

Southwestern American Literature

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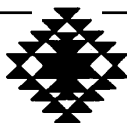
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Editors' Page

The publication of *Blood Meridian* in 1985 marked a radical change in the writing life of Cormac McCarthy and in the literary life of the Southwest. It signaled the beginning of a long, strange trip across Texas, Mexico, and the Southwest by the brilliant, enigmatic writer that Saul Bellow has called the "best unknown writer in America." *Blood Meridian* did not sell well, but readers realized its power, and the response it received set the stage for the public relations storm that McCarthy's publishers planned for the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, which catapulted McCarthy into the public consciousness.

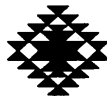


Now that McCarthy has apparently reached the end of this Southwestern journey (his next novel is reportedly set in and offshore of New Orleans), many are looking back at the quartet of border novels and concluding that *Blood Meridian* is the most uncompromising of McCarthy's Southwestern novels. None of the nationally-known literary critics pointing to the significance *Blood Meridian* is more prominent than Harold Bloom, polymath. Bloom's wide-ranging knowledge and reading are clearly apparent in his interview with Peter Josyph, which we are pleased to present in this issue. Josyph and his partner Raymond Todd are currently working on a documentary called *Acting McCarthy* and had asked Bloom to participate.

We follow that interview with a different look at *Blood Meridian* by Dianne Luce, one of the foremost national McCarthy scholars, president of the Cormac McCarthy Society, and the Society bibliographer (www.cormacmccarthy.com). Her careful analysis of the ambiguities and "double-binds" in *Blood Meridian* is highlighted by her comparisons to Herman Melville's *Pierre*, and, like Bloom, she points to the novel's complexity as perhaps its major continuing appeal.

The buzz this fall is all about the election and by the time you hold this issue, that buzz will have disappeared with the returns. Texas will either be positioned for intense scrutiny for the next four years or will return to its normal place as part of the larger body. We turn instead to a different type of buzz with Jeffrey Utzinger's "Swarm Season," a work of creative nonfiction about the adventures of a beekeeper.

Also in this issue are stories by Andrew Geyer and Joe Jaurequi, as well as poetry by René Saldaña, Javen Ronald Tanner, Lynn D. Gilbert, and Chris Patrick Morgan, and our usual array of reviews, all designed to lessen the withdrawal pains that political junkies feel at the end of a vigorous election.



Mark Busby
Dick Heaberlin

Nonfiction

Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation With Harold Bloom about Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Peter Josyph

During the making of the documentary *Acting McCarthy*, my partner Raymond Todd and I asked Harold Bloom to speak with us on camera about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, which Bloom had placed on his Western canon along with McCarthy's *Child of God* and *Suttree*. He also discusses it in the chapter on *Othello* in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. When he agreed to the interview, he said of the novel: "I yield to no one in my admiration for *Blood Meridian*. I think there is no greater work by a living American."

On the day of our conversation, which took place in Bloom's home in New Haven, Connecticut, on February 6, 2000, I brought Bloom a copy of John Sepich's sourcebook *Notes On Blood Meridian*. I also showed him Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession* in the deluxe edition, published by the Texas State Historical Association, containing color reproductions from the pages of Chamberlain's memoir, including paintings of Judge Holden. Bloom was so delighted with this book that I advised him to keep it. In return, he signed and gave me a bound proof of his then unpublished *How to Read and Why*, in which an entire chapter is devoted to *Blood Meridian*.

The most remarkable characteristic of the interview for me cannot be conveyed on the printed page. This is the quality of thoughtfulness personified. It was audible in his speech, visible in his manner, which enacted the Zen saying: "Stand still, dance inside." Conditions were far from ideal—we had never met before, floodlights were shining into his eyes, he was coming down with a cold, it was late in the day with not much time to spare (dinner partners were waiting for him)—but Bloom was so wholly absorbed in thinking about the novel that it became, in a sense, the ground on which we met, and he made me feel at home there. I never had the impression of being instructed by a man who had worked out all the answers. For Bloom, the issues of the novel remained open, and I felt as if we were probing them together. Throughout, his beautiful Falstaffian face shone with a rare light that was not the result of video equipment.

JOSYPH: I understand that your first attempt at reading *Blood Meridian* was not entirely successful.

BLOOM: As I say in that little book that I just gave you, I was first given *Blood Meridian* many years ago by Gordon Lish, who is quite mad. Gordon loved it, simply because he loves anything that shows how violent America really is. I read about half of it and although I was very

impressed, I couldn't go on because I started to have nightmares. I began it a second time, and *again* I didn't get through it because I started to dread the slaughter too much. But then the third time it all came together. Since then I must have read the book scores of times, and of course I've taught it many times now. But I find my students and some of my friends have much the same reaction. There's a lot of initial resistance, until suddenly it meshes. You see what you might call the aesthetic justification, the rationale, for all that horror. After all, it is, technically speaking, what you might call the only successful holocaust novel. The holocaust is of the Native Americans of the Southwest, but it is certainly a holocaust. When I wrote the section on *Blood Meridian* in *How to Read and Why*, we were learning the full horrors of what the Serb paramilitaries were doing to the Kosovans, and I couldn't help comparing the two. It's hard to take.

Didn't you have that reaction the first time around?

JOSYPH: I was inebriated by the language.

BLOOM: Well, the language intoxicates me also, but the language provides problems. Even though he gets away with it, there is something beautifully precarious about it. The Faulknerian element in the rhetoric, the Melvillean element, and the Shakespearean element are always there, and he decides to handle it by just bringing it forwards rather than concealing it. Quite frequently it works remarkably well.

Remember in *Moby Dick*, where Ishmael and Queequeg have signed on to the *Pequod*, and Elijah, the prophet, accosts them and warns them not to sail on that ship? In the same way, before the initial expedition in *Blood Meridian*, the one headed by Worth, which comes to disaster, the Kid¹ and a companion are warned by a crazy old Mennonite. And the parallelism is almost precise, down to some deliberate verbal echoes. It's McCarthy's own defiance of his indebtedness. And he makes it work.

JOSYPH: In thinking about *All the Pretty Horses*, I asked how McCarthy could get away with sounding so much like Hemingway. The answer was: because he *is*, in a sense, Hemingway.

BLOOM: Yes, yes, there is that element. *All the Pretty Horses* is certainly his second best book. I regret that the other two books in that series, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, seem to me interesting failures, but failures.

JOSYPH: I was saddened by *Cities of the Plain*. Same character doing much the same things, making much the same mistakes, but McCarthy just didn't have the energy; he had nowhere to go.

BLOOM: Well, he really burned it out in *The Crossing*, and yet something in him wanted the trilogy.

JOSYPH: Where had you been in your reading of McCarthy when you encountered *Blood Meridian*?

BLOOM: I had read *Suttree* and admired it a lot, though it's *very*

Faulknerian. I had read *Child of God* and thought it was pretty good also. I hadn't read *The Orchard Keeper* or some of the others, and I had shied away from *Blood Meridian*. Even before my two attempted readings, I think I tried the first five or six pages and said: "No, no—I'm not up to this!"

JOSYPH: Even among McCarthy scholars, *Blood Meridian* has an almost legendary status. You can sense this whenever it's introduced into a paper or conversation, as if it were more than merely a novel.

BLOOM: Well it *is* more than a novel. It's an attempt, like *Moby Dick*, like Whitman's *Song of Myself*, like *Huckleberry Finn*, at being the ultimate American saga. And maybe it is. *Blood Meridian* is not only the ultimate American Western. Together with some things of Pynchon's—*Mason & Dixon* is an awfully good book—I was very heartened by it—I had been discouraged, because Pynchon had been so marvelous, particularly in *The Crying of Lot 49* and the best parts of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and then came that awful thing...that I even repress the title of...

JOSYPH: *Vineland*.

BLOOM: Yes—I couldn't stand it; I couldn't believe it was by *him*! I even publicly said I didn't think he wrote a sentence of it. You know, some friend of his did it as a contract-breaker or something. What is it? It's pseudo-Kerouac, and Kerouac is pseudo enough by himself, so you don't need an imitation. But *Blood Meridian* is not only the ultimate Western. Even more than Pynchon, or any of the poets who are still alive, like Ashbery...if I had to speak of one work of imaginative literature by a living American, I would have to call it *Blood Meridian*. Once you have done that, you're in trouble. What do you do to match it? None of the other books by him is at all like it.

JOSYPH: What is it about *Blood Meridian* that's so extraordinary? You said to me over the phone: "It has no weaknesses, only strengths," implying that it succeeds at what it's about. What *is* it trying to do?

BLOOM: What it does, whenever the tension even begins to fall off, is to very skillfully take you away from the center, which is the relentless drive of Glanton and the Judge. The Kid cannot be called the center; his consciousness is too intimate; he fades out too often, quite deliberately. But McCarthy finds ways, much subtler than they seem at first, of giving you side stories. Like Brown going to have his gun fixed, or the whole extraordinary interlude of the breakup of the Yuma ferry and everything connected with it. There is a surge of narrative propulsiveness and power in the book, and an astonishing charge of language, which, finally, in spite of its clear Faulknerian and Melvillean affinities and sources, goes back beyond Faulkner and Melville to *their* source—particularly Melville's—in Shakespeare. Which is why I think Iago shows up so powerfully in the Judge, and I found, in writing a book about Shakespeare [*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*] and writing about *Othello*, that

I couldn't really talk about Iago without bringing up the Judge. Not that the Judge is a Machiavel—far from it—but that the Judge is a pyromaniac who wants to set the whole world on fire with warfare and blood.

JOSYPH: And he is, in a sense, immortal, isn't he? It certainly ends that way.

