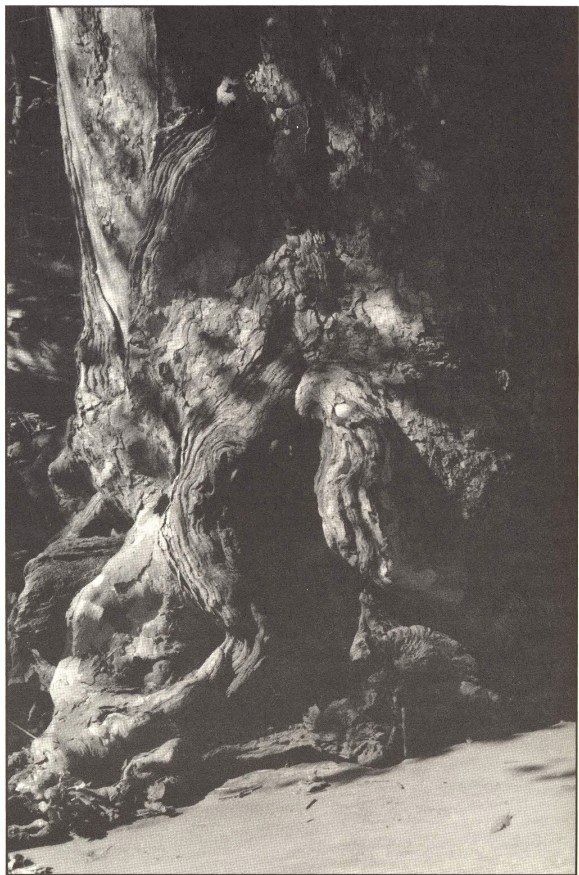
We lay on our backs  
Watching for falling stars  
Who would die?  
Drinking beer, recalling our fathers' sayings  
The old dead times  
Our separate lives, selves  
Perhaps for a moment bound together

One friend is dead  
We will piss no more together  
On the dark road  
Nor into the moonlight water

Today I rode through sweet October  
And came to the pond again  
To watch the first leaves come down  
When the wind stirs the trees  
Watch them gliding, angling  
Softly touching the water  
Twirling, floating to shore  
The white heron will not return today  
He is gone to rivers far beyond this place

There is a moment when the wind comes  
And we are dry and curled and turned  
The naked tree  
But the leaves in their life and fall  
Are not us  
Whatever it comes to is hidden  
And is not the same magical, mystical kingdom  
Beneath the silent yard  
Nor heavens we gaze upon  
Beside a pond at night, nor wind nor water

I have given my few bright coins  
To children who will spend them  
And I wait by the water  
Knowing the wind alone will not bear me home



*Ann Heyward*

## Black Crow

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*Mark Ryan*

Tom squeezed his hand across the rifle barrel, wiping the rain from it. He breathed warm air into his curled fingers and thought, Jesus, it's cold. Bracing the rifle into his shoulder, he aimed it directly at Father Brozek, who stood at the edge of the slough, with his back to the twelve year old, and his own rifle pointed toward a flock of crows perched in a tangle of birch trees that fringed the meadow.

Tom tilted his head against the stock and narrowed his right eye, sighting down the black muzzle to a point just above the priest's shirt collar. He strained an uneven breath in through his teeth and held it as his finger squeezed the trigger.

But nothing happened. No click of the trigger. No pop from the barrel.

He backed his head away, staring at the rifle. Stupid boy, he thought to himself, and in one movement, yanked back the bolt action and cocked the weapon.

At that moment a shot fired and Tom flinched, thinking his rifle had gone off by mistake, thinking maybe he had shot the priest, thinking he wouldn't be lying now when he told the police there had been an accident. But then he realized it was Father Brozek who had fired, sending the crows airborne in a flurry of squawks. The priest lowered his rifle from his shoulder and turned back with a bewildered look on his face. Tom's mind flooded with confusion. The only thing he could think to do was point his .22 into the air and fire three quick rounds at the hovering black birds.

"You'll never hit them in the air," the priest chided. "Crows are too clever for that." Tom crouched to pick up his spent shell casings from the ground.

"What did you wait for?" the priest said stepping over the fallen tree that lay between them.

"I forgot to cock it," Tom said.

Father Brozek snorted and patted the boy on the head. Tom ducked out from under his hand.

"Let's stick with the small prey," the priest said walking into the thicket. "They're easier to hit."

It's just as well, Tom thought as he followed the priest through the dense underbrush. I don't think I could have killed him with one shot. I would have maybe dropped him but I would've had to pump him full of bullets once he was down, to make sure he was dead. I don't know if I could do that. Not up close anyway.

Despite the promise of clear skies to the west, the morning drizzle had turned into a steady rain in the afternoon. As they trudged through the tall grasses and damp weeds, any protection the trees gave them from the rain was lost. The weeds added a sharp trace to the air and the freshness of the scent appealed to Tom but his jeans and the bottom of his jacket were sopped.

Father Brozek fired off two shots, and out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw something drop from the branch of a large cottonwood to his right.

"What was it?" he asked.

"A sparrow I think," the priest replied pushing aside a low branch and continuing through the brush. "When you can't find partridge, tweety-birds will have . . ."

The branch snapped back into Tom's face and he let out a cry that made the priest stop and turn.

"The branch hit me," Tom whined, rubbing the stinging ridge below his right eye. The priest held the boy's head still as he examined the injury. Tom's eye filled with water and blinked rapidly.

"It's hardly anything to make a fuss about," Father Brozek said touching the welt with two fingers.

Tom glanced up at the priest's puffy face. Father Brozek's complexion paled oddly against his indian-black hair. His eyes bulged slightly from their sockets and gave him the appearance of engaging in a stare-down whenever he looked at anyone.

When their eyes met Tom saw something that frightened him: a glint in the priest's eyes he had seen many times before

and one that meant Father Brozek had more on his mind than Tom's injury or partridge hunting or anything else. Tom jerked his head away.

"I'm okay," he said, wiping his eye with the back of his hand.

The priest straightened up, surprised, and looking as if he expected an explanation but Tom knew better than to say anything more. He knew enough to leave it alone.

"Be more careful," Father Brozek said walking away. Tom rested his rifle military-style on his shoulder and followed after him.

A swirl of leaves, knocked into the air by a sudden wind, spiralled down from the treetops and settled onto the forest floor around them. Tom goosestepped behind the priest, saluting and kicking up the ground cover with his wet tennis shoes. Beneath the cottonwood, they searched the underbrush for the fallen bird but found no sign of it.

A drenching rain came up behind the wind so they called it quits and tramped back in the direction of the priest's car, parked a mile or so away on a gravel road near one of the stone bridges that arched across Amity Creek.

Walking through the trees, Tom's mood went hollow. Not because he was chilled and soaked clear through, and not because he had actually tried to kill Father Brozek—in regard to that he felt nothing. Weeks before he had decided it would be easier to kill the priest than himself. But the moment his plan had been bungled, the courage to go through with it began to drain from him like blood from an open wound and it left him with nothing in its place.

At least we're heading home now, he thought. That was something. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out an apple, a remnant from his sack lunch, and ate it as they walked. He watched the priest stumbling through the woods and couldn't help but giggle. Father Brozek had suddenly struck him as a sad and awkward character, clumsy and out of place in his worn-out corduroys, left over from the priest's university days when he was a heavier man. He wore them too high and bunched up around his waist with a belt that was too thin for the loops and a gold buckle that was too fancy for the trousers. Father Brozek stopped and cocked his head, and wanted to know the reason for all the laughter.

"Why such a fancy belt, Father?" Tom asked him with a mouthful of apple. It always felt funny calling him "Father" when he looked nothing like a priest.

"It keeps my pants from dropping to my ankles," the priest said, smiling. Tom smiled, too, though he didn't feel like smiling at all. As they continued their trek through the woods both Tom and Father Brozek were aware that the belt made no difference whatsoever.

The forest declined into a wide clearing, revealing a wood-framed house falling to ruin in the middle of nowhere. The building's front door was missing and its porch and steps lay collapsed in a heap of lumber beneath the opening. Approaching the house, they came across a rusted junker obscured by the undergrowth which had reclaimed the yard.

"It's a Ford. Looks like a '58 or '59," Father Brozek said.

All of the vehicle's windows had been shot out, its headlights and plastic taillights smashed, and pieces of bottle glass covered the roof. The car's tires were long gone. An odd pattern of rusting bullet holes riddled the side of the driver's door, forming what appeared to be the letters "W" and "B".

Tom leaned his rifle against the rear quarter panel and pulled at the front door handle. The hinges shrieked stiffly, and at first were unyielding, but Tom tugged hard and it opened. He jumped inside, bouncing back against the seat, both hands gripping the steering wheel. The priest remained outside in the rain, running his fingertips across the bullet holes in the door.

"I'm going up to have a look at the house," he said wiping his hand on the back of his trousers. "Maybe we can wait out the rain in there."

"I'm fine here," Tom said tightening his hands on the steering wheel. He caught a reflection of himself in a surviving corner of the rearview mirror and raked his fingers through his wet and matted hair. He could see beer cans and pieces of safety glass littered across the backseat.

Father Brozek took a hesitant step back toward the house, lingering as if waiting for Tom, but the boy stayed put in the car with his eyes kept forward. Drops of rain drummed loudly against the hood, spraying into Tom's face through the glassless windshield. He watched a rivlet of rainwater dribble its way along the seam of the hood. He didn't want to look at the priest. His stomach ached from the thought of it.



"Do what you want," Father Brozek said heading toward the side of the house. Tom watched him as he climbed over the loose boards and shingles to the base of the doorway. There, the priest placed his rifle inside and despite his well-fed appearance, displayed no problem in lifting himself up and into the open threshold. He braced himself in the door frame, careful to test the floorboards with his right foot.

"This will hold us, Tom," he called out before disappearing inside. Moments later, he reappeared at the window that faced the car.

"Come on, Thomas," he commanded.

Whenever Father Brozek called him 'Thomas' it served as clear warning that he was nearing anger, and Tom rarely pushed him any closer to it than that. Past experience had taught him not to pry open that collection.

"Thomas!" Father Brozek repeated with raised voice. "Come in out of the rain. Now!"

Tom wanted to scream: "Shut up, priest!" like one of those Mexican bandits in a cheap Hollywood western. Instead, he crawled out of the car, picked up his rifle and meandered slowly toward the house, certain his dawdling would annoy him. He knew what Father Brozek was waiting for and he knew how relentless he could be about it. Before he rounded the corner to the doorway Tom glanced up at the window. In it stood the priest, as still as a statue, his hands gripping the top of the window's frame, hanging like some great orangutan, waiting for Tom to come inside so they could do that tiresome thing again.

Father Brozek appeared above him at the entry. He took Tom's rifle and placed it next to his own in the corner then gave the boy a hand up across the threshold, into the building.

Tom stood in the doorway brushing the rainwater off his jacket. There wasn't a piece of glass in any of the windows, and the walls, stripped bare of nearly all wallpaper, were filthy with graffiti and pitted with craters the size of grapefruit. Above him, the ceiling looked like a road map of cracks. One long break serpentine from one corner to the other, spawning three or four small streams of water that dripped onto the trash and broken windowpane which littered the floor.

"It's okay back here," Father Brozek said grabbing Tom by the hand. He led him through a hallway past a wooden staircase, into the next room. It was less cluttered and drier but

across the floor, at the base of the opposite wall, Tom could see the remnants of past fire. The small pile consisted of burnt wood, curled chunks of wallpaper, and junk food wrappers. The floorboards beneath it were also burned and a black tongue of scorched wallpaper ran up the wall, nearly to the ceiling. A charred odor dominated the room and it made Tom sick to his stomach.

"I can't be in here," he said breaking from the priest's grip. He ran back to the first room where he dropped to a dry spot on the floor next to the stacked rifles.

"Just leave me alone," he said not looking up.

Father Brozek stared back at him from the hallway, then with a disgusted sigh disappeared up the wooden staircase.

Something on the floor near the rifles caught Tom's attention. He leaned over on one hand and discovered the half-eaten remains of a small rodent, crawling with yellowjackets. It startled him to see so many wasps in one place. Why couldn't I hear that before, he thought. The buzzing seemed so loud and distinct to him now, even with the racket of wind and rain outside. He watched the insects swarm over the carcass, each pushing and crowding the others, as if there were nothing else in the universe to devour but that mutilated rodent.

Tom reached over for his rifle then slid across the floor to another dry section of the room. He placed a handful of cartridges from his jacket pocket on the floor next to him and began reloading the rifle. Overhead, he could hear the priest's heavy footsteps creaking across the upper rooms.

He pointed the .22 at the ceiling and followed the sound of the priest's movement with the gun barrel, listening for the tiny crackle of glass under the footsteps. A gust of crisp air rushed through the room from outside and Tom pulled his legs in close to his body, dragging his jacket zipper up to his throat. He kicked at some of the litter on the floor in front of him and righted a torn page from a magazine which showed a black and white photograph of a woman dressed only in jeans, and with her body arched in what he thought looked an odd and uncomfortable pose. He stared at the page for a long time, both fascinated and puzzled by the woman in the picture. He was fascinated by her nakedness, but it was the seemingly heartless expression in her eyes that he found so puzzling.