BLOOM: It ends that way. And yet, unless I misread, in that strange, italicized epilogue, there is that man who is traversing the plain, and he's holding a two-handed instrument. I didn't say so in *How to Read*—I was writing, I hoped, for very common readers indeed and I didn't want to overburden them with associations and allusions—but McCarthy, who is profoundly allusive and very erudite, undoubtedly has in mind that great moment in Milton's *Lycidas* when you are told that the corrupt clergy and the whole corruption of England will be cleansed by "that two-handed engine at the door"² (105). That two-handed engine, that implement, is being wielded by a figure striking fire that is imprisoned in the stone, which is clearly a Promethean motif. The Judge is off in the meridian sunset. That figure is at dawn. Clearly there is an opposition. There is, I think, a hint—a hint, but a real one—I don't know otherwise how to interpret it—that a kind of new Prometheus or Promethean figure is rising up at the dawn who will move west and perhaps challenge the Judge, although we do not actually know that. That would be the only thing that might keep the Judge from being immortal.

Certainly the Judge is immortal in the normal sense of age. The Kid—who *was* just a kid, a teenager, when he joined the Glanton gang—is at least forty-five when he is murdered by the Judge. What ages the Judge? Nearly thirty years have gone by and the Kid is now in full middle age. The Judge would have to be seventy-five or eighty years old, but he looks exactly the way he always looked, and clearly he has the power and endurance that he's always had, that terrifying strength. There's that *horrible* implication, which is very hard to evade and has got to be taken as deeply hinted, that the Judge, who opens those great arms to embrace the Kid, violates him and then smothers him in the muck. That is the way the murder is done, a ghastly moment in its implications. But since the Kid is pretty tough himself, it would take preternatural strength—really, inhuman strength—to accomplish that.

JOSYPH: What is it that he wants from the Kid, and does he get it?

BLOOM: This is an *ex post facto* explanation on his part, but he *says* that he's looking for a son. His relationship with the Indian seems to parody the relationship that he wanted with the Kid. But the Kid, from the start, evades him. The Kid is, of course, remarkably disengaged from his own father at the beginning of the book and seems to have a sure sense that he wants to stay as far away from the Judge as possible. I suppose the Judge wants discipleship, with everything that might be involved in that.

There is a very powerful but, in the end, I think misleading interpre-

tation of *Blood Meridian* by a very fine fellow named Leo Daugherty (“Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* As Gnostic Tragedy,” *Southern Quarterly*, 30, Summer 1992), that the whole thing is to be read in terms of Gnosticism, with the Judge as one of the archons, one of the evil demiurges ruling this world. In a very great passage, which may be a dream vision, when the Kid is in jail, McCarthy warns you not to use *any* system, including the Orphic system, for interpreting the Judge. Don’t try to reduce the Judge to his origins. Don’t try to make this a Gnostic fable. Don’t try to see the Judge as the hierophant or the priest or even the demiurge of some heterodox vision. I think he’s right. I think it would lessen the imaginative force of the book if you could so reduce the Judge. The Judge has no ideology except blood, violence, war for it’s own sake. And that is what makes him so astonishing a figure, so frightening and foreboding.

I think of the Judge all the time, you know, when I read about some Aryan Nation gang armed to the teeth out of the Dakotas or Montana, or the blowing up of a Federal building, or some nuts, fully armed, breaking into a school and opening fire. The United States has two special characteristics, I think, from 1800 to 2000, two full centuries now. It is both gun-crazy and God-crazy. The American religion is all mixed up with guns. In that sense the Judge can be called the high priest of one version of American religion.

JOSYPH: He’s an awfully good justifier, isn’t he?

BLOOM: He is an astonishing rhetorician, the ablest in all of American literature. You would have to go to Shakespeare, to someone like Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, to find someone who is a better sophist than the Judge. Or you have to go to Iago. It’s that astonishing a gift. And there *is* something Shakespearean, at times, about the Judge. Some of my friends, some of my students, resent that in the Judge. They feel that he is *too* wordy. But of course McCarthy very subtly accommodates that by having the expriest, or Toadvine, or other characters like Brown, simply say: “Holden, you’re crazy,” or: “Why do you go on like this?”

JOSYPH: Or they spit.

BLOOM: They spit. And yet they are spellbound. They go on listening to him, as I think any sensitive, alert reader is mesmerized also.

After all, what are the great things in the book? The landscape, which is more astonishing, perhaps, than the landscape in anything *except* Shakespeare. It’s a controlled landscape which goes beyond, say, what you’d find in the high Romantic poets, it’s that astonishingly done. Better than Faulkner. Maybe not better than Darl Bundren’s visions of the landscape in *As I Lay Dying*—and it is somewhat indebted, I think, to Darl Bundren’s visions—but that much landscape, and that astonishingly beautiful, as well as menacing. There is that and the Judge’s rhetoric. And the whole sort of sublime, mad trajectory of the book. And, finally, that

great dialogue in the bar, if you can call it a dialogue, because the Judge is doing almost all the talking. But what the Kid has to say, even though it's laconic, is *immensely* forceful, down to the final: "You aint nothin," and the Judge says: "You speak truer than you know" (331).

JOSYPH: You mentioned earlier that the Kid disappears from the narrative intentionally. There's almost a kind of slight-of-hand in the book.

BLOOM: Yes.

JOSYPH: Here's a boy who's part of a gang in which, as with *any* gang, if you don't participate the way *they* do—

BLOOM: You don't last.

JOSYPH: You don't last.

BLOOM: You don't last.

JOSYPH: By implication, he's guilty.

BLOOM: Oh, he *is* guilty. On the other hand, how subtle McCarthy is about that. I cannot recall any place in the book where the Kid actually slaughters anyone. He always fires, as it were, in self-defense, or simultaneously with someone else firing or making a menacing movement with a knife. I think he is dropped out because McCarthy doesn't want to show you what is developing in him. But he finally does show it when the Kid desperately tries to come to the aid of the Indian woman who is already dead. Very striking moment in the book, which indicates that an enormous change has taken place.

JOSYPH: Let me give you a counter-example. In *Lonesome Dove*—

BLOOM: This is, after all—let's face it—to compare a minor Western with the greatest instance of a Western that could be imagined, but go on.

JOSYPH: The two ex-Texas rangers have discovered that a third pal of theirs, from the old days of rangering together, is riding with real killers.

BLOOM: Sure, sure.

JOSYPH: They've stolen horses and done a *Blood Meridian* deed of burning some farmers—

BLOOM: Yes, okay.

JOSYPH:—and so the two friends track him down and string the guy up. Just before they do it, they say: "Ride with an outlaw, die with him" (572). It seems as if at some point in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy really wants you to be *softer* than *Lonesome Dove*: he needs you to *forgive* the Kid for what he's done. Otherwise, he's got nobody to go up against the Judge.

BLOOM: He does have, I repeat, that mysterious figure at the end, who evidently is being prepared to go up against the Judge. But it's quite true. Although the expriest is willing to argue with the Judge, there is only the Kid.

Of course the Kid is handled strangely. He is hardly allowed a

personality at all. He finally shows, in his laconic way, considerable moral force and courage in the last confrontation with the Judge in the bar, and we can begin to intuit that a personality has been developing there. But McCarthy does not want us to identify with him. And while it's always a terrible shock to realize how badly he dies, one is, in a sense, insulated from that. It's not as though we feel Huck Finn has been raped. We don't love the Kid. We don't really empathize with the Kid. I think we admire him, finally, but only toward the close. And of course we have the mystery—which is not fully explained by McCarthy and which is worth a lot of cogitation—I'm not sure one will ever solve it—the mystery of what it is, finally, that the Kid means to the Judge. He clearly means more to the Judge than he does to the reader. But the Judge is not able to fully articulate it, though he does say to the Kid: "Was it always your idea that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?" (328) Which implies that the Judge *has* recognized him as someone who matters, someone who is implicit, although we do not know what the burden of that implicitness is.

JOSYPH: There's that line in the film *Hud*, where Hud says to the girl who he's failed to seduce and who he's even failed to force: "I'll remember you, honey—you're the one that got away." I get the sense, not so much that the Kid is resisting the Judge's approach to the world, but that the Judge is saying: "You're the same as I am but you don't want to acknowledge it; you want to *pretend* to be different."

BLOOM: Maybe, maybe, but it's fascinating that we're both omitting what probably is most unforgivable in the Kid as far as the Judge is concerned. The Kid has an excellent chance to find out whether the Judge is mortal. The Judge passes three times, I believe, in front of the Kid, buck naked and unarmed. The Kid is an excellent shot. The Kid presumably could have dispatched him and would ultimately have saved his own life had he done so. He's been urged by his sidekick to do it. *He will not do it.*

Now, why he will not do it we have to surmise, and again surmise is almost endless. I think it ranges from scruple at killing a naked, unarmed man, all the way to a kind of spiritual fear that maybe you can pump bullets into the Judge and it won't touch him at all, he is so uncanny. But we don't know that. This is mere surmise on my part or any reader's. I think the Judge bears out what you're saying, but I think he transcends it. It is, as it were, a demoniac form of a temptation of Christ. Not that Christ is involved in any way in this book. But the Judge does pass back and forth, offering a temptation to the Kid, and he cannot forgive the Kid for not having taken it up.

JOSYPH: It's almost as if, by not shooting him, the Kid has disproved him. The Kid knew that if he shot the Judge, the Judge would then be right, because the Judge is saying: "That's what we all are; that's what we're made of."

BLOOM: I can grant that and not argue with it, but it's larger than that, I think. There are transcendental elements in it also. The great thing about the book is that, even though McCarthy deliberately cuts off any traditional explanations of a negative transcendence, such as a Gnostic explanation or a Manichean explanation or an Orphic explanation, still, the intimations reverberate; still, there is the extraordinary sense that the Judge is not just preternatural. There is something Homeric about the book after all. There is also something which reminds one of *Jason and the Argonauts*, though in a terrifying, negative sense.

It is an old tradition in Homeric romance, or Hellenistic romance following Homer, that these mortal questers will have a concealed god in their midst, a Hercules figure, someone who is at least half mortal, half immortal. That these heroes in *Blood Meridian* are thugs, bestial murderers, doesn't make them different from epic heroes throughout history. As Shakespeare demonstrates so well in *Troilus and Cressida*, the heroes among both the Achaeans and the Trojans are commonplace criminals. But to introduce a divinity among them is an old stroke.

McCarthy's originality is, I think, more a question of temperament, even, than it is of material. Though I haven't yet read the original text of the Chamberlain—I will now, now that you've been kind enough to give it to me—I have read accounts of it. It is very Shakespearean on McCarthy's part to have taken his plot from a source. Shakespeare had every possible literary gift except one: he couldn't make up a plot. In the two plays for which he has no sources whatsoever—*The Tempest* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—nothing happens. They are plotless, as it were. Shakespeare had no interest in making up plots. I suspect that in all of McCarthy's novels except *Blood Meridian*, what most gets in the way is the plot. Even in *Suttree* or *All the Pretty Horses*, one feels that not enough happens, that too much is somehow contrived. One doesn't feel that in *Blood Meridian*, but that's because history has given him the main line of his narrative and has, indeed, given him his characters. Only the Kid is really his invention, and he doesn't allow the Kid to be a full-scale invention, though his elaboration of Holden is so baroque, so extraordinary, that it transcends any possible source.

JOSYPH: In Chamberlain there isn't much of Holden. You'll also see that he is really a very mediocre writer.

BLOOM: He wasn't a mediocre person, though. He led a rather extraordinary life.

JOSYPH: I want to ask you about the relation between the novel and the history of the West in this country. You mentioned the epilogue, which has always bothered me. It's been interpreted as a process of digging holes, of setting dynamite to build a fence: the closing in of the West.

BLOOM: No, no, no, that's a very bad interpretation. That two-

handed implement is, as I say, doing one thing and one thing only: it is striking fire which has been put into the rock, clearly a Promethean motif, and he is clearly contrasted with creatures who are either goulish human beings, if they *are* human beings, or already are, in fact, shades, looking for bones for whatever nourishment that might bring about. The contrast between striking fire and looking for bones is extraordinary. And I cannot see that as any kind of allegory of anything that has happened to the American West.

Allegory is always a mode of irony. They are really two words for the same thing. Any great literary work has a certain intensity of irony in it, but the mode of irony in *Blood Meridian* is almost purely rhetorical. The irony is always a question of the deliberate disproportion between the extraordinary language and the carnage.

JOSYPH: I don't see *Blood Meridian* as being about any West that ever existed in the American past.

BLOOM: Oh, no no, no no no no—

JOSYPH: It has as much to do with the West as *Apocalypse Now* has to do with Vietnam. It's a vision—

BLOOM: It transcends. Whatever the Holocaust that was visited on the Native Americans—and it was horrible, the decimation not just of a people but *several* peoples—one rather doubts that the particular nightmares that are being rendered so vividly by McCarthy are anything but his own nightmares. It is a very individualized mode of perceiving carnage. It depends upon grotesquerie. It depends upon distancing. In order for the reader to stand it, it has to be stylized to the most extraordinary degree. The entire book is a stylization.

I'll be very interested in looking at that book on the sources (*Notes On Blood Meridian*), but already, sight unseen, it reminds me of the *endless* collection of books—encyclopedias—on the sources of Shakespeare's plays, which are *terribly* self-defeating documents from any civilized, humane, literary point of view. You read these *amazing* accounts of sources, and you finally say: "This has to stop." Because the sources, say, of *King Lear*, or *Hamlet*, or *Othello*, are almost infinite. They never stop. You *can't* stop them. Shakespeare had the mind of a cormorant.

JOSYPH: Someone went so far as to tell me: "I found the source of the bear in *Blood Meridian*! I found it in Hawthorne!" I said: "Are you forgetting McCarthy's a *writer*? That's what writers do—they *imagine* things. Can't there be *another* bear?" They need, somehow, to diminish imagination, to reduce it to something else. Why are people so uncomfortable with admitting—

BLOOM: The sublime. Shelley, who is a very wise literary critic in his way, defined the literary sublime as that which persuades the reader to give up easier pleasures in order to absorb more difficult pleasures. That is what *Blood Meridian* does. Like *Moby Dick*, or *As I Lay Dying*, it's

a work of transcendental and very difficult pleasures indeed. And it *tries* to make them as difficult as possible. The difficulty of the book is not just the carnage; it's not just the baroque language. The difficulty is the total conception of the book. It finally conceives of itself mystically.

For me, in some ways, the most important passage in it is not actually written by McCarthy, it's the great epigraph by Jacob Boehme, a passage from *Six Theosophic Points* that I can see he's altered slightly but decisively.³ I know Boehme very well. As an old Blakean I would have to know Boehme very well. I find him a fascinating writer anyway. But the attribution of what Boehme calls the *Ungrund*, a kind of negativity which is the basis of all our existence, that darkness which is the necessary companion to the light, is simultaneously affirmed and yet dialectically denied by Boehme. And that is very much the transcendental scheme, as it were, of *Blood Meridian*. To affirm the darkness, to affirm the horror, but ultimately to transcend it and to suggest that, even though we are alienated from it and cannot get to it, there is the final parable of man striking fire from the rock and whatever that intimates. The aesthetic achievement of the book is to bring about a negative transcendence, and that is quite Shakespearean.

It's not individual tragedy as it would be in Shakespeare. McCarthy is not of *that* eminence. I don't think he could realize an individual tragedy like Hamlet's, or Macbeth's, or Lear's, or even Iago's. And Holden is in no way a tragic figure. But the book, somehow, achieves a kind of tragic ecstasy. Very difficult to describe except in purely aesthetic terms.

JOSYPH: That quotation from Boehme helps to answer the question: "Why is the novel so enjoyable?" If you are *of* the darkness, everything is reversed, so there's a tremendous exuberance in the book.

BLOOM: Exuberance is clearly a key word there. There is a terrifying method of exuberance to the book. Finally, I suppose, it has to be regarded as some mode of mysticism, as Boehme is a mode of mysticism.

JOSYPH: You mentioned Blake. Blake said that Milton wrote best about the Devil.

BLOOM: Yes. Shelley also said, magnificently: "Satan owes everything to Milton." And Judge Holden owes everything to Cormac McCarthy. Not that Holden is a Satan. That's too simple, too reductive.

JOSYPH: I want to read you a passage from Simone Weil.

BLOOM: I have mixed feelings about her, but go on.

JOSYPH: She wrote this in 1940 about the *Iliad* in a pamphlet—

BLOOM: Yes, *The Poem of Force*. It's a remarkable essay. She has the insight that Achilles more than kills, he murders precisely as an attempt to eradicate death, almost as though he would destroy death by inflicting so much of it. It's a very strange piece of work.

JOSYPH: Let me ask you if you hear anything about *Blood Meridian*

in these few sentences. "Since other people do not impose on their movement that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they can conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. And at this point they exceed the measure of force that is at their disposal."

BLOOM: Yes.

JOSYPH: "And now we see them committed irretrievably to chance."

BLOOM: Yes.

JOSYPH: "Suddenly things cease to obey them. Sometimes chance is kind to them, sometimes cruel. But in any case there they are, exposed, open to misfortune" (14, 15).

BLOOM: What that could be applied to is, I think, the greatest single moment in the novel, perhaps transcending even the encounter between the Judge and the Kid at the end. It's that marvelous moment when they come riding into the Mexican town that first sent them out, and they've gone mad already and they're bringing with them the scalps of Mexican villagers. When they ride out, within a couple of days there's a price on Glanton's head and so on. But as they set themselves toward the west, their horses are described as "tragic mounts," and they themselves are described as "infatuate and half fond," *fond* in the Elizabethan sense of mad (185). The meridian is invoked quite explicitly, and you get a great phrase about "the distant pandemonium of the sun" toward which they are moving (185). That moment is very close to the moment that you've just quoted from Simone Weil. Interestingly enough, she herself goes on to say that although it holds for the others in the *Iliad*, it doesn't hold for Achilles. For him it is never chance. For him it is design. And I suppose I would not put it beyond the ironic powers in this astonishing book that the Judge throws a terrible light back upon Achilles, although the Judge, is of course, a negative theologian of violence.

I guess he is a prophet, really, whether one likes the phrase or not. And it transcends the American West. I think of that great subtitle: *or The Evening Redness in the West*, which means the sunset, but it doesn't just mean the Western United States, it is also a kind of elegiac look at Western consciousness, as the other epigraph, from Paul Valéry, enacts when he's talking about the self-destruction of European consciousness, the decline of the West, although he doesn't use exactly that phrase. Of course it is most deeply true. Even though we live in a relatively protected environment, for which *something* be thanked, we cannot pick up *The New York Times* without reading about the latest Hutu-Tutsi massacres, or the Serbs on another berserk lunge, or something ghastly happening in Afghanistan, or the horror that the Russians are slaughtering man, woman, and child. No one is going to prove Judge Holden wrong. The entire chain of human history from the beginning to now is

a confirmation of the Judge.

JOSYPH: I get the same feeling from you that I got from my professor of Blake, Professor Leonard Dean. Although Dean had taught him for years, Blake was still troubling him: it hadn't resolved. When I spoke to him years later, he was in the same condition; Blake was still completely alive for him, still disturbing him.

BLOOM: I will probably teach *Blood Meridian* another half dozen times or so. In the rest of my career I don't think I will come to the end of it. I would like one conversation with McCarthy, though I am sure he will always keep a good distance away from me. One would want something to help solve the mystery of why this astonishment was possible for him only that once. He is a great puzzle, I think, aesthetically, because *Suttree* was a marvelous book, though so close, at times, to *Absalom, Absalom* as to be almost embarrassing. It is true that there is a whole series of major American novelists who have only the one great book. There are very few who have more, like Henry James, or Faulkner, who had one great phase which lasted ten years, during which the five really top books were written. James is able to go on for thirty-five years and there are masterpieces at every point.