"You're a little young for that kind of thing, aren't you Thomas?"

Tom's head remained lowered but his eyes stared upward at the priest standing in the shadowy hallway at the base of the stairs.

He had used "Thomas" again.

"Yeah, right," Tom said pushing the page away with his foot. The priest gestured upward with his thumb over his shoulder.

"It's not so wet in the backroom upstairs," he said. "We'll be more comfortable waiting out the rain up there."

"I'm fine here," Tom said quietly.

The priest stood muddled. Then he walked over to Tom and pointed to the rifle.

"What's with this?" he said.

"I just reloaded it," Tom said. Father Brozek held out his hand and Tom handed over the rifle. The priest returned it to the corner then moved to the window next to Tom. After brushing away bits of broken glass from the sill he sat down and slumped against the window jamb. A torpedo-shaped sash weight yanked from the window's frame lay at his feet, against the baseboard. He leaned down and lifted it by the frayed cord attached to it and began tapping it lightly against the wall between his legs.

"Let's go upstairs," he said nodding his head toward the stairway. Tom shook his head.

"I don't want to do that anymore," Tom mumbled, huddled against the wall.

"Do what?" the priest fired back. "Why is it you think you have to do anything?"

"I just don't want to."

The skin around the priest's eyes tightened but his face settled into a concerned, thoughtful look, like it did whenever parishioners approached him with their problems.

"When did all this start?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," Tom said, "and it just doesn't. . . ." He stopped himself, sensing there was something wrong and forbidden in even talking about it.

"I'm just tired of it," he said. "That's all."

The tapping of the weight stopped suddenly and a terror

showed itself in the priest's eyes. His face became as ashen as the sky outside.

"You haven't told anyone, have you?" he said. He was almost shaking.

"No."

"Do you know what kind of serious trouble you'd get into if anybody were to find out?"

"I didn't tell anyone," Tom said.

"People would never understand," Father Brozek said. He spoke softly, almost in a whisper. "They'd never understand how . . . how . . . important you are . . . the special friendship we have. . . ." His voice disappeared under his breath.

Tom gasped quietly in frustration. "I didn't tell anyone," he insisted.

The priest's eyes darted about as if his mind raced in calculation. But all concern suddenly vanished from his face and he began to laugh loudly.

"My God," he said finally, "why in the world would you think anyone would believe you, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter," Tom yelled. "I didn't tell anyone!" He felt more anger welling up in his throat but he swallowed it. "I won't tell anybody," he said softly, "I'm just tired of it, that's all."

A sudden and raw uncertainty chilled Tom's insides. He's right, his mind told him. Who would believe him? Certainly not his mother. Since the very beginning, when the newly arrived priest had first telephoned with an invitation for her eight-year-old to join him at an upcoming church outing, she was both proud and delighted. "It will be good for Tom," she'd said, pressing her narrow lips together. "Ever since my divorce, he's kept too much to himself." Tom in his usual display of uneasiness at making new acquaintances, had dragged around the house mumbling between frequent yawns that he didn't want to go, but his mother had insisted. "Father Brozek's a gift sent from the Good Lord," she'd told him. "That's not something you turn down."

A crow shrieked in the distance. Tom watched as Father Brozek silently rocked the weight into a slow pendulous motion again. Tom knew the discussion was far from over; it was only over when the priest got what he wanted.

"Look," Father Brozek said finally. "Perhaps if we prayed

together then maybe God . . ." he caught himself. His hand drifted up toward his mouth but stopped short of touching it. Tom even noticed the mistake. In the four years of their "special friendship" Father Brozek had never spoken God at times like this. He seemed to consciously avoid reference to Him.

"Maybe it would help us," the priest said.

"You want me to pray with you?" Tom said, surprised.

"Yes, I do," Father Brozek said. A detectable thread of remorse snaked into his voice as he added: "It might help me."

"I don't think so," the boy said, flatly.

Father Brozek had suggested this once before on a bright April morning, four years earlier, in the sacristy of St. Martin's church after Tom had served Mass for him. Beneath the slender gold crucifix on the sacristy wall, the priest, dressed in his black cassock, had asked Tom to pray with him.

"I need to pray, Tommy," he'd said then. "Will you join me?"

Tom cheerfully agreed but as they knelt in prayer opposite each other, Father Brozek leaned forward and, cupping Tom's head in his hands, he kissed him on the forehead. Tom yanked his head back but the priest's thick fingers curled into the boy's hair and pulled him toward him again. Then he pressed his mouth hard against the boy's and all the confusion in Tom's mind was suddenly replaced by a jarring fear which crawled up from his stomach and made him shudder and squirm. But the priest's grip never loosened.

Outside the abandoned house, the rain began to let up.

Father Brozek sat hunched over the floor, his eyes following the swinging sash weight beneath him, each tap of it against the wall growing louder.

"Tell me what's wrong, Tom," he said at last. Tom pulled his knees up tight against his chest and said: "I just want to go home, please."

"This isn't you," the priest said shaking his head. "It's not like you at all and I want this nonsense to stop, right now."

"That's not what you want," Tom said to the floor. When he looked up, the priest was suddenly standing over him, his legs straight in a wide stance.

"Goddamn it!" he screamed, striking the wall above Tom's head with the weight. Pieces of shattered plaster flew every-

where but the priest raged on, purple-faced and spitting.

"You think it's something I can just turn off at will? How can you do this to me, goddamn it!"

His face relaxed into a strange distorted gape and his speech became more controlled.

"Now look what you've got me doing," he said. He suddenly bashed the weight against the wall again, this time just inches above Tom's head, leaving a deep oblong depression in the plaster that exposed the wooden laths behind it. Tom sat terrified, unable to move or speak.

"Tell me what's wrong," Brozek demanded. He swung the weight repeatedly, with a force that shook the wall each time.

"What did I do?" he screamed, his words more enunciated. "You're upset about something and . . . I . . . don't . . . know . . . what!" He punctuated each word with another blow to the wall.

Tom's hands covered his head against the flying chips of plaster. The priest slammed the weight rapidly above him, and Tom trembled with each bash of the wall until the pounding finally stopped and the plaster dust settled to the floor.

Father Brozek teetered over the boy, blinking and licking his lips, with sweat draining down the sides of his face. The weight dropped from his hand with a loud clank, then he fell against the wall, weeping as he sank to the floor next to Tom.

"You know what you mean to me, don't you, Tommy?" he asked in a low cracking voice. "I don't want us to grow apart."

Tom, fighting back a flood of tears, slowly dropped his arms from over his head and wrapped them around his raised knees. His heartbeat fluttered rapidly, countering the short and jagged breaths of the priest.

After a moment, Father Brozek gently placed his hands on both sides of the boy's head and smiled reassuringly.

"I'm so sorry," he said. Then he leaned forward and kissed Tom on his forehead.

The path came out onto a gravel road that divided the woods. The rain had ended and Tom was glad to be on solid footing with the hard gravel under the soles of his shoes. He picked up his pace, leaving the sullen Father Brozek to himself.

Up ahead, beyond where the road curved sharply to the

right, the sun broke through above the hilltops and its light fringed the overhanging clouds with an orange glow.

Rounding the curve, Tom came upon a wounded crow hobbling along the roadside. The startled bird darted quickly away, dragging a bent wing through the gravel. Tom chased it off the road and across the ditch through a thick patch of hawkweed, where dozens of grasshoppers leapfrogged into the air ahead of them. He trailed the crippled bird back to the edge of the road where it finally dropped, exhausted.

Tom stood over it with legs apart and his rifle at his side. The crow stared up at him as Tom brought his rifle to his shoulder and aimed down the sight. The bird's head twitched once and Tom squeezed the trigger, letting go a single shot point blank that penetrated the crow's breast and punctured the silence of the countryside.

Tom knelt on one knee over the bird. It surprised him to see its body still heaving with breath, so he stood up and fired three more quick shots into it. But when he lowered his rifle to look, the crow again seemed unaffected by the violence to it.

With his right hand, Tom hovered the barrel an inch above the bird and fired four more times. After the last shot echoed back from the hills, he watched a thick line of blood run out of the bird's neck and mix in with the mud and gravel of the road. This time he saw the crow shudder, saw its beak snap open and closed in quick spasms, saw its black eyes staring back at him, moist and alive and blinking in its feathered head. 20

## Striped Skirt

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*Charles Muñoz*

My grandmother wore a striped skirt  
on her honeymoon  
one hundred years ago.  
The daguerreotype  
shows grey on dark grey.  
(Everybody's gone.)

I think it rustled when she moved.  
Her eyes look down to that shadow  
where the wall meets the floor.

Her skirt may have been  
corn color, or poppy, or lavender.  
Nobody knows: everybody's gone.

My grandfather  
leans toward her in that old picture,  
my grandfather, dead before my birth,  
leans toward her in gentlemen's grey.  
Grey clothing. Or perhaps some other color.  
Nobody knows.

You can imagine his watch  
ticking away in one of those pockets  
with his keys and his Indian-head pennies.  
Or on a chain,  
or even left behind in the hotel room.  
Face serious, he gazes down at her.  
His neckwear may have been sky blue.



The photographer didn't make them smile.  
It was too important a moment  
there in those other Nineties. It was  
a moment to protect,  
a long time of bright, lost colors.



*Kathleen Saccopoulos*

Sarah lay on her bed studying a labor case when her brother, Mike, walked in.

"Sis," he said, picking at a scab on his elbow, "I have a learning disability."

"How do you know?" she asked, setting her glasses on top of her head.

"I heard it on television just now."

She got up, laughing, and hugged him. He was a big, unemployed nineteen-year-old who had been sent by their parents to live with her. It was hard to believe he got into so much trouble at home, because now he rarely left the apartment.

"Come on, Sis, let's wrestle." He spun her around and locked her arm behind her back. "This is Tyke Daniels making Masked Mountain eat dirt," he said, and crashed her onto the bed.

"Say, 'Love is a fresh bowl of slugs,'" he said. She tussled with him until the heavy books hit the floor and the thin pink bedspread was mussed.

"Love is a fresh bowl of slugs," she said, her head sore and caught in a leg lock.

"Say, 'I'll buy my gentle brother some wine,'" he said, tightening the vise about her ears.

"I'll buy my gentle brother some wine," she yelled.

He let her up and strutted around the bed, beating his chest. He scowled in front of an imaginary camera and challenged Ape-man Kanochi to a death match, ripping the buttons off his shirt and charging fiercely into the living room.

Sarah slammed the door and locked it.

When the phone rang, she hoped it was Duncan, her boss at

the National Labor Board, where she was a rookie learning the rules of arbitration. She couldn't remember laughing, even at Mike, before she got close to Duncan. The worst part was that she had known he was married from the start. She didn't mind that he was twenty years older than she.

She answered the phone, and Duncan said, "You always sound surprised when you say hello."

"Mike says I sound sexy," she said.

"I want to see you. Meet me in my overcoat at quarter to nine."

She paused before answering. "O.K.," she said slowly. "I can tell Mike I'm going to buy wine."

She met him in the parking lot of the liquor store, and they drove to an alley and parked. It was the first time she confessed that she loved him.

That weekend, she and Mike cleaned up the apartment. He was really not an unpleasant boy, she thought. The two weeks he had been there he did everything she asked. He was anxious about Monday's stag lodge elections back home because he was on the ballot for secretary. Its members were a group of conservative old men who did nothing but get drunk every night. She couldn't understand why Mike wanted to be with them so much. She didn't think he was actually a member. He worked there as a bartender before he left home, and for some reason those old men liked him, which was partly why her parents had gotten him out of town.

While she was cleaning, she kept finding things broken, and Mike couldn't explain how they had gotten that way. She found a cracked vase on the bookshelf and a rip in the carpet by the television. She was dusting the frame holding a picture of their parents when the whole thing fell apart.

"My God, Mike. Do you play football in here when I'm gone? You're so damn lazy and clumsy."

"I'm sorry, Sis," he said, cleaning the television screen. "I didn't do it on purpose."

She remembered how he had broken her hairbrush and her favorite water pitcher, and she grew quietly angry. She jerked around the vacuum cleaner and switched it on. Everywhere she pushed it he seemed to be standing in the way. Once, she jammed it over his feet, and screamed, "Get out of here. Go home to your precious drunks."

He went into the kitchen. Sarah turned off the vacuum. She heard him pouring Froot Loops into a bowl. She went to him and thumped him lightly on the head. He took the cereal to the living room and watched tag team wrestling on the SuperStation.

Sarah traveled out of town on Monday to oversee a union vote. She drove the three hours back to the apartment hoping to get right into bed. Mike was sitting on the floor wearing headphones, with two empty wine bottles beside him, and a half-gallon bottle between his legs. The sofa was pulled crookedly into the middle of the room, and black scuff marks were on the wall.

"Mike, get your low-life butt off that floor," she said, pulling the earphones off his head.

"Aw, you sound just like Mama." His head lolled to the side.

"Why can't you act right? Look at that wall, Mike."

"I lost, Sis."

His drunkenness infuriated her. She kicked a wine bottle, and it smashed against the bookcase before she realized what he had said. He looked up at her as if he was going to cry.

"Was it close?"

"As close as Hitler and Santa Claus."

She sat beside him, stroked his hair, and took a swig from the bottle of Labrusca.