JOSYPH: But you would rank *Blood Meridian* very high?

BLOOM: I repeat: we have remarkable living American writers of narrative fiction. I've mentioned Pynchon. Philip Roth is a close personal friend, but aside from that, in the last ten years he has written eight astonishing books, the very best of them, *Sabbath's Theatre* and *American Pastoral*, almost unmatchable. And there is Don DeLillo's one great book, *Underworld*. As marvelous as those three are—Pynchon, DeLillo, Roth—they don't match *Blood Meridian*. I keep trying to get Philip Roth to read *Blood Meridian*. He won't do it. He takes a glance at it and says it's not for him.

Remember, I'm talking about *living* figures. William Faulkner is dead. If I had to vote for *one* work of prose fiction by an American in this entire century that just ended, it would have to be *As I Lay Dying*. In this course called How to Read and Why, which I probably won't teach any more now that the book is coming out, I have always taught *Blood Meridian* at the end of a sequence that starts with *As I Lay Dying*, goes on to Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, then to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and culminates with *Blood Meridian*. Not that they are in any way equivalent, but because of the negativity that is involved in the four works, the essential darkness of the vision. There was a time I would have thrown in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. In one of her letters, O'Connor says that the two American novels in her century that she most cares for are *As I Lay Dying* and *Miss Lonelyhearts*. I suspect that had she lived to read *Blood Meridian* she would have been very impressed indeed.

JOSYPH: What would Shakespeare have said about *Blood Meridian*?

BLOOM: (*Laughing*) He might say: "I wrote that in *Titus Andronicus*." He'd be wrong. But no, I think he'd be too shrewd to say that.

It's not like any particular Shakespearean work. The book has its landscape. The book has its language. The book has its aestheticized violence. What the book primarily has is the Judge. One cannot get away from the Judge. The difference between this book and everything else by McCarthy, or everything else by anybody still alive in the United States, is the Judge. It's the Judge who, finally, can't be absorbed. You can understand absolutely everything he says. You can memorize everything he says, as I practically *have* by now. But his ability to frighten you, to shock you, to turn you inside out and to simultaneously fascinate you and horrify you, never ceases. In that sense, he is the real bedrock of McCarthy's genius. How he was possible for McCarthy I don't know.

JOSYPH: Is *Blood Meridian* filmable?

BLOOM: I am sure that if Mr. Tommy Lee Jones wants to, he will make a film of it.⁴ I wish he wouldn't. I certainly won't go to see it. Do you remember John Huston—who was, after all, a terrific film director—do you remember his ghastly *Moby Dick*? It was bad enough that he had the impossible Gregory Peck as Ahab, which was terrible miscasting, but he had a beautifully sensitive Ishmael in Richard Basehart, and he had an amazing Father Mapple in Orson Welles, and he had a very good Queequeg, whoever that actor was—⁵

JOSYPH: Welles, by the way, was terrified of delivering that speech—afraid he'd forget it, or he wouldn't do it well—but then he did it in one take.

BLOOM: He does it very beautifully, with an extraordinary Shakespearean music. But then, it's a very Shakespearean speech. But think of the disaster of that film!

Besides, there is the other problem. You can see a lot of stylized violence in different Hollywood epics, but if you really tried to convey the precise quality that McCarthy is getting through to you, I don't think spectators could take it. I think you'd start having defensive laughter. It's beyond one's capacity to absorb visually.

JOSYPH: That Comanche raid—you need to imagine it, not see it.

BLOOM: Yes, that's of course one of the most astonishing things in the book. The *amazing* historical anthology of garments they are wearing and the weapons they are using. They're out of Blake, really. They are a visionary procession. They can't be regarded naturalistically.

There is the heart of it. Here is a book in which everything that counts most is, in a sense, preternatural. Even if you could bring Sam Peckinpah back from the dead and make him permanently drunk, you wouldn't have a director who could manage it.

NOTES

- ¹ In using initial caps for the Kid and the Judge, I have followed Bloom's practice in *How to Read and Why*. In the novel they appear in lower case.
- ² Concerning the line "But that two-handed engine at the door / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more," Roy Flannagan, editor of *The Riverside Milton*, says: "No scholar has been able to determine exactly what the 'two-handed engine' is. The image has become perhaps the most famous crux in English literature. The best-informed guesses are that the engine may be some sort of weapon, such as the 'huge two-handed sway' of Michael's sword in *Paradise Lost*" (105).
- ³ As it appears in *Blood Meridian*, the quotation from Jacob Boehme is: "It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness."
- ⁴ At the time of the interview, actor-director Tommy Lee Jones, a great admirer of McCarthy's work, was in the preproduction stages of filming the novel.
- ⁵ In the film *Moby Dick*, Queequeg was played by Count Friedrich Ledebur, an Austrian aristocrat, who was a friend of the director, John Huston.

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Ambiguities, Dilemmas, and Double-Binds in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Dianne Luce

"The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252) announces *Blood Meridian's* Judge Holden, the "hoodwinker" (252), "ponderous djinn" (96) and controlling genius of the novel's purgatorial terrain—a terrain "whose true geology was...fear" (47). The judge's liar paradox is akin to the kid's own semantic paradox "You aint nothin'" (331), which he unintentionally poses to the judge and which Holden cheerfully affirms. With its assertion of false certainty, the judge's paradox both posits and exposes the encompassing lie of the ambiguous land over which he is suzerain: that there is no ambiguity—in the judge, in the moral nature of man, in the novel itself. The contest between Holden—liar, manipulator, demon—and "the kid," who survives the Glanton gang's wars against Indians and Mexicans and even its massacre at Yuma to become "the man," and who is the novel's everyman and test subject "to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (5), is the locus of McCarthy's extended meditation on the ambiguity of evil as an object of human contemplation and judgment.

That the judge is a liar is plain enough from the kid's first encounter with him. Indeed, it is self-proclaimed. Holden's confrontation with Reverend Green establishes from the outset the judge's abiding nature as false accuser, inciter of violence, and fiddler on man's heartstrings. Minutes after easily undermining the crowd's confidence in the reverend by accusing him of false piety, child-rape, and goat-diddling, accusations that release general violence and turn the revival meeting to murderous riot, the judge greets the veterans of this battle in the saloon, readily acknowledging that he has never seen the reverend before and knows nothing of him. This triumph of the trickster paradoxically evokes laughter from the men who had been self-righteously ready to hang the reverend on suspicion of vice, and soon one of them is treating the judge to a drink (7-8). But this incident is mere finger exercises for the judge and for McCarthy.

Even knowing that the judge is a liar does not prevent the kid from becoming mired (sometimes literally) in his ambiguity; neither does this simple exposition of the judge's nature and methods adequately arm the reader to make sense of Holden's judgments of the kid or the kid's judgments of Holden and himself. Like the kid in so many scenes throughout the novel, we've been warned, but whether we can judge truly of the judge is yet to be tested.

The precise nature of this demon remains ambiguous to the kid, and

his struggle with the ambiguity can be seen as the dominant factor determining his often puzzling actions throughout the novel, and especially his responses to the many double-binds he faces in which he must choose between evils or must choose blind. Most obvious is the dilemma presented by his opportunity to kill Holden in the desert west of Yuma, but his provocation in the bonefields by the violent orphan Elrod, alter ego of his youthful self, is a reciprocal and equally important double-bind that both reverses and paradoxically reconfirms the kid's own fate. The kid's recruitment to Glanton and Holden, his election to rejoin the gang after he is separated from them by Elias' troops, and his daily bondage to the scalp-hunters are other instances.

Perhaps the most apparent ambiguity concerning the judge is that of his flesh. He is of heroic proportions: a huge man who physically dominates all others and awes them with his power. He is particularly adept at hefting, throwing, and bashing. He carries a cannon under one arm as if it were a rifle; tosses a giant meteor farther than even Glanton believes he will; flings the broken bodies of his child victims over town walls; crushes the head of a horse with a single blow using a large rock for maul; cracks the skull of a man between his bare hands. He inspires fear as any oversized bully does, though the kid repeatedly (and foolishly and falsely) claims not to be afraid of him.

Yet despite his seemingly superhuman invincibility, the judge is also presented as frail, maybe even cowardly. His vast, hairless flesh and babyish, bald dome are more vulnerable to sunburn than those of the baked and literally hidebound men he consorts with, and his skin is striated tender white and pink when the kid encounters him several times in the desert west of Yuma. In his concern for his bald pate, Holden wears ridiculous headgear made of mud and leaves or the retro-fitted hat he has bribed Toadvine to surrender. Bartering and intimidating to gain his needs, Holden seems as desperate for survival as the others walking across the desert to California. And he has so frequently exhibited his nakedness—in the baths in Chihuahua, in his night-time watches on the walls and towers of whatever town or fortress the gang has occupied, in his urinating into the gunpowder matrix and calling on the other men to do likewise in the story the expriest Tobin tells the kid—that it is no wonder the kid asserts to a despairing and terrified Tobin that the judge is “a man like all men” (297). The kid has seen the judge toss the huge meteorite eleven feet, an astonishing deed, but he has also seen him “tottering” and straining to do it (240). He has no doubt noticed that the judge's hands are proportionally smaller than his own and observed the judge's dainty and mincing feet, although there is nothing to indicate that he accepts Tobin's implicitly relating them to the devilish little “hooflets” imprinted into the lava on the malpais (130). Further, the kid has seen enough to suspect that one of the judge's favorite pastimes is to

rape and murder boys and girls—this bully's preference for small-fry in stark contrast with the reckless and overweening violence exhibited by the kid, who will take on much larger and older opponents.¹ Only after the kid's death does the judge, in his dance of celebration, claim invincibility ("He says that he will never die" [335]), suggesting that his appearance of frailty has been a disguise and a ruse, perhaps tailor-made to play upon the kid's irrational confidence in his personal manifest destiny, born of his survival of so many street fights and battles. "They aint nobody done it yet," the kid says when Toadvine announces he'd meant to kill him in their mud-fight (10). With Sproule's death the kid becomes the lone survivor of the Comanche attack on White's company, a battle scene that is a dumbshow of the hounds of hell routing bounty hunters, encapsulating and foreshadowing all of the novel's action. Witnessing this battle inspires for the first time the kid's sense of mortal fear, but his survival also furthers his illusion of leading a charmed life.

Neither does the judge, the "malabarista," appear to use supernatural means or sorcery to achieve his "tricks." He saves Glanton's gang from Indians by using naturally occurring materials to concoct the gunpowder they need.² Though the Tarot reading gives the men the fidgets, and the narrator implies the judge is in control, to the men it appears that he is simply an attentive member of the audience. His coin tricks are the stock of illusionists. These means counter the mystery of his sudden appearance out of nowhere at the time of Glanton's most desperate need, his reputation for ubiquity, the more than natural felicity of his "gifts." Although the narrator gives us clues into the infernal nature of the judge ("He is a draftsman as he is other things, well sufficient to the task....[He] seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation" [140]), the expriest Tobin alone among the characters voices any suspicion that the judge may be a "sootysouled rascal" (124), a "bloody dark pastryman" (132) with a "terrible covenant" with Glanton (126). But he voices it to the kid.

Holden's lying about Reverend Green and later recanting is merely first among the judge's many lies, false accusations, and self-contradictions meant to undermine the men's faith not in him but in their own moral sense. This is illustrated again in his disquisition on geology. When the men tentatively challenge his "ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings," he confounds them by agreeing that "God dont lie" (he always begins by agreeing with his victims), then arguing that God speaks not in scripture but in "stones and trees, the bones of things...until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools" (116). His blatant manipulation of the men and then ridiculing their belief should alert them to resist his rhetorical bullying, but they are as dazzled by the intellectual displays as by the physical ones and, except for Tobin, little

armed by education or temperament to meet him on these grounds.

The judge's other self-contradictions, those he does not himself immediately expose, are several and significant. For instance, the judge explains his scientific interest in the objects he encounters on his travels by asserting that whatever exists without his knowledge exists without his consent, and he would be "suzerain" over all (198). We may feel we can credit this bit of self-revelation; but the premise that things exist without his knowledge is one he implicitly contradicts when he tells Tobin, who looks for the hand of a cynical god bringing the gang's path to cross those of the murdered argonauts, that perception takes priority over existence: the "proximity [of the witness] was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?" (153). The judge's saving the life of the idiot James Robert and making a pet of him flies in the face of his criticism that humans, unlike wolves, do not cull themselves but rather give succor to the weak (146). At the well west of Yuma, the judge warns Tobin to weigh his counsel, smiling affably and agreeing when Tobin denies his influence over the kid, and asserts: "The lad is a free agent" (284). But in the confrontation at the creek soon after, Holden tries to manipulate the kid into surrendering his pistol by pretending that the kid is not fully a free agent: "I know what you've done. The priest put you up to it and I'll take that as a mitigation in the act and the intent" (292). And earlier while performing his coin tricks, he has hinted that he himself ultimately controls the movement of the men: "The arc of circling bodies is determined by the length of their tether, said the judge. Moons, coins, men" (245-46). In Fort Griffin, where the judge taunts the kid to explain why he has returned to him, the kid defensively replies: "Everbody dont have to have a reason to be someplace," and the judge counters: "[O]rder is not set aside because of their indifference" (328). He has earlier suggested that man's fate is within his own control if he will discern this order: "[T]hat man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate" (199). Yet he soon undermines men's notions of order altogether: "[T]he order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way" (245).

These contradictions go unnoticed or at least unchallenged by any of the men but ought to alert the reader that nothing this confidence man says can be taken uncritically to define either his nature or any consistent philosophical position he may truly hold.³ His underlying purpose may be discerned, however. All Holden's acts and utterances are calculated to cozen any man he does not outright kill. Just as he undertakes to interpret every man's fortune at the Tarot reading, Holden usurps all judgment, confounding or silencing all opposition in his mock dialogues

with the men. He pretends to be Glanton's lieutenant, but in fact Glanton is his truest disciple; and unlike Brown, Webster, Toadvine, Tobin, the kid, and others, Glanton never questions or contests the judge's judgments.

Always the judge plays on the dilemma of human nature as defined in the metaphysics of the western world: man's flesh versus his spirit, his contradictory impulses towards compassion and violence, his predatory nature versus his capacity for moral choice. Holden's tactic is to heighten men's confusion about the contradictions apparently embodied in their nature, posing a false dichotomy of views of human nature that will maneuver them to accept that mankind is degenerate or "simian" and thus undermine their belief in the possibility of ethical exercise of free will. The dilemma of human nature is established several times early in *Blood Meridian* in contexts not explicitly involving the judge. The first is the epigraph from Paul Valéry:

Your ideas are terrifying and your hearts are faint. Your acts of pity and cruelty are absurd, committed with no calm, as if they were irresistible. Finally, you fear blood more and more. Blood and time.

The action of the novel would seem to bear out this description of western man,⁴ and it may apply most directly to the kid, whose alliance to the Glanton gang and to the judge seems irresistible even though he watches the judge with suspicion and loathing, even though he may harbor in his heart "some corner of clemency for the heathen" (299) as the judge accuses, because finally he fears death—"blood and time"—more and more.

The dilemma is set forth again when the old hermit questions the kid about man's fit within the world. When the kid acknowledges that he doesn't think God made the world to his specifications, the old man challenges him:

Aye....But where does a man come by his notions. What world's he seen that he liked better?
I can think of better places and better ways.
Can ye make it be?
No.
No. It's a mystery. (19)

The hermit's paradox, that man can imagine a better world than he finds or than he has power to create, hints of something in human nature that transcends flesh and the limits of his direct knowledge—something like spirit or Platonic ideals. But the hermit continues with the other horn of the dilemma and even weights the argument on that side:

You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when

God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine....And evil that can run itself a thousand years....You believe that?

I dont know.

Believe that. (19)

Though the terms in which his argument is couched are different from the those the judge will use, the hermit's lecture on the meanness inherent in man anticipates the judge's sermons on war and his argument that violence speaks to man's heart. As an old slaver with his trophy, the heart of a slave he admits he has murdered, the hermit himself seems exemplary of his lesson. His slave-hating and his trophy anticipate the Indian-hating and "receipt"-gathering to which the kid will soon be committed as if he does believe as the hermit exhorts; and the mummified heart corresponds with the scapular of mummified ears the kid recovers after the hanging of David Brown and wears until his own death. Coupled with the hermit's hovering over the sleeping kid, who wakes to find him "all but in his bed" (20), these details hint that the hermit may be an avatar or minion of the judge himself (indeed there are ambiguous suggestions that Toadvine and Tobin also function as the judge's agents)—a notion consistent with the general affinity of *Blood Meridian* with Melville's *The Confidence Man*.

On the other hand, the kid's encounter with the hermit, coupled with the many more direct warnings given him by the Mennonite (40), Mexican citizens (49, 103), and outlaws (65), may awaken him to some dim vigilance that accounts for his resistance to the judge and his ability to postpone his death for years after his compact with Glanton. For the hermit has also spoken of the difficulty of self-knowledge and the paradox of self-deception: "A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he dont want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there" (19). While adopting the perhaps false dichotomy of heart and mind, and suggesting the futility or paradoxical unwisdom of pursuing self-knowledge, the hermit nevertheless issues a challenge to the kid which later events hint he at least partially acts upon. Although as a boy of fourteen he is characterized by his "mindless violence" (3), the kid becomes by tiny increments more thoughtful about his violence as his experience with death and suffering grows, and he eventually attempts to break with the judge and atone for his deeds. But whether these attempts prove effective remains ambiguous even at the end of the novel.

Holden's portraiture of human nature is evident in almost every mock sermon and many of his actions, but it is perhaps most transparent to the reader, if not to Glanton's men, in the long parable⁵ of the Allegheny harnessmaker that he tells after Webster refuses to allow the judge to draw his portrait. The tale is also Holden's indirect way of

answering the men's question about the Anasazi Indians whose ruins they camp among:

What kind of indians has these here been, Judge?...

Dead ones I'd say, what about you, Judge?...

Not so dead, said the judge.

Then he told them another story and it was this story. (142)

The story is about images of fathers and how they impact men's images of themselves. The harnessmaker, a scant step away from becoming a highwayman, poses as an Indian to accost the young traveler. This ambiguity of his racial identity and moral nature accords with the men's own moral ambiguity in the eyes of the Mexicans as they pursue their Indian-hating for hire and quickly degenerate from saviors to scourge so that the Mexicans finally feel "Mejor los indios" (171). Like Melville's Indian-hater Colonel John Moredock in *The Confidence Man*, where Indian-hating is ambiguously equated with devil-hating, the gang (and the culture that has hired them as agents) demonizes Indians to justify the hunt; but in murdering and scalping other humans, they become diabolic themselves, eventually preying even on the helpless Mexican citizens they were hired to protect from the Apache.⁶ Thus when the judge relates that the young traveler "recognized the harnessmaker for a white man" and "spoke to him in a way that made the harnessmaker ashamed" (142), McCarthy suggests that the shame is not only racial but moral and that the young man has recognized some better, "white," nature in the old man. (In his references first to Indians and then "niggers," the judge skillfully plays on the racial prejudices of his audience.)