When she came home from work the next day, the scuff marks were gone and the broken glass was cleaned away. Mike was in the kitchen feeding milk to a strange gray cat.

"That guy just called," he said.

"What guy?" She knew it was probably Duncan because he never left his name, though Mike was certainly no threat. Duncan hadn't been at work that day, and she was worried that he was ill. Several times she almost called him, to report on her trip, she would say. But she could never convince herself that was strong enough reason, and she hoped he would call her, instead.

He finally phoned again when she was drinking beer with Mike in the kitchen. Mike had the cat on the table, checking its ears for fleas. She couldn't stand the cat being on the table, but she didn't have the heart to say anything. The cat was dirty—a plain alley cat with dried, white wounds on its haunch. It was

skinny and collarless, and she truly wished Mike wouldn't want to keep it.

Duncan wanted to take Sarah out to dinner, but she was dieting and didn't want to eat. The reason he wasn't at work was that his wife had broken her leg in a fall down their back porch steps. He had driven her to her sister's house, thirty-five miles away, so someone could care for her during the day.

"You're a very bad man," Sarah said.

"I know it," he said. "Why don't you come over here?"

"I'd have to think of something," she said, glancing at Mike, who was looking under the cat's tail.

"Say it's business. Say the president's been fired and you have to go handle the grievance."

"Can I call you back?"

"If you promise to bring me dinner."

She considered telling Mike that a girlfriend needed her, but he knew she didn't have close friends in town. She couldn't think of anything that would keep her out of the house for more than twenty or thirty minutes. It would be better, she thought, to see Duncan tomorrow—to go straight to his house from work.

She called him and told him.

"I'll come over there, then. I'll bring some folders to make it look good."

"That's an idea. Don't wear too much cologne."

"I'll step in dog shit if you want me to."

Duncan arrived wearing a green knit shirt, blue jeans, and Sperry Topsiders. This was the first time she had seen him dressed like that, and she thought he looked cute with his stomach bulging slightly under the shirt. She introduced him to Mike, who seemed unusually quiet.

"Where can we work?" Duncan asked.

She led him to the kitchen, while Mike turned on the TV and lay back petting the cat.

Duncan opened his briefcase on the table and kissed Sarah on the lips.

"Sis," he said. "May I call you Sis? You're great and gorgeous." He held her as she leaned against the counter under the Peanuts calendar.

"How's Barbara?" she asked.

"Ashamed," he said. "And loving all the attention." He wore rectangular, silver-rimmed glasses that made him look like a dentist to Sarah. She brushed the bright gray hair at his temples and kissed his stubbled cheek. He ran his hand under the back of her long-sleeved blouse.

They heard Mike coming and broke away. He carried the cat. He took two beers from the refrigerator and offered one to Duncan.

"Thanks," Duncan said. "Look at the size of those arms. Are you on somebody's team?"

"Nah. Not now. I played football in high school and did some wrestling."

"Yeah? Me too. Let's see what you've got." Duncan took off his glasses, set the beer down, and crouched in a menacing attack stance.

Mike grinned and put the cat on the table. They grabbed each other's arm and tucked their heads onto each other's shoulder. Sarah lifted herself to the counter and cheered for one, then the other. Duncan caught Mike behind the knee and pushed him into the table, scudding it noisily against the oven. The cat jumped onto the stovetop and then leaped out of the room. Mike and Duncan fell to the floor. Their legs locked together, and Mike rolled Duncan over on his stomach. Duncan grimaced as his head was pressed to the linoleum, but he heaved and threw Mike off. He got behind Mike, clinched his legs around his waist, gripped him in a choke hold with one arm, and with the other he bent back his leg. One of Duncan's shoes came off. "Say, 'Chicken knuckles,'" Duncan said.

Mike twisted and bit Duncan's arm, easing Duncan's grip. He spun away and pinned him to the floor, his knee in Duncan's back.

"I give up," Duncan said. "That's enough." He got up. "You're mean, boy. Like wet oak in a thunderstorm."

"You think I'm good, huh?"

Duncan rubbed at the tooth marks on his forearm. "Your brother's a wild one," he said to Sarah. "Get him a helmet."

Mike beat his chest and grinned. Sarah slipped off the counter and handed Duncan his beer. "You're both insane," she said.

"Let's have a look at these folders," Duncan said.

Mike left calling for the cat.

Sarah got up early the next morning and packed an overnight bag. She had told Mike she had business out of town for a few days. At work, Duncan was in meetings all morning, and she kept busy at her desk filling out forms and making calls. Everyone there worked in one large room that was sectioned into eight glassed-in cubicles. Occasionally, she turned around and watched Duncan talking to clients or taking notes with the silver pen she had given him. Whenever she caught his eye, he kept a straight face and went back to whatever he was doing. No raising his eyebrows, no sticking out his tongue, no A-O.K. sign or lip pucker.

He went out to lunch without her, which was normal since both wanted to avoid suspicion. Sarah usually brought something to eat in her purse and ate in the office. She was eating grapes, putting the seeds on a yellow paper towel, when one of her coworkers sat down in the chair in front of her desk. She offered Sarah a slice of chocolate cake. Sarah took it and placed it by her pencil cup, wishing she could eat it.

The woman's name was Doris, and Sarah didn't like her very much. She wore tight skirts and too much jewelry, making clients, Sarah thought, feel uncomfortable. Sarah always wore loose dresses that she considered sensible. She had only five dresses anyway, and Duncan discouraged women from wearing pants at work.

Doris unwrapped her own slice of cake, licking chocolate icing off her fingers. "I guess you heard about Duncan's wife," she said. "I knew she was desperate for attention, but that's ridiculous, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Sarah said.

"You know, honey. Duncan's a bit of a maniac."

Sarah took a grape seed from her mouth and tried to sound gossipy. "But I didn't know his marriage was shaky."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

Sarah stared at the wheat crackers in her plastic lunch dish. "What are we talking about exactly?"

"We are discussing Duncan, sweetheart."

"Maybe you should talk to yourself," Sarah said.

Doris polished off the cake and balled up the chocolate-stained cellophane it had been in. "I guess I'd better get back to my desk," she said. "You know, I used to think you could use



more makeup. But what the hell, you're young. You need something else entirely."

Sarah watched her leave and threw the cake in the trash can. I don't need this, she thought.

Duncan came in from lunch with his jacket thrown over his shoulder. He called Sarah to his office. She had to walk by Doris on the way, but Doris was on the phone and just looked up at Sarah and smiled. Duncan closed the door and sat down at his desk, twirling the silver ballpoint.

"Is Doris looking this way?" Sarah asked.

He peered over his shoulder and shook his head.

"I've got some bad news," he said. "Barbara's back."

Sarah didn't say anything. There was a sliver of grape peel stuck between her back teeth and she touched it with her tongue.

"She can get around pretty well on her crutches," he said. "And she wanted to come back home."

"That means you can't see me tonight?"

"I'm as disappointed as you are."

"Right." She got up and went back to her desk. She looked at Duncan, who hadn't moved. When she felt she was going to cry, she snatched her purse and left as fast as she could.

Driving home, she got on the causeway and tried to blow up the engine of the Festiva. Then the steering wheel started to shake, and she slowed down. Every few minutes she pounded the dashboard and cursed. She drove dangerously, swerving in and out of the passing lane, even after she exited. She screeched into her apartment complex and stormed into her apartment.

Mike lay on the sofa with his feet on the wall, drinking a beer and watching a soap opera.

"What's the matter, Sis?" he said.

"Get your stinking feet off the wall. And get that ugly cat out here." She went to her bedroom and cried.

Mike followed her. She lay across the bed clutching the spread in her fists. He sat beside her and placed his hand on her back.

"What happened, Sis? You get fired?"

She reached for a tissue and blew her nose.

"They canned you for sounding like a hog?"

"Shut up, Mike," she said, and buried her face in her arms.

"Of course, I'll kill whoever hurt you," he said. "Somebody break your heart?"

She sat up and dried her face on his shirttail. "Am I just spoiled or is the world out to get me?"

"You're spoiled, Sis. Who else has me?"

"Mike, you're as stupid as hell."

"But I discovered I can cook." He went into the kitchen and brought back a lopsided chocolate cake. She started crying again.

"Touching, isn't it?" he said. "I learned how just for you."

"Go away, Mike. I just want to be alone, O.K.?" She lay down again at the opposite end of the bed.

Mike put the cake on the night table. "Sis?" he said.

She didn't answer.

"Can I tie you into a knot?" 🐞

## Late Fall

---

*Diane Swan*

It's hard to tell birds  
from wind-rushed leaves  
as they skirl up in the funnels  
of blinking October light.

The women have been cooking for weeks,  
their fingers are full of bandages,  
the pantries swollen with harvest.  
But today as they stand at the sinks  
crows that hollered spring  
hurl their other word.  
Soon it will all be taken—  
what was blighted and what ripened,  
what flew or could only fall.

In the glass, each sees she has grown  
slimmer more elegant—patina  
of driftwood, bare tendons  
of the dying elm. *I am too old  
and beautiful to be a servant only.*  
In the yard she finds a daughter  
raking mulch over the cooling gardens.  
*Go inside, she whispers,  
Take your turn at the stove.*

## Bar Scene: Lament for Youth

---

*David W. Ullrich*

Young men lean into smoke, 4/4 time, and alcohol  
so unnervingly clean and polished.  
I think of Hannibal's army before the Alps,  
the thrill and despair of snow  
melting in soft, astonished mouths.

And when they dance,  
when lithesome young women  
wrap themselves like lace around earnest awkward men,  
I feel myself falling in love  
with the infinite, skidding night,  
her warm, insistent kisses,  
my clothes at the lip of a pond.

Glorious, sexy youth,  
come back to me, slowly,  
like smoke rising from beneath the floorboards;  
haunt this rumpled plug of flesh  
until the moon's smokey music shoulders me gently,  
and dangerous rhythms blaze in my snow-packed heart,  
and I spin out onto the musical floor, dizzy and alive.



*Mark Dauber*



*Michael Russell*

## Robert Bell's *The Butterfly Tree*: Universals at Home

---

Thomas Rountree

Once when I was a harum-scarum child, curious and constantly bumping into trouble, a yellow Alabama butterfly lit on my finger with a gentle grasp and flattered me with slowly pulsating wings as I were a substantial but mere idling point of the air. Though I was a bit startled, I watched it with growing familiarity until it lifted off again and eventually wafted a distant goodbye that was as far from final as breathing. My more mature experience has been much the same with Robert Bell's *The Butterfly Tree*, a novel by an Alabamian about a special region of Alabama. The evocations persist.

Published in 1959 by Lippincott, the work is currently reprinted by the University of Alabama Press in The Library of Alabama Classics series—and it still demonstrates that a writer may be born and reared in one section of a state but find immediate inspiration to creativity in another section. No doubt the contrasting newness of locale and personalities has much to do with it, but it is really the artist's full experience that accounts for the universal qualities that inhabit and vitalize the poetry, characters, and themes of an original achievement like *The Butterfly Tree*.

Growing up in Tarrant City, located in the ridge-and-valley region of upper mid-Alabama, Bell was in mountain country. Nearby to the southeast the flatness of Jones Valley was expansive enough for the Birmingham Municipal Airport, but to the north Sand Mountain stretched through small towns surrounded by large rural areas. A short distance south the highly industrial city of Birmingham was flanked by Red Mountain and Shades Mountain. It was a fitting geography to match the heights of boyhood experience.

Although not recognized as such at the time, an early influential and repeated high point for a writer-to-be was his mother's reading to him and his two brothers and her firing their imagination by telling stories of her own making. Such reliance on the power of oral words for a child to visualize things found a natural extension in listening to the radio well before the coming of television. It was almost entirely the spoken word that gave life to programs like *Let's Pretend*, *Bob Hope*, and *Lux Radio Theatre*.

But then there was the glorious Imperial Theater in Tarrant City where young Bell eagerly attended movies at every possible opportunity. Except during the polio epidemic of the mid-1930s when many children were kept from most public gatherings, he basked in uncountable Saturday westerns wherein the word (though still important) gave first place to the visual and the narratives depended on well-recognized characters such as Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Gene Autry, and Hopalong Cassidy. Suspense was resolved in these shows every weekend, but not in the serials, those continuing movies that left a viewer hanging with question and wonder from one weekly episode to another. In contrast the program would begin with an animated cartoon, a relaxing short piece of comic relief based on action within a tight but simple narrative structure and anchored in familiarity by the imaginary likes of Bugs Bunny and Roadrunner. During the week mystery movies about detective Charlie Chan and others called for close scrutiny of things, people, and events.

Though the fictional settings were almost entirely in a romantic elsewhere, Bell's contact with storytelling was nonetheless a blended Alabama one, beginning with family reliance on spoken words and broadening toward emphasis on plot, character, and attention to detail. It is no surprise, then, that he literally read every book in the children's department of the Tarrant City Public Library by the time he was thirteen and that in junior high school he decided he wanted to be a writer.

He began developing great sagas but could never get past the first chapters. In his senior year at Birmingham's Phillips High School, however, he completed a long, gloomy story about Viking brothers who fell in love only to learn that the girl was their sister. Afterwards at Birmingham-Southern College, he



continued writing with the encouragement of his advisor and freshman composition professor, Richebourg McWilliams, a learned man who became a lasting and major influence, for Bell finished his degree there although he had relocated with his family to Fairhope on Mobile Bay in 1947.