Holden's portrait of the harnessmaker nevertheless initially insists upon the duality and fickleness of human nature: after welcoming the young man into his home and receiving two coins from him, he wheedles for more, prompting the traveler's paraphrase of the golden rule and his warning that until the harnessmaker begins to act upon that precept he will be "a loss to God and man alike" (143). The traveler's sermon against the dark aspect of the man's nature inspires the harnessmaker's son to call out for a place to be made for the "nigger" hearse driver passing in the road, and the whole family seems elevated to new levels of charitable sentiment and self-esteem, although the judge's previous use of race makes it ambiguous whether the son's call to make a place for the "nigger" may not be a call to embrace the dark side of man in opposition to the "white" side.⁷ When the traveler leaves, the old man first offers to guide him through the wilderness but then kills him. The family's variable reactions to the traveler's gold and to his Christian message illustrate man's moral confusion, recalling the novel's epigraph from Valéry.

However, the judge's story increasingly undercuts the notion of man's duality with which it began and suggests that what appears man's nobler nature is sham or mindless sentiment and that his true nature is predatory and competitive. The harnessmaker's son accepts his father's deathbed confession of murder, claiming the right to forgive his sins and doing so. Then he heads west, like each of Glanton's men, to "himself [become] a killer of men" (145), acting out his envy of the traveler (the judge calls it "jealousy"). By confessing that he has murdered the Christ-like traveler, the harnessmaker defines humanity and manhood to his son and may harness his son to that image, creating the same behavior in him. Similarly, by painting a portrait of unregenerate humanity for Webster and the others, the judge's story itself circumvents Webster's refusal to have his likeness drawn. Apparently the judge hopes to "chain" them to this image as he says he had "unwittingly" done to the old Hueco he'd drawn (141). That the men instantly recognize the story Holden tells, even while they disclaim trivial parts of it, suggests he is having some success.

Having planted the image of man as a murderous creature, the judge is not satisfied in his triumph until he also demolishes the competing portrait depicted in the traveler, so he interrupts the clamorous men to add a "rider" to his tale: that the traveler's son, born after his father's death, is "broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way" because he will never live up to the image of his father's perfection. Because "[t]he world which he inherits bears him false witness," the traveler's son, Holden says, is "in a bad way" (145). But by the judge's own account, the murderer's son lives out the evil pattern established by his father. The judge has neatly established an apparent double-bind by transforming the idea of the dual or ambiguous nature of man into a false dichotomy: two images, either one of which is harmful to emulate. Tobin alone focuses on the "moral" of Holden's story and asks for a solution to the dilemma: "It strikes me...that either son is equal in the way of disadvantage. So what is the way of raising a child?" (146). His question gives the judge a final opening to drive home his message that the true witness of man is to his meanness and folly. His reply to Tobin that a child should be raised with wild dogs, confronted with wild lions, and made to run naked through the desert segues into bald assertions that man is degenerate and predacious and that even God has no intention to interfere with his predatory nature. The way out of the double-bind, he claims, is for man to embrace that dark legacy and to give up the image of Christ-like perfection that humiliates him.

Holden prepares for this message when he applies his parable to the image of Anasazi culture preserved in their artifacts. He says the Anasazi are "much revered" (146); thus they are "not so dead." But like the son of the traveler, who is paralyzed before a "frozen god," men who witness

the remnants of Anasazi culture, Holden claims, are shamed by it:

The tools, the art, the building—these things stand in judgement on the latter races....In their crude huts they crouch in darkness and listen to the fear seeping out of the rock. All progressions from a higher order to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage. So. Here are the dead fathers. (146)

So, here is the image of mankind the judge holds up to Glanton's men: one that insists on their destiny to fulfill their degenerate nature and on the futility of their aspirations to a higher cultural or moral order, one that he hopes through his interference will instill fear and nameless rage and will prepare them for his later argument that "[w]ar is god" (249). Ominously, though he has addressed Webster and Tobin, the judge's story may be more particularly aimed at the kid, whose classically educated but alcoholic father has "progressed" from a higher order to a lower and who cannot himself even read.

As early as 1969, McCarthy identified Herman Melville as one of the "gutsy writers" he favored, telling a Knoxville interviewer: "I like Melville particularly" (Jordan 6). Several readers and scholars have briefly compared Glanton or Holden to Ahab, and John Sepich has noted the relation between *Blood Meridian* and *The Confidence Man* (9, 145). But surprisingly, the judge's parable of father-images echoes Melville's *Pierre*, significantly and appropriately subtitled *The Ambiguities*. In Melville's novel, two paintings of Pierre's father become projections of Pierre's alternative views of his father's moral nature, and Pierre's discovery of the earlier, morally ambiguous portrait evokes his own highly ambiguous decision to throw over his engagement to the "angelic" Lucy Tartan in order to live as alleged husband to the dark, mysterious, and captivating Isabel, possibly his half-sister. Pierre sees his decision, at least initially, as resplendently self-sacrificial and noble, an act meant both to right the wrong he guesses his father has done Isabel by not owning her and to spare his mother's feelings by protecting her image of her husband. "Can Truth betray to pain?...[H]ow can hurt come in the path to God?" Pierre asks, articulating the central dilemma of the novel (190). However, the disastrous results of his choice and his glimpses into his own heart intimate that rather than achieving almost superhuman goodness, he has succumbed to a dreadful unacknowledged temptation, in fact repeating his father's legacy of self-indulgent passion. Indeed, the portrait made of his father when he was involved with Isabel's mother may subconsciously release Pierre from the idealized portrait he and his mother have colluded in maintaining, while consciously he still defines his own nature in terms of that picture of moral perfection and duty.⁸ In the end, his inability to come to terms with his

father's moral ambiguity and his own—mysteries beyond his ability to unravel—leads to his mother's death of grief, his cousin's violent death at Pierre's own hands, Lucy's death by emotional shock, and his and Isabel's deaths by suicide.

Particularly resonant with Judge Holden's remarks about dead fathers' impact on their sons is Melville's narrative commentary on the image or "shrine" Pierre keeps in his heart:

In this shrine...stood the perfect marble form of his departed father; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene; Pierre's fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue....Not to God had Pierre ever gone in his heart, unless by ascending the steps of that shrine and so making it the vestibule of his abstractest religion. (83)

Melville adds that the father who dies "after an honorable, pure course of life" and is buried "in the filial breast of a tender-hearted and intellectually appreciative child" is "[b]lessed and glorified in his tomb." Significantly for both novels, Melville avoids mention here of whether the child himself is blessed. However, his reference to the marble shrine "deemed solid and eternal" (83) adumbrates the judge's image of the traveler's son broken before an idol of his father's perfection:

The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father [i.e., the child's immature image of his father's goodness and invulnerability] to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. (145)

As the judge does with the harnessmaker, Melville poses an alternative to the case of the father's too-early death:

[I]f fate preserves the father to a later time, too often the filial obsequies are less profound; the canonization less ethereal. The eye-expanded boy perceives, or vaguely thinks he perceives, slight specks and flaws in the character he once so wholly revered. (83)

Discussing the child's reinterpretation of the parent's life after receiving some new key to his character, Melville warns that the consequence of disillusionment about the parent may be that "all faith in Virtue [has] been murdered, and youth gives itself up to an infidel scorn" (85). Something like this is the response of the harnessmaker's son, who is freed to murder by the knowledge that his father murdered the traveler. Though Melville disclaims that Pierre experiences exactly this, he indicates that when Pierre intuits Isabel is his father's unacknowledged child, "his whole previous moral being was overturned, and...for

him the fair structure of the world must, in some then unknown way, be entirely rebuilt again, from the lowermost corner stone up" (106).

The narrator announces early in *Blood Meridian* that:

[o]nly now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (5-6)

Melville had similarly established an ominous note after introducing his tragic character, alerting his reader that a man's origins may not fully predict his destiny and establishing Pierre as a case in point. Although Pierre's family history is aristocratic and privileged, the very antithesis of the kid's, Melville too impelled his mock-pastoral plot with the notion that Pierre's is a test case for the workings of a man's fate or character:

Now Pierre stands on this noble pedestal; we shall see if he keeps that fine footing; we shall see if Fate hath not just a little bit of a small word or two to say in this world. (17)

The kid is born motherless into the backwoods Tennessee hovel of an alcoholic father, and he departs for terrains wild and barbarous to act out his violence; Pierre is born into a comfortable pastoral manor where he is raised by a doting mother, and he departs for the city to act out his passion for heroic goodness. Melville comments:

In the country then Nature planted our Pierre; because Nature intended a rare and original development in Pierre. Nevermind if hereby she proved ambiguous to him in the end; nevertheless, in the beginning she did bravely....[W]e shall see if that blessing pass from him as did the divine blessing from the Hebrews;...we shall see whether this wee scrap of latinity be very far out of the way—*Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse*.⁹ (19-20)

The affinities between *Pierre* and *Blood Meridian* suggest that as McCarthy built upon the antipathy between Holden and Samuel Chamberlain's semi-autobiographical persona Peloncillo Jack in *My Confession* to portray the judge as a terrible avatar of the Melvillesque "confidence man," he also partly conceived the kid's ambiguous story as a parallel, and in some respects a reversal of Pierre's¹⁰: Pierre seeks nobility and truth but uncovers the disheartening ambiguity of his own heart; the kid apparently seeks little but violence and rough companions but discovers his latent compassion and remorse, however mixed with baser clay.

As Pierre embarks on his self-satisfied if self-sacrificing venture to

save Isabel, Melville notes: "But Pierre, though charged with the fire of all divineness, his containing thing was made of clay" (129). This dualism of clay and fire is echoed in the opening of *Blood Meridian* when the narrator wonders whether man's heart is not "another kind of clay"; and it informs the epilogue, where an unidentified man "*progress[es]...striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there*" (337). The epilogue not only picks up the images of fire and clay (or rock) but also fleshes out Melville's metaphor of the "march of mind," which may have influenced the very genesis of the epilogue's action. Meditating on Pierre's groping toward an understanding of the mystery of his father and Isabel, Melville remarks:

[W]hat is so enthusiastically applauded as the march of mind,—meaning the inroads of Truth into Error—which has ever been regarded by hopeful persons as the one fundamental thing most earnestly to be prayed for as the greatest possible Catholic blessing to the world;—almost every thinking man must have been some time or other struck with the idea, that, in certain respects, a tremendous mistake may be lurking here, since all the world does never gregariously advance to Truth, but only here and there some of its individuals do; and by advancing, leave the rest behind....(196)

Intensifying the spatial imagery of spiritual progress, Melville adds that ill-regulated but advancing minds may "be goaded into turning round in acts of wanton aggression upon sentiments and opinions now forever left in their rear" (197). McCarthy's epilogue expands Melville's metaphor of the "march of mind" and depicts the more seasoned man than either Pierre or the kid, one who advances steadily in "*the verification of a principle*" in contrast to those "*behind him*" who are not seekers after Truth but "*wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search*" and whose mechanical progress is regulated by what appears to be reflectiveness but which "*has no inner reality*" (337). When these misdirected seekers and non-seekers inevitably cross the seeker's track, they are neither moved nor redirected by it, insensible of the fire he has struck out of the rock.¹¹

Pointing his moral after telling the story of the harnessmaker, the judge declares that man's "spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day" (146-47); again Holden confounds the men's notions of human progress and negates the human potential for enlightenment. And McCarthy's title *Blood Meridian* might seem to support the judge's contention. But the title's allusion to another passage in *Pierre* suggests otherwise. In the coach that carries him and his sister to the city, Pierre finds the pamphlet by Plotinus Plinlimmon entitled "*Chronometricals and Horologicals*," which comments warningly on Pierre's attempt to achieve supernatural

goodness but which he does not comprehend. The pamphlet revisits the concerns Melville raises in his passage on the march of the mind towards Truth and puts forth an analogy arguing that earthly virtue relates to heavenly Virtue as local time relates to Greenwich time. Greenwich time (or heavenly Truth) is the standard from which local time (or man's achievable virtue on earth) must of necessity deviate, for "in an artificial world like ours, the soul of man is further removed from its God and the Heavenly Truth, than the chronometer carried to China, is from Greenwich" (248), even though man knows "by an infallible instinct" that "the monitor can not be wrong" (250). Plinlimmon argues that on earth humans can only practice a limited virtue: "Nor does the God at the heavenly Greenwich expect common men to keep Greenwich wisdom in this remote Chinese world of ours; because such a thing were unprofitable for them here, and, indeed, a falsification of Himself, inasmuch as in that case, China time would be identical with Greenwich time, which would make Greenwich time wrong" (249). But Pierre does try with his limited vision to live by Greenwich time, to "be an angel, a chronometer; whereas, he is a man and a horologe" (251); and the result is as Plinlimmon predicts for all but the most rare chronometrical souls such as Christ: "[A]most invariably, with inferior beings, the absolute effort to live in this world according to the strict letter of the chronometricals is, somehow, apt to involve those inferior beings eventually in strange, *unique* follies and sins, unimagined before" (249).

Plinlimmon's advocacy of "virtuous expediency" (251) in recognition of human limitations is not, however, equivalent to the judge's argument for the wisdom or necessity of men's acting on their bloodlust. Plinlimmon warns: "This chronometrical conceit does by no means involve the justification of all the acts which wicked men may perform. For in their wickedness downright wicked men sin as much against their own horologes, as against the heavenly chronometer" (250)—a passage that speaks to the kid's recoiling with horror in the San Diego jail, speaking "with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime" and causing the jailers to believe "his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated" (305). Man's conscience, his intuitive perception of right, is evidence according to Plinlimmon "that this world's seeming incompatibility with God, absolutely results from its *meridional* correspondence with him" (250; emphasis mine).

The title *Blood Meridian* in light of the book's resonance with *Pierre* thus posits the barbarous terrain of the novel, its "desert absolute" (295), as a longitude far removed from Greenwich time, where man gives freest rein to his folly and vice, his love and fear of blood, forgetting both the chronometrical standard and his own horological standards, but which yet retains its meridional correspondence with God. Toadvine's impulse

of mercy for the Indian child Holden dandles and then murders (164), Glanton's reverence for the perfection of a fallen leaf (136), the murderers' paradoxical faith in the God of creation, their quiet attention to the hymns sung by a dying man because "they were of just these qualities themselves" (119), Tobin's argument to the kid that when the voice of God stops he'll know he has been hearing it all his life (124)—all attest to their intermittent recognition and intuitive reverence for the Greenwich standard. McCarthy makes this platonic notion explicit and links it with the man in the epilogue who strikes god's fire out of the rock when he writes of the gang that "they watched the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves inasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origins and are exiles" (244).

In rough correspondence with Melville's plot, where Pierre's decision to announce his "marriage" to Isabel expels him from the safety of his convention-bound family and village society to make his own way through the ambiguities of his life with Isabel, the kid is thrown back on his own devices, released from the collective, when the Yuma Indians avenge their betrayal by murdering Glanton and most of his gang. From this point forward, *Blood Meridian* tightens its focus on its young outlaw who has previously been absorbed into the gang almost to the point of invisibility as its protagonist; and the kid's struggle to discover appropriate courses of action in response to what he has witnessed and experienced—his initiation into rampant evil, his intuitive revulsion from the judge who stalks him, and his incipient remorse for his unspeakable deeds—structures the final sixty pages. There is no lessening of ambiguity and dilemmas. In fact, the game of war in which the judge has involved the men gives them the illusion of freedom from ambiguity only as long as they pursue their bloody employment. The judge claims that war is "a forcing of the unity of existence" (249); by playing for ultimate stakes, the warrior forces fate (or God) to choose between him and his opponent—in effect imposing his will on God. Identifying both God and war as agents of the "choice" between warring opponents allows the judge to equate them, however flawed his syllogism. Paradoxically, this equation also identifies god's will with the historical absolute, furthering Holden's aim to undermine the men's sense of moral responsibility. The kid's voluntary return to the gang after he is separated from them by Elias' troops and even before this ultimate sermon on the divinity of war, suggests how hoodwinked he is by all the judge's doubletalk and how appealing is the illusion of freedom from ambiguity. But after the Yuma massacre, the kid is openly distrustful and antagonistic to the judge, as if he finally understands that such a game can only be played until the player loses the ultimate wager, until, that is, the "larger will" chooses against him. Like Russian roulette and bargaining with the devil, it is a desperate game, a sucker's game that can

only be lost; the way out is to decline to play. The deaths of Glanton's men bring home to the kid that his life is not charmed, that he may very well be killed even though no one has done it yet. Afoot and wounded when he next sees the judge at the well west of Yuma, the kid finds himself at last sharing the position of the dying Sproule, whose fear and despair he has earlier scorned (66).

The survivors of the Yuma massacre—Toadvine, Tobin, Brown, and the kid—all have been sometime antagonists of the judge, suggesting that their survival may result from their resistance. But Toadvine, who has recruited the kid to Indian-killing, and Brown, who has been one of Glanton's most trusted lieutenants, quite literally sell out to Holden in the desert, metaphorically reaffirming their initial recruitment; and the kid sees them hanged not long after in the City of Angels, as the judge has predicted. Tobin and the kid remain the two hold-outs, and the expriest continues to function as the kid's "spiritual" counselor as they flee the judge, just as he has earlier taken upon himself to interpret the judge to the kid (although Tobin has admitted he is "of two minds" about Holden (131). The expriest is waiting at the wells of Alamo Mucho when the kid and Toadvine arrive (a mysterious thing echoing the sudden first appearance of Holden to Glanton's gang when they are in desperate flight from Indians). How are we to explain Tobin's preceding them at the wells? Toadvine and the kid escape the besieged camp ahead of the judge because they have been upriver cutting willow poles when the attack begins (263; 277). In Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*, Tobin is one of three men who plan to desert Glanton with Peloncillo Jack, Chamberlain's fictional persona, and their defection places them out of harm's way when the Yuma attack.¹² But in *Blood Meridian* Tobin's whereabouts are unexplained, and the kid and Toadvine do not seem to wonder, perhaps because one of Tobin's first questions of them is about survivors: "All the rest gone under? Glanton? The judge?" (279). They do not reply, but when Brown, returning from San Diego, meets the kid and Tobin and asks if they have seen Glanton dead, Tobin then claims that he has, and the narrator confirms, "For he had so" (287).

Such self-contradictions appear to ally Tobin with the judge. From the reunion of the survivors at Alamo Mucho and onward, Tobin appears ever more ambiguous, giving the kid contradictory opinions about the judge's nature, encouraging the boy's cool-headed sharpshooting at the pursuing Yumas, but adding: "[I]t's cunning work all the same and wouldnt it take the heart out of ye" (280), and appearing suddenly at his elbow to "hiss" exhortations to kill the judge or his fool or his horses until Tobin and the kid elude Holden and make it to San Diego. There the expriest just as suddenly disappears from the kid's life and from the pages of the novel.¹³ Tobin's failed exorcism with his make-shift cross of bones may actually save the kid's life at his own expense, but if the

expriest contributes to the kid's safe arrival in California, he also contributes much to his confusion in the desert. For he is, after all, a failed priest who never finished his novitiate, and his role in the gang as "priest"—insisted on by Holden but often enough denied by Tobin—is a false one. Far from living by Greenwich time or striking fire out of the rock, Tobin is a man of moral confusion among other such men, and the novel suggests that such confusion may be sufficient to enlist a man as evil's agent or tool. He is one of the judge's many fools. Tobin's relation to Holden is brought into focus by his relation to Glanton. Glanton is pleased to send the expriest for whores and liquor (201); the judge similarly singles out Tobin to gun down "the laggards" at Nacori (180). Their cynical pleasure in Tobin's willingness to do their bidding is analogous to that of Marlowe's Faustus, who charges a minor devil to change his shape into that of a Franciscan friar because "[t]hat holy shape becomes a diuell best" (154).¹⁴ At the very least, as the kid's "bright angel" who combats the judge for his soul, Tobin is woefully inadequate.