Compared to the ridge-and-valley country, the land around Fairhope was flat with many trees, undergrowth, and vines of a semitropical nature, all of it saturated with the furtiveness of small life. The shoreline was a sequence of coves, beaches, gullies, marshes, and red cliffs that permit Alabama to claim possession of the highest seacoast point in the eastern United States. It was a region of definitive summer heat and humidity, of hurricanes and gully-washing rains, and of surprises in the continued history and culture of its people.

After localities in four other states were considered, the rural Alabama site was settled as the Fairhope Single-tax Colony in 1894 largely because the search committee had appreciated "the Gulf Breeze in its purity" and "the health giving aroma of the pine trees" (Alyea 25). These colonists were individualists and reformers who respected individuality in others. Their varied origins and intellectual interests established from the beginning a cultural atmosphere of friendliness and rural cosmopolitanism, reflected in 1907 by the founding of the innovative School of Organic Education. And time brought others: farmers, shopkeepers, naturalists, summer-home owners, repeat tourists, writers and other types of artists who could work without fear of interruption. An inhabitant could know many in the developing town and country without ever meeting someone who lived just around the corner, for privacy was automatically honored while public and personal contact was welcomed at the beach, barber shop, exhibit, or theater. Even the wharf jutting toward Mobile across the bay equitably invited solitary walks or meetings with gulls and people.

It was this newness of flat land and well-rounded, fascinating characters that Bell came to know in the second half of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. These potential elements for a novel, of course, required accretion and sharpening of skill, which came during marvelous year of M.A. work on a fellowship at Harvard in 1950-51. He studied hard for some of the best known scholars and writers of the time such as Douglas

Bush, Howard Mumford Jones, and Kenneth Kempton, in whose writing class he completed what would become his first published story. When he returned to Fairhope, he developed old and new friendships while employed at night as reference librarian for the Mobile Public Library. In the summers he pursued a degree in library science at Columbia and LSU. Then one autumn morning while crossing the bay causeway to work, he was so caught by the clustering thousands of monarch butterflies on their seasonal migration south that he began a new short story which outgrew itself into the beginnings of a novel.

Still, because of writer's block and other concerns, the narrative would not develop until after he moved in 1955 to Fort Worth as assistant director of the Public Library. New encouraging friends, ambition, and nostalgia combined so well that by late 1957 the completed manuscript was accepted by a New York agent and afterwards by Lippincott editor Lynn Carrick as a virtuoso performance by a talented writer. That evaluation ran true when, after some revision, *The Butterfly Tree* was published in the spring of 1959.

His fictional town of Moss Bayou is patterned on the real community of Fairhope, and Mobile is simply itself; but Bell and his main character, Peter Abbott, sense the poetry in reality, even in the ordinary. It is evoked in the wistful place names proclaimed in the boarding call at a bus station. A breeze will stir the trees, "shifting the day to new meanings" (Bell 18). The moon above the pines makes "cut-glass of their needles" (23). Spanish moss is "like the beards of old men whispering together that winter will come" (73). Eulacie's singing voice is "a cotton-patch contralto" (85-86). And Eulacie herself can pin down a neat critical figure of speech about her little daughter, Miss Em-majeau, with the aptness of experience: "'I can't leave a can of beer around for five minutes she ain't inhaled it'" (83). Figurative language and the mood of poetry invite the reader to linger and relish.

And to learn, for Bell knows that a novel demands more than poetry. Although some of the characters are eccentrics and all are well individualized, from one point of view they also represent universals. The central character, Peter Abbott, is an initiate, an inquirer involved in a transition time that he has not particularly sought or anticipated. Miss Billy, his aunt with

whom he has come to live while attending college in Mobile, is delightfully off center as the imaginative, with echoes of the magical; to a good extent she is, in her own phrase, a wise fool. Naturalist Margaret Claverly is the scientific, quirkily devoted to her field work and collections. Eulacie is the realistic, bluntly down-to-earth with her speech, her actions, and her reactions. Along with nature and perhaps Miss Claverly's bloodhounds, Miss Emmajean is the elemental, always underfoot, going her instinctive way. Karl Heppler comes through as beauty-and-brains, godlike in his observations, his opportune appearances, and his physique; but he proves to have a tragic mortal incompleteness. As an ominously sybaritic character who is a proudly artistic mortician, Edward Bloodgood stands for patient and smooth predatory evil, commenting that grave flowers prove that beauty, like death, is inevitable.

Each of these personalities is nonetheless an unique character in his or her own right, and their speech vibrates as convincingly true, even that of the two who wax philosophical at the drop of a hello. It is primarily as concrete human beings that Peter comes to love (or at least appreciate to the verge of love) all of these new acquaintances. Four of them have learned, from different unusual strangers, the legend of the butterfly tree, and each is apparently unaware of the others' knowledge. However, each tells the legend to Peter, who goes along on fruitless searches for the tree. By the time he independently encounters a butterfly tree, he has learned a great deal from and about these friends and therefore about himself. When he excitedly reports his discovery, he has more to learn about the limits of identification with others and about reliance on one's self.

This theme of identity can be very helpful in placing *The Butterfly Tree* in the mainstream of its time and also in demonstrating that it is nonetheless an Alabama novel.

When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* in 1942, he judged the most singular fact about modern American writing to be that the authors were absorbed in all details of their American world but at the same time were deeply and subtly alienated from that world. As anthologies of American literature have pointed out, through the 1960s this sense of alienation often progressed creatively into the theme of individual identity.

But it was far from being a new theme in American writing.

Edgar Allan Poe fictionalized it through the concept of an alter ego in "William Wilson." Ralph Waldo Emerson urged it as Man Thinking in "The American Scholar." And Walt Whitman flourished it even in his titles like "One's-Self I Sing," "Spontaneous Me," "Myself and Mine," and "Song of Myself," that vast encompassment of individual and democratic identity. By the middle decades of the twentieth century, the theme was as Americanized as the theme of innocence and initiation or the muckraking theme of corruption in business and officialdom.

What was different about the fictional treatment of those decades was twofold: the intense changes in the American world and a consequent about-face in exploring the theme. From the mid-40s through the 1960s the sense of alienation was reinforced by overwhelming developments (the Cold War, the hydrogen bomb, greater mobility and displacement of the population) and by a perceived cultural dilution in the trend of regional and ethnic differences toward a convergent sameness. It is no wonder that the new philosophy of existentialism took hold on this side of the Atlantic when Jean-Paul Sartre and others asserted that man in this absurd world is what he conceives himself to be and also what he wills himself to be. The idea that man is condemned every moment to invent man is a clear but (in detail) complex answer to the question of individual identity. How in narrative form is a writer going to depict man inventing himself? Shades of Poe! He does it by letting a character encounter himself eventfully through other things and people. Since it is no longer convincingly possible simply to declare identity (a constantly changing concept anyway), the stance of Emerson and Whitman will not suffice. Instead, fragmentally misplaced in an overwhelming modern American world, a character goes (or finds himself) in pursuit of his identity. Search has replaced declaration—and that is to say that the only truth declarable about identity is the search and perhaps the encounters.

Some brief comparisons will illustrate that *The Butterfly Tree* is within this thematic mainstream but is singular in its treatment and locale.

Like Truman Capote's protagonist Joel in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* of 1948, Peter Abbott is circumstanced into a new place by family conditions, not by a conscious need to find his identity. Both characters encounter mystery to be responded to, but their

divergences lie not just in their difference in age (Joel is 13, Peter 20) nor in their degrees of innocence. Joel becomes involved in the enigma of unhealthy people burdened by the past and caught in stasis, while Peter less quickly learns that newly-met people of easy but vital energy unknowingly share a mysterious legend from their past which they are willing to confide to Peter, identifying him with the earlier revealers of the legend. Following the death of the mule at the isolated, sagging Cloud Hotel, Joel whoops the next morning with the joy of life, "I am me"; then after seeing that Cousin Randolph is nothing but a helpless adult zero who literally has to be steered home through the woods, Joel realizes that he himself has succeeded to the identity of maturity. On the other hand, Peter, who is an adult throughout, identifies with the believing searchers for the butterfly tree even though he is a doubter. Ultimately he has to confront his identity as a doubter who must find his own thing to believe in.

Capote has told us that his setting of Noon City and rural Skully's Landing is based on where he once lived in Alabama, and yet it could be almost any non-coastal, deep-South small town and country. It strikes me forcefully as being broadly representative rather than particular. Bell's locale, however, is beyond quibble the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, as definite as a name on a map in its delineation of flora, fauna, and geography. It could be only this one area in Alabama.

In diametrical contrast, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) is set everywhere, from coast to coast and border to border (once even beyond in Mexico). Rather than a spot on a map, the ever-moving scene is the whole map, trying and failing to capture the sense of a whole nation, failing because there is something more than seediness to be found in a land. The subject of alienation is not nearly so well focused and executed as in, say, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952); but the novel, for a time, was so popular and influential with the so-called "beat" generation that it is worthwhile even now to note how the theme of identity can be enlivened with the aromatic fascination of three-day-old sweat.

Although Sal Paradise is the central intelligence of Kerouac's volume, Sal's and the book's focus is on Dean Moriarty, a quester who by-and-large does not know what his is seeking. For ex-

ample, he arrives in New York from Colorado and just has to meet Sal because, incredibly, he wants to be a writer. At the same time he asks another character to teach him "all about Nietzsche and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew" (Kerouac 5). Now, Dean can complete a simple oral sentence about something he has done, but he is never even pseudointellectual enough to express his ideas beyond an anacoluthic gibberish. He is too busy flitting around the country, dragging others like Sal with him and trying to "dig" everything and everybody in sight. Sporadically he looks for his wastrel father but symptomatically never finds him. He applies to everything the wild Whitmanesque affirmation of "Yass, yass" but lacks the Whitmanesque commitment to anything except the mad exhilaration of the moment. Essence, however, is made of more than just moments, and Dean never gains insight into what he really is: a semiliterate, romantic bum. Only the reader (and possibly Sal) can see that identity has been reduced to a blur of sub-dilettantish movement.

In *The Butterfly Tree*, Robert Bell's Peter Abbott, of course, is involved in movement and moments. He has left Birmingham to come to Moss Bayou, where there is plenty of local movement for him. Yet he can pause to reason out or poetize his moments, some of which are quite exciting (in a hurricane, at a carnival, during Mardi Gras). When the occasion is right, he has the good sense simply to let things happen to him. In spite of the unusual characters and events in his life, his experience is far more within the range of the mainstream population of his time than is that of Dean—and even more so than that of the title character of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, which was published the same year as *The Butterfly Tree*.

Brilliantly seriocomic and inventive, Bellow's novel is a thematic tour de force if there ever was one. As a hereditary millionaire with an inner voice demanding "I want, I want" (Bellow 13 and passim), Henderson believes that he is part of an age of madness, that his failures and attempts (marriage, fatherhood, learning the violin, growing pigs) are as massive as his bulk and 6-foot-4 frame, and finally that his erratic and confused nature must respond to "the destiny of my generation of Americans to go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life" (245). Taking himself to Africa, he finds that he is still cursed to mar

the objects and actions even of his good intentions. He is a kind of modern, exotic Don Quixote, tilting at frogs and statues, troubling already troubled situations which include his becoming for one tribe the rain king Sungo (a fine referential name like that of Henderson, who is both hindered and hindering). Accepting that position, he comes under the influence of the tribe's educated King Dahfu, who introduces him intimately to a lion and coaches him to translate himself primitively into one. Although once again the complications result in disaster, Henderson decides that he is a Becomer aiming to realize himself as a Be-er. With his unusual qualities (e.g., for him emotions are registered in the gums), Henderson is as marvelously grotesque as the robust development of other characters and events in the novel. Nevertheless, at the end he seems to have established a mixed truce with himself, closely associating with a lion cub reminiscent of Dahfu and with a little non-English-speaking American orphan boy on the plane trip home, where Henderson plans to enter medical school at an age past fifty. The book may well be the ultimate extreme in treating the search for identity—and, given the main character's gusto and intense indulgence in the pluses and minuses of experience, it has a constant thrust of parody.

But if the parodic makes for a major unity in Bellow's novel, it is poetry that does the equivalent in Bell's novel, a tone pervading the encounters, the talk, the legend, the weather, the actions, the insights, and especially the locale. The setting is neither a Southern anywhere, nor a transcontinental everywhere, nor a far-off African elsewhere. Instead, it is a specific here, fictionalized for exploring significant literary themes like the question of identity, a question that arises for most people in a local habitation.

Like many (including Robert Bell) who have settled on the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, Peter Abbott is an outsider who becomes also an insider, partaking of both perspectives, the kind of role rewarded a reader by any good novel. As a child Capote's Joel progresses (until the very end) as an innocent, wondering outsider. Kerouac's Dean is from beginning to end an observed insider incapable of becoming an understanding outsider, while Bellow's Henderson (in spite of his African involvements) remains mostly an outsider, his tenuous relationship symbolized

by the lion cub that will inevitably grow up and away from him. Bell's Peter, on the other hand, stays well in place at the end as an outsider/insider, his dual position certified by his privately discovering a butterfly tree, by the reaction of his family of friends to his breathless news, and by his acceptance that identity is both a personal and communal reality focused in the individual. Hence the reader is doubly drawn into an outsider/insider point of view by a novel inescapably set "at home" in a recognizable but special part of Alabama, a section which lends itself to the poetry of place, theme, and characters. The treatment hints that a reader can encounter poetry and identity in his or her own neighborhood.

The magic is that the reader of *The Butterfly Tree* meets multiple poetry and lingering coalescences of identity right along with Peter Abbott. By the time Peter reaches his twenty-first birthday near the end of the novel, he has passed through the four seasons on which the story is based and which unify his maturing experience. Summer coaxes him into gradual identification with his new locale as home and into a closeness with his surprising aunt, Miss Billy, from whom he first learns of the butterfly tree. Autumn lures him into a sadly terminal companionship with Miss Claverly, the naturalist, whose no-nonsense focus on the insect world is partly countered by her belief that there is a butterfly tree to be sought. Appropriately, winter almost embalms him within the ominous influence of Edward Bloodgood, the mortician, whose philosophy of beauty and death stems largely from earlier experience when he learned of the butterfly tree. Although all of these three characters (plus the fourth one, Karl Heppler, associated with spring) have kept the legend a personal secret, each one confides it to Peter and takes him on a fruitless hunt for the tree, compounding his doubts while unfolding specialized vistas of experience.

True, Miss Billy's is that of imagination, Miss Claverly's that of science, and Bloodgood's that of evil (significantly his search for the tree occurs at night). But since for Peter these views—separate or combined—lack balance and fullness, Karl Heppler's would appear to be the needed climactic one. Though he proves to have a mortal flaw, Karl's thought and physique are godlike. As with the others, his knowledge of the tree is a revealed one, coming from a closely attached stranger who disappears. Sym-



bologically, Peter's love affair with Karl's twin sister Karen (Karl's soul mate) indicates how intimately Peter is drawn into this higher view of the tree and the world. However, at a hidden human distance away, Peter observes that Karl and Karen together fail in searching for the tree. Though he has learned much from all of them, none of these four valid but vicarious approaches is complete enough for Peter.

The only adequate view for Peter is that of the experiential self, and to a great extent it is the poetry of place that has prepared him for the ultimate event. Early on, he is attuned to and by nature: "Adrift in the treetops, the afternoon shimmered suffocatingly" (Bell 18); "summer dripped around him, into him, and stayed all ambition" (28); "Distant thunder rolled barrels across the horizon and struck the edge of the world with a dull rose flash" (33). In Moss Bayou "old houses leaned into the woods, ancient houses secure against time, weary of time, concealing strange forgotten secrets behind their peeling shutters and flaking paint" (16). When later his and Miss Billy's search for the butterfly tree proved futile, he "tried not to listen to the insect, bird and water voices, for they told, told truths and lies, and there was no way to tell which was which" (68). Throughout the novel Peter's perceptions are calibrated in terms of the poetic shifting of local scenery and people about him as they become a part of him, changing him. Since he comes to be not only what but also how he experiences, it is no wonder that no one but he, when quite alone, suddenly and unexpectedly encounters the butterfly tree in all of its experiential poetic beauty. Only he at present is adequately qualified.

For, as a doubter, Peter must now begin where others fear to end. He is involved in one of the profound human themes of William Faulkner's short story, "The Bear," where the wilderness-seekers know that hunting is a serious exhilarating business and also a cursed blessing. Their instinctive hunt for the kill is deeply countered by a hope and need to fail, because that ultimate kind of possession will be the end of something more than the bear. When, after the climactic hunt, Ike McCaslin emulates the life of Christ, he is a true outsider/insider just as Peter Abbott is after he confronts the butterfly tree. Peter's actual experience clashes with the contradictory but needed dream of others who are very close to him. He is frustrated and hurt by their reactions

to his news, but his final acceptance of the fact is a sure indicator that he has achieved an identity beyond and perhaps sadder than theirs, one that will develop for him and reverberate for the reader well past the final page and into other areas than the unique locale that happens to be on Mobile Bay.

As a work pulsing with things that matter and last and are locally discoverable by the alert, *The Butterfly Tree* richly deserves its newly affirmed status as an Alabama classic. 🦋

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*Mark Dauber*



*Kathleen Saccopoulos*

## A Note on Detective Fiction

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Semon Strobos

**B**ecause I don't like detective stories very much, I have wondered what people read them for. What I mean by "detective stories" is the popular whodunit, as begun by Poe and picked up by Dickens and Conan Doyle, as written by Agatha Christie and her ilk, and to a lesser extent I mean Raymond Chandler's work and that of others of his school. I'm distinguishing these from thrillers, in which suspense and terror rather than whodunit are foci.

I usually love the characters and scene setting, which are old fashioned technically, but more simply written than the nineteenth-century novels they resemble: altogether relaxing. I like English villages or 1930's California either one. But I start to lose interest when the logistics start: who was where at what time and date, and how long it took, and who saw him, etc.

"Murder on the Orient Express" for instance was a blast at first: neat characters, romantic setting, lots of stories, even the murder is an exciting event. Then you get the same scenario told (*told*, in a movie) by different people four more times—kind of a thoughtless *Rashomon*. Not even the interesting part of the story either: just more logistics. Other fiction tends to leave out how people get places and how long it takes, because other fiction strives to be less boring and time consuming than life its own self. But detective stories spend a lot of time on the least interesting part of the plot, on the "McGuffin" as Hitchcock called it (the Maltese falcon or whatever) rather than on people.

Of course, I was watching a detective movie starring Susan Sarandon, whom I like, with my roommate. Sarandon's character is inclined to have an affair with the detective but she's married, though having problems with her husband. All three

characters are well done. She and the detective stop talking about this interesting situation to start talking about where the murder weapon was found blah blah blah. I turned to my roommate and said, "This is the same old boring stuff. The interesting part is this affair they may have."

He said, "But they have to talk about something. There's got to be a story." He's a graduate student in physics and never reads anything if he can help it. I realized that dates in America, visits, opportunities for meeting people also probably have to have pretext: a baby shower or some story going on. Perhaps people aren't comfortable just talking about what's happening between them, or about whatever comes up. We don't live in a cafe society, like Eastern Europe's, and it shows in our businesslike sense of narrative.

The characterization in detective works tends to be thin—only what's needed to get the plot moving along. It's mechanically done too: set up as exposition rather than allowed to transpire. And modern fiction as a whole has lost belief in such complex plots: Shakespearean doubles, coincidences, hidden relationships, villainy. These things survive mostly in crime writing, though it's interesting that Dickens and *Tom Jones* also go in for them and have also been read as primal restorations: as allegories of the incestuous family.

Few of the realities of the criminal nature (what psychiatrists *DSMIIIR* now calls "Anti-Social Personality Disorder") or of the policeman penetrates detective stories. The detective tends to be an amateur outside and often in opposition to the police force, or a maverick within it. She or he is an amateur who has no truck with police SOP but uses his/her own, invariably described as original and unusual. The detective is in fact a kind of academic, or naive rationalist, employing entirely rational methods.

I once asked the late Richard Danae ("Ellery Queen") what he thought crime fiction's lure was. He said, "People have always been interested in crime and murder: Dostoevsky, Shakespeare."

But detective fiction isn't about murder or crime. It has no interest in what motivates a murderer (besides "motive"), or in his psychology or upbringing, or what he feels like; no interest in the effect the crime has on the family, society, and friends of the murderer or the victim; and no interest in the criminal act

itself, which is narrated at a safe remove. Other than 'whodunit' and 'with what' the murder is often not described at all, unlike in the thriller, where teasing about such a scene occupies much of the film or book, and the scene itself, always foiled, is the climax.

I pass briefly to a few things which are obvious. The plot is a puzzle or parlor game, an adult Easter egg hunt with clues. Usually so much freedom of possibility remains—since psychological realism is so much in abeyance—that by the end, any number of suspects could still have done the murder, if one accepts involved and improbable *modus operandi*. Still, for some readers, the puzzle has its interest, at least in the form of suspense.

Three things about this genre account to me for its appeal. First, the atmosphere, rather than chilling, is cuddly. The detective has a best friend or mate—often the narrator—with whom he has a warm and supportive relationship (Holmes and Watson; Marple and the entire English village; Poirot and his joker English detectives; Nero Wolfe and Archie). Jokes or teases are played, usually by the detective. The main tease is his withheld knowledge of the murder. Policemen (adults, as it were) warn him not to involve himself for his own safety. The society of the detective is also warm, not only Miss Marple's delicious English village, but Holmes' London, Nero's hermetic household. The atmosphere of the murder is a contrast, an episodic picaresque situation which leaves the society of the detective unaltered. The murder is held at a safe remove: someone finds the body of her father and within sentences she's worrying about "clues." The detective and his cohorts are neither murderer nor victim. Even the picaresque background is frequently warm, with a "client" or sympathetic main suspect (innocent).

Second, the solution is highly improbable. The murderer has created a puzzle rather than a crime. I imagine in real murders it is either immediately obvious whodunit, or not obvious precisely *because* of the simplicity of the act, rather than because of its puzzle-like complexity.

Lastly, the world of detective fiction is virtually sexless. The detective, with few exceptions, is unmarried. The thin man (Nick Charles) may be an exception but his relationship with his wife is not very marital, at most courting and perhaps even childish play. There are suggestions that he drinks too much and

stays up too late to consummate the marriage. Marple, Holmes, Poirot, Wolfe: all aggressively single. Archie has his chase routine but it never comes to much until after the story is over. As Wimsey gets involved with Harriet Vane, his novels hardly any longer involve crime (murder). The murderer and his victim may have had and often did have a sexual relationship, for which, I suppose, they are punished, but it is rarely described in any detail, either emotional or physical. TV murders partake of the adolescent foreplay typical of the genre: *boy meets girl*, then . . . fade.

The detective is a neuter "genius" in the naive, Horatio Alger journalistic view of genius—a confusion of Knowledge and Thinking. She is a rationalist without human qualities or emotions, an eccentric who works with an all purpose brain, adept not at special cases or insights but rather a compendium of knowledge about everything. The detective is a connoisseur of wine, of flowers, of books, of trivia, of whatever is necessary, not merely to unravel the crime but to impress the interloper (adult) community. The detective belongs to the Romantic rather than "Realist" tradition in being seen from outside. She is never the narrator. She is childhood's magic parent, or the parents' "good" double, the pre-oedipal, non sexual father or mother. She is the comic wizard—in Northrop Frye's sense—who helps the New World of the ingenues to be born from the ashes of the Old World of parents, murderers, police.

This new world resembles other popular fiction. Wodehouse and Tolkein also have this cuddly prepubescent atmosphere. They also have their Uncle/Aunt ersatz father/mother figures—fantastic and improved parents like the detective who help the young at heart escape repression.

Thus these forms can be considered escapist in the direction of regression. Detective fiction seeks to deny mortality and even maturity. It allows the main family/friendship/sibling nexus of its primary and (even primal) group to remain pre-sexual, immature and unthreatened. The murder is highly improbable, treated as a removed puzzle object which never affects the "cuddlers"—including not only the detective and his cohorts but the "client" or favorite "suspect."

Puberty's forcible interruption, the knowledge of mortality, and the breakup of the nuclear family are held in abeyance. The



detective—magi-parent, like Peter Pan—holds at bluff, plays with, defeats the outside world of murder, sex, death, hostility, aggression and policemen, and preserves for his family circle a paradisiac version of prepubescence. This circle also includes the reader, who through narrative voice and point of view is made to identify with the “best friend” or “nephew” figure. The reader is encouraged to admire the ingenue—the innocent favorite suspect—but from a distance from where this admiration is kept to a presexual or at least fantasy level.

Raymond Chandler’s “The Simple Art of Murder” makes some similar points in excoriating what he calls “Mystery Fiction” of the Agatha Christie sort which predominated before him. Chandler claims that his own “Detective Fiction” is more realistic. It does not, for example, deny sexuality.

How true is this? Many rebels end up reverting to what they rebelled against, or, more subtly, accept its paradigm while rejecting content or symbols. So the rebel moves, perhaps, to the opposite extreme, an axis which affirms the same thing. The Liberator, putting the first foot wrong by fighting violence with violence, becomes a tyrant of another sort: a Castro or Napoleon.

Chandler’s “Detective Fiction: for me at best moves into adolescent fantasy sexuality: women characters, basically projections of naive desire, admire the hero’s macho. Vulnerability, even communication, is too scary for this adolescent sensibility, so the detective cannot respond in turn to the woman’s expression of interest. He’s busy detecting, which tends to involve fighting. Not a realistic view of how to meet women and get to know them, needless to say.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler made a similar point about the American novel as a whole: which is, he says, about “come on back to the raft, Huck, honey.” Men form attachments to men, with women at best as picaresque episodes. Or the women, ignored, capture the men into domesticity, like Mom making you stop touch football to wash your hands for dinner, or the bar girl who gets John Wayne in the Western’s penultimate scene, though he’s clocked maybe a minute of running time with her up to then. Then in the ultimate scene he rides off with the guys again.

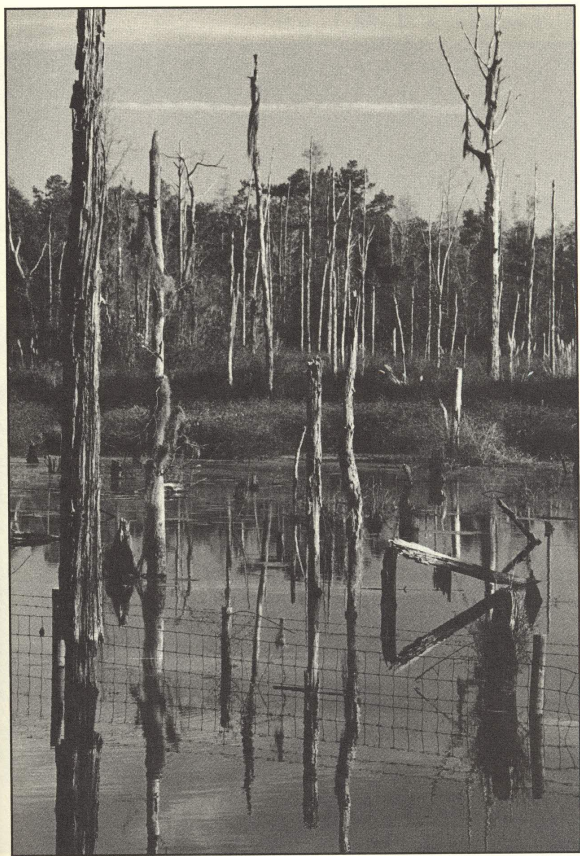
While a society’s relationship to its fantasies is hard to

puzzle out, it's disturbing to find our art so fantastic (not about daily relationships) and the fantasies themselves so violent, alienated, antisocial, and so primitively masculine (adolescent).

So the crime novel is not about murder/aggression/hatred/crime/violence at all. It denies these things. It's a fantasy about playing with your buddies after school.

Nothing wrong with that. I still don't get the logistics. Do we view this as a necessary evil, like putting on our snowsuits and washing our hands? I think, instead, we can take a clue from the simultaneous birth of the detective and the industrial age. We watch *Robocop*, our children play with plastic toys which are half man and half machine. Somehow we have come to identify with machines: we see our cars not as expensive, homicidal, time-consuming inconveniences—an environmental and balance of trade disaster—but as freedom, the way the cowboy looked at his horse. We have become comfortable with being robocops.

And this is probably why I don't like detective stories. I like cuddling with my friends fine, but if half of me is a machine, I regard myself as a monster. I don't enjoy the scheduling, accounting and filing of forms modern life has made necessary. I'd sooner escape, when I'm reading, to some more human world. ☹



*Patrick Hood*



*Randall R. Spotts*

## Letter from Russia

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Dr. V. L. Tsvetkov

*"Thank you for your promise to give serious consideration to my work which presents nothing but the truth about poor Russia."—Dr. V. L. Tsvetkov, January 27, 1992*

**M**y father came from an old family of Christian priests and for a long time preached at the village of Meshuiki in Kazan Gubernia. In 1883 a boy was born into their family and, breaking the tradition of their clan, entered the University instead of the theological seminary. On the threshold of the twentieth century, he showed off in a new cockade with a large silver sign on which one could see two entwined V's signifying *Vetorach-veterinary* placed under the two-headed eagle of the Russian Empire. He was dark-headed, with a nonchalantly twisted moustache, and admired by women. When he sang in an amateur opera ensemble, he conquered the listeners with his soft tenor. All that was in Kazan City.

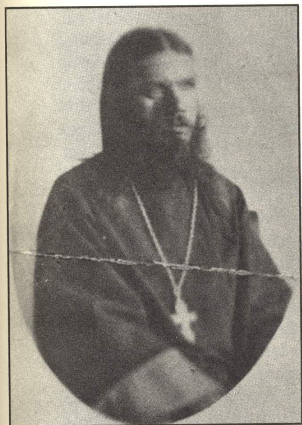
In 1907 Leonid noticed that his landlady's daughter cast timid but blushing glances at him now and then. When her strict mother came to know about her daughter's passion, she asked her lodger to leave, forbade her daughter to see the lad, and locked her in her room. Though Ludmila was only 15, she was clever enough to arrange secret correspondence using a pencil and a telegraph pole. They wrote in pencil on the pole the date and the time of their possible meetings on the way to the church or the shop, the only places the girl was allowed to go. When she was 16, they worked out a bold plan. Leonid and his friend made up their minds to kidnap Leonid's beloved when she left under the pretense of going shopping. Ludmila did not take any of her belongings and wrote a short note asking her parents not to worry. Leonid's brother was a preacher in Meshuiki and agreed to marry them secretly in his church. They were married by him on that very day. When a week later Ludmila's husband dared to face Ludmila's mother Euphemia Kharitonovna and ask

her for some of his wife's things, he was not let into the house, was given neither a kopeck nor a thing belonging to Ludmila. Instead he was scolded and damned to hell. The married couple began their life quite anew. Leonid had to find a place to live and earn money to support his family. In 1911 Galina, the elder daughter, was born and in 1914 Olga, the younger one.

Leonid served in the army at that time and he insisted on his wife entering Moscow University where she studied at the medical faculty. The course of her studies was interrupted several times as she worked as a nurse in hospitals. In 1923 she earned the qualification of a pediatrician and was sent to run the



Mrs. Euphemia and her husband, Mr. F. A. Negreus in Kazan, 1910.



**Top left:** Dr. Leonid Tsvetkov, 1910.

**Top right:** Miss Ludmila Negreus, 1909.

**Left:** Father Ioann, who married his brother Leonid and Ludmila in the village of Meshuiki, Kazan. Photograph circa 1888.

medical orphanage in Orel. Upon her arrival she had a severe, near-deadly septic heart attack. Assisted by her husband, she went to Moscow for a consultation with the well-known professor Konchalovsky. The professor warned the pregnant Ludmila that she could die during childbirth, but Ludmila immediately ruled out abortion. The professor's worrying proved unwarranted. Ludmila died at the age of 93. Her heart was strong enough to resist any disaster.

That was the time when there was neither radio nor telephone and electrical light was available only some places. Despite these limitations, the need for communication had always been strong in the gregarious Russians. They liked to visit each other, discuss various problems, go in for music, show their children, arrange outings and picnics, go boating, and master rhetoric and philosophy, as well as develop their musical, poetic, artistic and literary talents.

My father entertained guests, singing Faustus's cavatinas—merry couplets of rivers and lakes turned into wine. Everybody admired his oil and watercolor paintings, carvings, and poker work on the wooden cases. He made greeting cards with congratulations and invitations with a flowery ornament on them cut in with a razor in such a way as to be visible in the shade but disappear in the light.

When I grew a bit, I displayed my father's pleasant voice and a good ear for music. I tried to avoid dull music drills, singing false notes, and being forced to study music. Only sometimes when I was in a good mood, my sister Galya (who was fond of listening to her brother's soft, expressive voice) could talk me into singing. She even envied me.

I remember some episodes of my carefree childhood as if they were yesterday. I remember that in the 1930s, next to our house was a college under construction. This building survives to this day. This place became the place of our merrymaking. As we grew, so did our tricks both in number and intensity. Bottles with lime and carbon were blown up and the roofs were good grounds for running. Once while marching on the roof I found a five-pound jar and a brush with drying bright green oil paint on it. It was not too hard to climb down with the brush and jar, just a few moments to carry it into our garden. Thinking about the mischievous Tom Sawyer's popularity, I began to paint our fence with nobody in the vicinity except Venus, our small dog of un-



certain breeding and unpleasant white and grey color. Suddenly a brilliant idea, not thought of by Mark Twain, struck my mind: a green dog! Everyone would be jealous of my possessing such a rare thing! I grasped Venus with one hand and started making thick strokes of paint on its back, sides and paws. Poor dog! Venus did not share my ambitions and, preferring to be the sort it had been before the operation, it struggled for its life and eventually forced me to let it alone. Before its escape, however, obstinacy and ambition made me continue painting until its muzzle, neck and breast became green. Only after letting go of Venus's tail, and being bit by the infuriated dog, did I look at my suit. It was smeared and spotted as brightly as the dog itself. Oh, my new trousers and jacket! What became of them! For a couple of minutes I was absorbed in watching the green monster jump and gallop about the yard. Then I returned to earth and dragged myself to the house scratching my itching skin for the drying oil had hurt my face, neck, and body. It was Sunday and fortunately my father was out. When my mother saw me she opened her mouth and all that she managed to pronounce was, "What's wrong with you?" Then she boiled some water on the primus-stove and after ripping off my clothes, put me into a tin basin and scrubbed with a wisp and hot water. But the paint was not to be removed so easily. Only kerosene and spirits lessened the green spots on my face, hands and body. My new suit was washed in a pail of kerosene. Unfortunately, the attempt of concealing the incident from my father failed. The awful stench of the kerosene-turpentine mixture gave away his son's secret. The sight of green Venus running madly in the yard added to making his decision: "Whipping!"

In 1935 our father took us for a voyage along the Volga on board the century-old "Spartacus" of American type. The voyage was unforgettable. How many impressions I got! How many new things I saw! I could not tear my eyes from the picturesque banks passing by, piers with noisy bazaars. Once on the first-class deck, I noticed a multi-colored crowd of strange people dressed in queer clothes. Both ladies and gentlemen were wearing shorts and singlets with sombreros and cowboy hats. I was amazed that I did not understand a word in their speech. Their words sounded like a constant rapid flow of indistinct sounds. One of them caught sight of me, took my hands and began to show me how to move my legs keeping the rhythm of the noise-

music. My amazement grew. I thought they could have been taken for extraterrestrials. My dance partner took some sweets from his pocket and gave them to me. They were very tasty. Though I felt pleasantly cool in my mouth, still I was ill at ease because I could not make out their speech. I tried "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" but they were not German. I ran to my mother to ask her what words "Virginia, Norfolk, Russian boy" meant. When I found out that they were Americans I required a few English words for the initial communication. Thus began my introduction to a new language.

My new first-class acquaintance was delighted to hear my English words. He introduced me as a very capable Russian boy who mastered the language on the spot. Consulting my mother several times, I got to know their names: Bertran Brelsford, or Bert, and Tredwell Smith. I visited their cabin, saw the wonderful contents of their suitcases and like a trout swallowing a small fish, and in an instant, absorbed new words necessary for a talk. I was surprised that neither my father nor mother came out of the cabin to take part in our discussions. All the interpretations were made from deck to deck by me. By chance I heard my father mention to my mother the serious situation in our country after Kirov's assassination and did not recommend my mother leaving the cabin. But I made friends with the joyful lads from America. We spoke about many problems and events, such as the Pioneer organization in the USSR. I showed them all my knowledge derived at school lessons about America, i.e., the workers' struggle against capitalists in the USA. Mr. Bert looked at me in puzzlement but did not say anything. Mostly our talks were far from politics. I learned many interesting things from them apart from the class struggle. When we parted in Tsaritsin, we exchanged addresses. For two years I had a very lively post correspondence with my American friends. They sent me greetings, wishes, reckonings, photos, stamps, pictures, and books. It ended in 1937, for my parents were recommended by certain authorities to stop this childish practice. I was in despair to lose so many friends.

We believed everything our teachers said. I remember that we were told to cross out and smear with black paint beautiful portraits of Blücher, Tukhachevsky, Rikov, and others in our textbooks. We were told to modify the texts by saying "People's

Enemies" instead of their names and say that it was Comrade Stalin who wisely saved the people from danger.

On the 28th of February of that same year, I was awakened by loud voices and my mother's crying in the bedroom. Peeping into the room, I saw my father tucking his things into his suitcase hurriedly and my mother standing near a man in black, begging him about something and weeping. Two other men were looking through our things, thrusting them off the table and out of the wardrobe drawers. The "black man" noticed me at once, came up to me quickly, opened the door, switched on the light and asked, "Is it your son? Who else is there?" My mother covered me with her hands and murmured that I was asleep although I was not. It surprised me. I was frightened by that "black man" and did not say anything. He lifted my bed cloth, threw down books from my bookshelf, turned everything upside down, and started tapping my fish tank with a nail. I thought that he wanted to take the fish out and approached him. He grinned, kicked my books with his boot, lifted one to his eyes, turned a few pages and left the room without saying a word. I was ordered to stay in my room. I heard noise behind the door. Then the door opened, my father came up to me in the dark, bent his head, saw that I was not asleep, kissed me on the forehead and whispered, "Be a good boy, please. It is a mistake. Be a good boy!" I saw tears in his eyes glistening in the meager light of the opened door and then he left. I heard a clatter of horse hooves in the street when a carriage on rubber tires took away my father, my dearest father, forever. I knew I was losing him and, hiding my face in my pillow, I wept bitterly until morning.

After the war broke out in 1941, a volunteer corps was formed in Orel. All the male pupils of our school were admitted to Fighter Battalion 3. In August the disruptions became more frequent. We hid in covers and shelters at the outskirts of the town. The atmosphere was tense. Each shadow of a man seemed an enemy. Once there was an incident when one guard unit did not recognize another one and both were about to shoot each other. Eventually we became more experienced and informed. German aid raids became more and more numerous. First they bombed the railway station, the airports, then the whole town at

random. During the raids we, like many other rescue brigades, were on the roofs fighting small incendiary bombs, which splashed thermite from the garrets through dormer windows. Sometimes so many fell that here and there fires started. Sparkling flames and clouds of smoke arose from the burning houses. After each bombardment, we dug out slashings, found victims, and with a bitter feeling saw war's great losses. Our souls were brimming with anger and spite towards the invading Germans who started this bloodshed, this war that had ruined everything from head to foot, crushed our former quiet, peaceful life altogether. I felt many changes had occurred in me, that my inner world was undergoing heavy changes. A year earlier, I would have burst into tears watching the death or suffering of an animal; now I could drag out corpses from under ruins and carry the wounded and remain composed. All emotions got mixed in one spiteful wish, a wish of revenge. We were proud that our country was the best in the world and were ready to defend our Motherland, to fight against the enemy. Yes, we were made patriots.

In the morning of the 3rd of October, we were awakened by our neighbor who shouted, "Why are you sleeping? Germans are in the streets! They are laughing!" We were shocked with the last word.

We had expected cruelty, violence, slavery, executions, but not laughter. We rushed out of the house and saw them: strange bluish greatcoats, narrow shoulder straps, unknown signs of distinction on the sleeves. They were looting shops and houses of all that remained in them, loading their cars and motorcycles with the spoils. Many of them were talking loudly and roaring with laughter. I stood cautiously devouring them with my eyes and understanding that they were inspired with their victory of such an easy capture of Orel. I listened to their speech and suddenly distinguished many familiar words and the sense of their talking. My neighbor was glad that I had a good command of German and said, "Ask them for cigarettes. I saw them giving some away." I refused the suggestion bluntly. One of the Germans approached us on his motorcycle and beckoned my friend. The boy made a step towards him. We stood and watched with curiosity. Quite silently the soldier snatched the boy's hare-fur cap from his head and pulled it over his ears calmly, smiling all the while. We were struck dumb. The boy's jaw hung down and

it trembled. The German, satisfied with the effect of his practical joke and particularly with the warmth of the cap (it had grown rather frosty at that time), took a bottle of vodka from the baggage van of his motorcycle and slipped it into the boy's hands. The situation seemed funny to him. Grinning, he rode away. But we were far from laughing. Going home we met some more grey soldiers marauding in houses, and heard women's screams, and shots. We hurried and calmed down a little as we saw that they shot mostly dogs that dared to bark at them. My dear Venus did not escape this destiny.

Near the town post office a few corpses were hung with their tongues and heads bent aside, their bodies swinging from side to side ominously. I halted, terror stricken, unable to go nearer. The most disgusting thing was not the horrible sight of death, but the veneer boards on their breasts bearing the reasons for their execution, written in Russian. I could barely make out their meanings: "bolshevik," "jew," "saboteur," and something else. German punctuality! Suddenly I remembered that I had been developing my willpower. How could I give way to emotions? It was the enemy's criminal design to scare us. No, I for one was not scared at all! I tried to convince myself of it. My dear mother saved me, having supplied me with the good knowledge of the German language. A week later I came into contacts with Germans easily enough, causing jealousy in some and receiving blame from others.

We were preparing to fight and looked for weapons. Once I was walking home with a bag containing a few grenades found in a bombed police post. In my heart I hoped that an officer coming towards me on the road would pass me by, as it had been many times. But suddenly he blocked my way. I saw his shining boots and an exquisite walking stick on the pavement in front of me. I made a step aside trying to avoid the undesirable meeting but he repeated my movement like in a mirror. He did not want me to pass. I was seized by fear when an elderly dandy Hauptmann with two silver stars on silver shoulder straps tapped with his stick on my bag and asked, "Was holst du in der Tasche?" It seemed to me that he felt the shape of a grenade through the cloth of the bag. I was ready to run but my attention was attracted by a small woman's shoulder bag on which his right hand lay as if in case of emergency. I did not know what impulse caused my grimace. I smiled and told him in

German that my mother washed German officers' linen at home. Then I murmured "bitte" and encouraged by the Hauptmann's smile and his praising words about my German added, "My mother is a German." I went on lying, hoping for the better, and saw that his right hand changed its place from the shoulder bag to my shoulder while he rendered the instruction that my mother wash more carefully for the officers. Then he resumed his tapping along with his walking stick. I could hardly regain my breath from excitement. I leaned against the wall, almost in a faint.

Those who did not work were driven to Germany, so I found a job as an orderly in the Orel War Hospital, and I was proud to bring my first wages to my mother. Orel War Hospital was set on fire by the Germans. Against the storming flames, the white figures of the wounded were crawling around like ants. Many of them took their pillows and blankets with them and tried to protect their bandaged and plastered bodies from the early frost. Nobody knew who had shown them the way to our hospital. It was a starting point of the Orel underground hospital, or Russian Hospital, which saved more than a thousand prisoners of war under the near unbearable conditions of the severe occupying regime. A few days after the occupation all the doctors were threatened with death if they did not clean all the comfortable buildings of the hospital, get rid of the helplessly wounded prisoners of war and drive them out into the November frost. Prisoners of war! It's a frightful word! It meant the cold, unheated cells of prison, starvation, beatings, slavery, and eventual death. There was nowhere to go and nowhere to stay. The infectious disease ward was overcrowded with the terminally frost-bitten or wounded.

Doctor V. T. Tourbin dashed from room to room instructing how and where the wounded were to be placed. He spent nearly all the wood stock for disinfection and heat to dry out soldiers' underwear and clothes. He sent his personnel to the Orlik river to fetch pails of water for washing all the newcomers, examined each fold of their clothing and swore when he found a louse or a nit. He had been staying in his section for days, sleeping in a desocamera, and eating dried crusts of bread.

No one ever saw him sit. He saved hundreds of people from typhus and death. Starvation reached its climax. All were exhausted, some were at the point of death. The wounds ached and suppurated. We looked for ways out of hunger and this is

what we found: Somebody suggested the idea of cooking "soup" of wallpaper glued to the walls with starch and rye flour paste. There were about three pailfulls of that paste left over from last year's wallpapering. All the wallpaper was watered and this wet paper-flour mass was scraped from the walls with knives. The "soup" was not very tasty but the wounded ate it, chewing and swallowing the boiled mass. It saved many people. In the summer, we ate grass, nettle, goose-foot, buds, and leaves of a lime tree; many plants unknown were consumed. The Tsvetkovs discovered another source of protein—river shells of edentates that inhabited the silty bottom of the Orlik river in great quantity. Soup with them was not bad at all. We also tried to eat frogs.

In 1943, the Germans selected all those wounded who could work, about a hundred men, took off their clothes and footwear, pushed them into goods wagons, together with their doctor, A. S. Minakovsky, and sealed them up. The train moved to the West for a few days, with the people in the wagons deprived of both food and water. Barefooted, they stood on the frozen floor and died together with their doctor.

The wounded were to be sent to the POW camp after recovery. But our hospital arranged the transportation to the partisans of POWs who were registered as dead. Surgeons B. N. Gusev and S. P. Protopopov organized the march to the woods. Still the main body of the wounded perished.

In August, 1943, the former POWs shared the happiness of liberation with all other people. Unfortunately, almost all of them were repressed, interrogated, and arrested by NKVD, accused of being "enemies of the people." Among them were doctors V. Smitnov, L. Tsvetkova, V. Tourbin, and many others. Some of them were "reinstated" after death.

Long-awaited freedom came like a bolt from the blue on the fifth of August, 1943. The eighth of August saw a new stage in my military life in the Red Army, the army that won freedom for us in fierce battles, costing many lives. We, the soldiers of Infantry Division A69, played an active part in the liberation movement, not only of our Motherland, but Europe as well. What was to be expected? *Aut Caesar, aut nihil?* Glory or death?

The forceful four or five days march from Tula to Khotinets wore all of us out. I, for one, suffered from bloody, bursting blisters on my feet, making me lame in both legs. I put soft grass, hay, dried leaves of plantain, even cotton and wool in my

boots. I bandaged my feet with puttees, but nothing helped! I tried to go barefooted, but it caused more injury and pain. My body ached and my soul could not but suffer our officer's indignant shouting at me. He reproached me for having no guts, ordered disdainfully for me to rub my "corn," scornfully cried out hurting words about how I had an unworthy look for a Soviet warrior. I realized that he was right. After each short halt, I apprehensively stuck my sore feet, tied tightly with puttees, into the damned hard boots already worn down to one side by a previous owner.

It was a time of great sorrow and deprivation for all of our people. I suffered hardships like all others, as well as constant humiliation by the rudeness of our officer. We waited for the first battle. What did my offenses mean compared to the meeting with the enemy in the first battle? Even my footache deadened due to our high mood when we, protected only by hillocks, bushes, trees, and other accidents of the ground, approached the Osier riverbed behind which the enemy hid, armed with machine guns ready to open fire at our ranks. Waiting for the attack, I was surprised to not be frightened. The predominant idea was to succeed in the battle. A lot of variants flashed in my mind. What was to be done? How was I to behave, or to act if . . . ? And of course, how could I escape bullets attacking the enemy?

The lieutenant remained in the trenches far behind. Only half of our squad were alive after a few minutes' run. The next moment, we realized the task could not be carried out. In front of us on the hill, two machine-guns and scores of other guns were firing at us, and the enemy was under cover from our fire. My sergeant fell on the blood-spotted ground. I was struck, but continued running like the other soldiers. In no time, the assault was used up. It is beyond my desire to describe the return to the company, wounded, and the swearing of our squad commander who had a lot to bear from the company officers for poorly training us soldiers.

After the first battle, I felt the urge to retreat. I felt my back turn cold, hearing the whining of bullets. I would involuntarily bend to the ground, though I understood that if I heard whining, that meant the bullet had missed.

We never got enough sleep. On the marches we had even less time for sleeping than at the front where half of the soldiers



dozed in their foxholes or slept lying in the communication trenches until a rare officer or sergeant coming from the second trench stumbled over them. It was a time of heavy rains and snow. It rained cats and dogs day and night. The fifty-pound weight of my equipment was added to with mud and water soaking our caps, greatcoats, even our underwear and foot cloths. On the march, soaked clothes dried rather quickly on our hot bodies, and water squelched out of our boots. We could manage without campfires, but night rains prevented us from drying out. The inner layers of our clothes were warmed by the body. In winter we felt better in spite of the cold and frost, for our clothing was dry. Snow could hardly melt under our bodies. Food supplies were satisfactory; however, when we marched, the food trains lagged behind and we were obliged to look for food by ourselves. In 1944, when the trucks "Willis" and "Studebaker" appeared, were our portions enriched with American canned pork, ham, and egg powder. The main defect of this food was that the portion was so quickly swallowed by a soldier that one could hardly taste it. This canned food was named "the second front" promised by Mr. Franklin Roosevelt as far back as 1943.

The further battles were successful. On the way there was Sozb Bridgehead, Pronya, the storming of the town of Vetka, and many more. We did not advance very far. Those battles brought me much knowledge and war experience. I became firm in mind



Vladi Tsvetkov with the Willis jeep his company received from the United States in 1945. Circa March-April 1945, Germany.

and body, more restrained, calmer, more stern, even indifferent to suffering and death. My worn-out nerves grew unable to worry or fear. I could sleep only 3–4 hours. I learned to fall on the ground, into the mud, and sleep embracing my gun. I learned not to cough and not to catch a cold from the biting chill piercing my wet clothing. The bloody blisters on my feet turned into scars and corns that no longer hurt. In short, I became a soldier.

I was wounded another time. Machine guns opened fire on our squad near a hut where our battle portions of sugar and bread were handed out. Dead soldiers lay around us with filmy eyes and red spots riddled in their greatcoats. The sergeant poured vodka from a can to each of us. I did not take it for fear of fogging my head at a decisive moment. Next to me, other soldiers stood up slowly and unwillingly. Another squad did the same to the left, guns in hands. We mounted the knoll where we could see the German breastworks-guns and machine guns pointing at us. I took a gun from a dead soldier to replace my broken, rusty one with only two bullets. I shot and a German, in his turn, fired back with his parabellum. I was dashed on the hip, feeling a heavy blow near the pelvis, and fell down into the furrow. I turned my head to see our ranks and then a machine gun started firing again, hitting my knapsack. My shirt was wet with blood on the breast and stomach. Blood ran through the collar near my neck. I thought only about shooting, and then my wound. When my thoughts turned to the fear of dying from a loss of blood, I began to crawl more quickly, took off my trousers, tore open the last medical parcel, and tried to bandage the wound and stop the thick stream of blood with one clog of cotton wool at the outlet where the hole was bigger. The second clog I placed on the bloodless inlet. I shivered with thirst. I saw a dead soldier in a furrow. I bit the knot on his knapsack, and resting for some time to save strength, I slowly managed to untie it and found a damp loaf of bread wrapped in a rag and a raw porridge of sugar. I devoured it, biting the bread with my teeth and swallowing sugar without minding the unpleasant salty, metallic taste. When I ate all I had, I stopped trembling and felt a large hole in the soldier's knapsack, leading to the flesh of his back. Both the bread and sugar had been salted with his blood. Though the thought that I had eaten bread mixed with human blood was nearly unbearable, I did not vomit. On the contrary, I felt strong enough to crawl further. In the dark,



World War II veteran Dr. V. L. Tsvetkov in 1984 at the age of 60.

amid flashes of gunfire, five or six hours passed before I got to the easily recognizable bank of our ranks. I felt relieved and there was nothing to fear anymore. I had endured the battle.

On the sixth of April, 1945, I was appointed the senior man in charge of a storm brigade entering behind the general troops besieging the fortress of Königsberg. Our group followed the attacking infantry with the task of cleaning cellars and buildings of hiding German troops in the town's northern districts. We moved from house to house along General Litzman Street. For the most part the houses were in ruins but people hid in the

cellars from the Russian soldiers. To avoid killing civilians, I used this trick: standing at the edge of the doorway, sheltered from a chance grenade, I shouted in German, "Get out. I am throwing a grenade!" Then I threw a stone. If no one came out, I went in looking for people in the cellar and mines. If I found civilians there, they usually cried that there were no military men among them and went out of the cellar. They generally could be believed though it was dangerous to meet them in the dark. If we noticed any shooting soldiers, we threw grenades. Those who surrendered were disarmed and sent to the rear. Such was our work.

In one of the cellars, behind a locked door, I heard many loud voices and dozens of boots marching up the steps of the staircase. My soldiers were ready to throw grenades and open fire at the running soldiers with their submachine guns. I recognized that the speech was not German and ordered my soldiers to stop. This moment saved scores of lives. We did our best not to press our triggers, as one after another, tall soldiers in unknown, threadbare uniforms rushed at us. Only their outstretched arms and their gay smiles on grey haggard faces showed that they were not enemies. In an instant my soldiers and I were embraced and covered with kisses. Shouting triumphantly and glad to be liberated, about two hundred POWs from the western front, mostly French, but with a few dozen American and British pilots, filled the yard. I spoke with the latter in the English I had learned long ago, and explained how they could get to the rear, and gave them a note for the Russian officers with an explanation of who they were and with a request to feed our starving allies. I warned them not to appear in Litzman Street for the German machine guns continued their fire. We were eager to talk but many parts of the town waited for our "cleaning." We reached Nord Bahnhof where I came to know that the group had gotten to the rear safely and was sent to the west. Afterwards, I was proud to realize that, though they were in such haste and had no time to say goodbye or to thank those who had helped, as it often happens in war, our bullets or grenades could have ended their lives. Instead, we helped them to return home. This belief was dearer to me than any award. I am sorry that I had no time to make acquaintance of some of them. Perhaps some of them will read these lines and write to me. It would be the greatest joy in the decline of my life. I wait and hope. 🐼

## Review of R. T. Smith's *The Cardinal Heart*

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Alan T. Belsches

*The Cardinal Heart*. R. T. Smith. Livingston, AL: Livingston University Press, 1991. 59 pages.

In his tenth published collection of poems, Southern poet R. T. Smith continues his exploration of man and nature through fifty-one poems, some new and some previously published. Smith, who is alumni writer-in-residence at Auburn University and an editor of *Southern Humanities Review*, continues a path in American writing forged by Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and more recently Annie Dillard, one where nature provides man the medium for learning about the world and himself.

Unlike the rough, rural picture of Southern life from inside the pickup or on a deer stand which Smith has done so well in earlier collections like *Rural Route* (1981) and *The Hollow Log Lounge* (1985), subjects one would expect in a Larry Brown story, this collection of poetry is more quiet, more probing, and contains a greater shadowing of religious overtones. The poet who coldly hunted the owl in *From the High Dive* (1983), now returns to a song of "simplicity, the grace of handmade things, / things that return and belong" he tells us in "The Bird Carver." The honesty of the emotions and incidents he so gracefully shapes in his poems captures the hearts of his readers as Smith describes moments of memory, of searching, and of revelation.

The poems in the first of four divisions in the collection establish a pattern that Smith has followed in many of his earlier works. He is a poet of moments. Whether it be gazing at the landscape from a window as in "Kitchen Window" or discovering a dead cardinal at the end of winter as in "The Cardinal Heart," the incidents he describes are filled with times of gaining knowledge or self-awareness. The lightning-struck oak with "gnarled arms" in "Kitchen Window" which stretches for

"one more chance to writhe / and blaze like an angel" and the sacrificial cardinal heart in the title poem of the collection become symbols or amulets which offer to the poet and the reader greater self-knowledge.

Sometimes this knowledge may be an acceptance of aging as in "Cardinal Directions." Or in "Back Porch" where the poet, ineptly building a porch, compares his constructing to a bird fashioning his nest, this realization is an acceptance of order wherever we can find it in this chaotic world. In many of these poems the knowledge comes through contemplating a cardinal, but just as often it might be a bluejay, sparrow, grackle, bobwhite, or even a rusting rooster weathervane as in "Weathercock." These are the signs in nature he seeks when in a "blue mood," he tells us in "Shaker," which can provide moments of insight and inspiration.

The poems in section two of *The Cardinal Heart* arise from Smith's literary and ancestral heritage. Poems about Pip and Father Mapple draw on characters from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and link them with the biblical Jonah and Ishmael, alienated characters seeking refuge. "Bread Cradle," "Her Armistice," and "Susan Gilbert Dickinson, 1887" focus on Emily Dickinson's ability to turn away from the cataclysms of her social and political world and to find in the natural world inside and outside her kitchen a sense of wholeness in the face of religious doubt.

The strongest poems of this section draw from Smith's Indian ancestry and his memories of his grandmother. The Indian spirit in "Beneath the Mound" achieved in his culture a spiritual wholeness that he would communicate to us if only he could summon his decayed body to regain its physical wholeness. And the Tuscarora grandmother in "Yonosa House" who sang "the myths of the race" on her "heart-carved maple dulcimer" and performed the simple chores of churning butter, frying cornbread, and brewing sassafras tea in the hearth conveyed to the young poet a wholeness from her culture. The oneness she had with nature returns to the poet "when the maples turn" because he can "hear her chants in the thrush's song."

Section three's poems deal more with the act of writing and the power of words and symbols on the printed page. The illuminations in "Brieves from *The Book of Kells*" help keep "any

intruder whose heart / is not nourished in the right / church . . ." from gaining the message in the old Irish manuscript. "Scribe" ponders how a writer, who may be a medieval scribe or even the poet, can be assured that an audience centuries in the future will be able to decipher the message of his work. And "Signifiers" compares a reader's difficulty in interpreting the meaning of words, which "cast a small spell / on things that exist outside us," with a dog's preference to focus only on one's hand rather than follow the implied direction of one's pointed finger. Words pose that same problem for the poet. How can he command his audience to pierce through the literalness of the words on a page to the thoughts and ideas which lie behind them?

In section four Smith includes poems which return to the setting of nature populated with birds which provide the poet with moments of insight. The "Bird Carver" who fashions bird figures all winter searches through his window and listens to his blade's "rasp" on the grindstone in imitation of the songs of the birds he carves, a song of simplicity and continuity with the past. "Can a Flower?" echoes the sentiments of William Cullen Bryant's "To A Waterfowl." Here the poet's contemplation of a solitary blue heron at the pond's edge is similar to Bryant's sighting of a lone bird flying at sunset. This helps him perceive in the next night's dreams that "a man / is never wholly alone."

In "Sloe Gin" the poet again echoes a literary ancestor, Henry David Thoreau, who spent two years studying the nature around Walden Pond as a path to a deeper understanding of his own human nature. Alone in the moonlight with his glass of liquor, the poet wishes winter to disappear and spring to return. Like Thoreau who finds in a living green sprig beneath the icy depths of Walden Pond the assurance that life continues and that spring will return, the poet here raises

my empty tumbler  
as a lens to discover  
on one twisted limb

a bird-shape stirring,  
then on the eastern rim  
of my private horizon

and misty as sloe gin,  
something to believe in,  
a holy unfolding, a tremor,

a far cardinal lifting

the red wing of dawn.

The image of the cardinal becomes his assurance that day will return, that life will continue, that a spirit endures in which he can have faith. Like the dying bird's heart in "The Cardinal Heart" which was sacrificed in order for spring to return, this living cardinal becomes the symbol upon which he can place his hope amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the alcohol and the night, the provider of the moment of insight.

In praising *Birch-Light*, Smith's 1986 collection of verse, Southern poet James Applewhite wrote that the work "demonstrates once again that the best of Southern poetry is no more limited in its appeal by location and subject than humanity is finally divided by racial origins and dialects." What R. T. Smith continues to show each of us here is the personal struggle all face in attempting to make sense of this world. Like we find in Robert Frost's poetry, Smith's poems can provide us with that "momentary stay against confusion," with a way of seeing in the natural world a wholeness to counter chaos, and with a connection among past, present, and future. ❧





*Larry Gay*

## Contributors

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**MARK DAUBER** is a freelance photographer who lives in Hope Hull, Alabama.

**PETE FROMM** resides in Great Falls, Montana. Two of his stories (including "Mardi Gras") published in *Alabama Literary Review* are included in his collection of short stories, *The Tall Uncut*, which is in its second printing by John Daniel and Company of Santa Barbara, California.

**LARRY GAY** is a freelance photographer in Bessemer, Alabama.

**ANN HEYWARD** has been exploring the medium of photography for the past three years, concentrating upon black-and-white and hand-colored imagery. She resides in Berea, Ohio.

**KELLY HOFFMAN** has attended the Pennsylvania School of Art and Design and has been working for the past five years in mostly fine arts photography. Her photos have been published in *1991 Best of Photography* and *1991 Best of College Photography*.

**JOHN HOLMAN** is the author of *Squabble* (which includes "Scuff"), a collection of short fiction published by Tichnor & Fields. He is a recipient of a 1992 Whiting Writers Award for distinguished fiction.

**PATRICK HOOD** is a freelance photographer based in Florence, Alabama. Hood works in every area of photography, but his first love is fine art photography.

**LARRY MCLEOD** has published previously in *Alabama Literary Review*. He lives near Goshen, Alabama, and raises Brittany Spaniels.

**RHONDA MORRISON** is a vocational resource teacher in Charleston, South Carolina, whose poetry has appeared in the *Southern Poetry Review*. She is married and has a six-year-old.

**CHARLES MUÑOZ's** novel, *Stowaway*, was published in 1957 by Random House. His poetry has appeared in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Gambit*, and *The Literary Review*.

**THOMAS ROUNTREE**, a professor of English at the University of South Alabama, edited six books on major British and American writers, and published over sixty short stories and nonfiction pieces in *Motive*, *Manhunt*, *PMLA*, and other periodicals. He died in May of 1992.

**MICHAEL RUSSELL** photographically documented several secluded islands of the South Pacific for almost a year in 1974. He is now a freelance photographer in Williamsport, Maryland.

**MARK RYAN**, of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a filmmaker by profession. His fiction has appeared in *City Pages*, and in *The Pinehurst Journal*. He is also a columnist in a locally published Twin Cities magazine.

**KATHLEEN SACCOPOULOS** teaches architectural photography at Mississippi State University and produces fine art photographic prints for exhibition. Her work has been accepted into over two dozen national and international juried exhibitions.

**RANDALL R. SPOTTS** has taught photography at the Cedar Rapids Art Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He has studied photography with Ansel Adams, Ralph Gibson, and David Hume Kennerly. He presently freelances in Minnetonka, Minnesota.

**SEMON STROBOS** worked with Saul Bellow at the University of Chicago where he received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. He has lived in Holland, France, New York City, and Texas. He has raced a bicycle for ten years and is presently working on a novel and a collection of short stories with Peter Davison at Houghton Mifflin Company.

**DIANE SWAN** has received an MFA from Warren Wilson College, North Carolina, and also two fellowship grants from the Vermont Council on the Arts. Her work has appeared in *Tar River Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Green Mountain Review*, and *American Poetry Review*, as well as other small magazines. At present, she is working on a book and teaching writing to the elderly.

**DR. V. L. TSVETKOV** resides in Orel, Russia. His letter to the *Alabama Literary Review* came through the diligent solicitation of William Sternman in Philadelphia.

**DAVID ULLRICH** is an assistant professor of English at Birmingham-Southern College. His poetry has appeared in *The Madison Review*, *Poem*, *The Wisconsin Academy Review*, and other periodicals. His critical work has appeared in *The Wordsworth Circle*, *Studies in Short Fiction*, and other journals.

**MARY SUE WESTON** published her first story with *Alabama Literary Review* in 1991 (vol. 5, #2). This is her second story with *ALR*. She has also published in *The Florida Review*.

# *Habersham* REVIEW

*A general literary journal with a regional focus, the Habersham Review is published twice a year by Piedmont College.*

EDITORS:	David L. Greene Lisa Hodgens Lumpkin
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The *Habersham Review* contains stories, poems, reviews and essays, primarily (but by no means entirely) with a Southern focus, by both established and beginning writers. Each issue features an unpublished work by a noted Southern writer and an interview with that writer. The first issue (Autumn 1991) featured Terry Kay, author of *To Dance With the White Dog* and other works.

As the editors said, somewhat pretentiously, in the first issue:

*The experiences of the South are a potent part of the American experience, and by attempting to understand the complexity of the South, we hope to approach an understanding of the complexities of humankind.*

Submissions should be sent to the Editors, *Habersham Review*, Piedmont College, Demorest, GA 30535-0010. Subscriptions are \$8.00 for two issues.

This program is supported in part by the Georgia Council for the Arts through the Appropriations from the Georgia General Assembly.







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