The judge's appearance at the Alamo Mucho wells is more plainly ominous. As Holden and the fool approach, they are transformed by a trick of light and perspective so that they appear "like beings of a mode little more than tangential to the world at large.... Like things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed" (281-82). The judge has always been portentous, and Tobin has hinted to the kid just what he heralds. His survival with his leashed fool and his omission of any query about the fate of the others seem to reveal to the kid that Holden has orchestrated the massacre at the ferry. If nothing else, the kid now sees the judge as his indubitable and very dangerous enemy. He keeps beyond the judge's reach and refuses to barter or to share in the judge's meat as if rejecting communion with him, while Toadvine readily participates.

Tobin's terror of the judge and his unpriestly terror of death, "blood and time," lead him to play into the judge's hands as often as not. When the judge inquires how they are "fixed for weapons" (284), Tobin volunteers that only the kid has a pistol, a response that focuses Holden's attention on the boy (although he certainly has designs on them all). The judge offers water and meat, the illusion of friendship, as if to seal a new covenant with the kid. When that does not work, he bids five hundred dollars in exchange for the pistol, provoking Tobin to hiss, "Do him":

[H]e spoke aloud, such was his fear.

You'll get no second chance lad. Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God's blood, do you think you'll best him any other way?...Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit. (285)

But the kid does not shoot Holden, in spite of his willingness to kill

Indians and Mexicans; and his failure to heed Tobin's advice reflects his confusion about the judge's nature and his own. Though Tobin has speculated about the judge's demonic essence, he has also backed away from that position often enough that the kid tries to conquer Tobin's paralysis by reminding him:

You told me so yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth.
You said it was no pair...pair...
Parable.
No parable. That it was a naked fact and the judge was a man like all men. (297)

And the judge himself has quite consistently carried out his masquerade as a man, albeit a powerful one. But after the Yuma massacre, the fear Holden inspires is entirely out of proportion with his frail "humanity." Herein lies a double-bind: if the judge is a demon who would inveigle the kid into a Faustian pact, then the kid must combat him by any and all means though he put his mortal life at risk; if the judge is human and the kid kills him, then the act will further confirm the forfeiture of his spirit. The kid has already killed many, and indeed he has already confronted the similar double-bind of Indian-hating without fully recognizing it, since legal sanction, public opinion, and racism have obscured the scalphunters' perception of the Indians' humanity. But his new restraint from killing begins with the confrontation with the judge at the Alamo Mucho wells and is not clearly broken until he faces Elrod in the bonefields almost thirty years later.

Paradoxically, it is the kid's belief that Holden may *not* be human that prevents him from firing at him at all at the wells and from returning the judge's fire with his usual cool, dead-eye accuracy at Carrizo Creek. Although the kid claims that he can shoot the judge and take the horses, he ultimately agrees with Tobin's assessment, "You'll not kill him" (291), and he shoots the horses instead. In all of these scenes in the desert, Tobin's fear elicits the kid's bravado, but at heart the kid actually is afraid to shoot the judge lest he provoke some terrible retribution. The irony, in terms of the epigraph from Valéry and the epilogue's man who strikes fire out of the rock, is that both the expriest and the kid fear the death of their antic clay so utterly that they cannot effectively vanquish the judge. "Face him down," Tobin urges the kid, but he speaks from no spiritual wisdom, and he means only that if the judge is a man the kid should shoot it out with him (297).

Nevertheless, the judge pursues the kid in the desert and continues to speak to him precisely because the kid has broken with him and attempts to renege on any implicit contract they may have had. Most of the judge's blandishments here are devoid of force, especially in com-

parison with his harnessmaker parable and his argument for the divinity of war—his masterworks of rhetoric delivered at the height of his influence over the men. Even his final harangue in the Fort Griffin saloon devolves into a frantic if riddling barrage of language, as if he can batter the kid into submission with words. In the desert, where the judge has no captive audience, his arguments are truncated and without much subtlety. In a transparent ploy, abandoning all pretense of consistency, he calls for them to be friends even after he has opened fire on the kid and Tobin. (As if the natural world offers its commentary on the judge's offer, the kid watches "a small caravan of ants bearing off among the arches of sheepribs," but suddenly his gaze is diverted from these cooperative creatures and "his eyes met the eyes of a small viper coiled under a flap of hide" [289]). The judge may simply mock the kid or maybe he is openly threatening to kill him if he will not surrender. Holden soon will taunt the kid for his inability to shoot, parading back and forth before the kid where he lies hidden under the dried carcass of a mule, and giving the lie to Tobin's assertion after the first passing that "Ye'll get no such a chance as that again" (298). In anticipation of his appearance before the kid in the San Diego jail, Holden accuses the kid as he passes and repasses: "There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart.... You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (299).

The judge's accusation hearkens back to his earlier lectures celebrating man's predacious nature, and as he speaks, "The imbecile stood and raised its hands to its face and yammered weirdly and sat again" (299). The fool is an apt chorus and mascot throughout these scenes, and his presence, rather than Holden's rhetoric, constitutes the judge's most persuasive tactic in the desert. Fool, imbecile, wild man, James Robert is the shambling embodiment of the judge's image of degenerate human nature. With his simian lope, his hooting after the sun and his dull fascination with fire, the fool both flatters the men's sense of their "progress" and paradoxically mocks them with a debased image of their biological origins. "Are we to drink at these holes turn about like rival bands of apes?" (284) challenges the judge at Alamo Mucho, and thus he goads the kid into mirroring the fool:

[H]e knelt opposite the imbecile...and submerged the flask in the basin. He and the imbecile watched the water run in at the neck of the flask and they watched it bubble and they watched it cease. (285)

The kid comes face to face with the fool again at Carrizo Creek, and Glanton's men have all been paired with it as they have faced it across their campfires.¹⁵ The judge molds them in its image as even the narrator implies when Holden rescues the idiot from drowning and "restored it

among its fellows" (259), for it is this aspect of their nature to which the judge speaks. Significantly, when James Robert first appears, he is smeared in his own excrement; when the kid first meets the judge in Nacogdoches and then fights with Toadvine, he is caked with mud. Toadvine might easily kill him, or vice versa, except that "someone [i.e., Holden] carrying a huge shellalegh" and "coming down the lot...[with] great steady sucking sounds like a cow" clubs the kid and ends the fight—rescuing both to serve the judge's purposes (9). The excrement, the clay, attracts the judge. When Holden gathers the kid to himself in the novel's final chapter, he does so in an outhouse surrounded by mud, mirror image of the jakes in Nacogdoches. In their opposition in the desert west of Yuma, the judge undermines the kid's faith in his own moral judgment, in his inner light, by keeping the debased image of humanity, the fool, ever before him. If he has any motivation other than mindless panic, this may be why Tobin tells the kid to kill the fool: to shatter the clay-bound image that fetters him.

The judge leaves the kid and Tobin in the desert with a final taunt, playing upon their fears of death: "[P]erhaps you have seen this place in a dream. That you would die here" (300). Whether their resistance has defeated him or whether he has simply granted the kid a longer tether is ambiguous, perhaps not even resolved yet; but he appears to the kid once more in the San Diego jail, where the kid wakes one morning to find the judge standing outside his cell again to accuse the kid of breaking faith while coaxing him to come to him: "Dont you know that I'd have loved you like a son?" (306). The judge's behavior in the jail is a reflection and elaboration of his actions in the desert even down to the final threat of death in his lie that the kid is to be hanged. When the judge announces he must leave, the kid closes his eyes; "[w]hen he opened them the judge was gone" (308). Quite likely, this confrontation with the judge is a dream like his ether dream of the coldforger: "In that sleep and in sleeps to follow the judge did visit" (309). Like Suttree's hallucinations, both the dream in the jail and the dream in the doctor's recovery room are out-picturings of the turmoil of the kid's inner being. If so, the judge not surprisingly manifests an aspect of the kid himself, and Holden's charges are the kid's self-accusations or his dim recognition of his divided impulses.¹⁶ The purgatorial world in which the judge dances is thus revealed as an inner landscape against which the testing of the kid's heart is to be completed. And when exactly did the "dream" begin?

The kid recoils against his bloody deeds and even seeks atonement. When he reaches San Diego, he sits in a tavern after curfew as if waiting to be arrested. In jail he confesses his crimes "with a strange urgency," and "his jailers said that his mind had come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he had participated" (305). After his release, the kid no longer seeks out opportunities for violence; he seems to intend reinvent-

ing his life. But like Pierre the kid remains an ambiguous being, unable perfectly to enact his new intentions. He witnesses the hanging of Toadvine and Brown in Los Angeles and recovers Brown's scapular of human ears, which he wears until his death as penance or as trophy, or both. Reminiscent of Tobin with his cross of bones,¹⁷ the kid picks up a Bible, carrying it as talisman though he cannot read it. Like Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*, he is taken for a preacher, "but he was no witness... , he least of any man" (312). As "the man" he contracts to guide travelers through the wilderness as did Holden's harnessmaker; but he abandons them at a desert well, as if acting out the judge's accusations that he had abandoned Toadvine and Brown, as well as Shelby and Tate.

Wandering alone, the man encounters a troupe of penitents and observes them with great interest until they disappear "in the coming darkness like heralds of some unspeakable calamity" (314).¹⁸ When he breaks his camp the next morning, he comes upon these penitents "hacked and butchered" as if by Indians or by his old gang, and "the hooded alter-christ... cut down and disemboweled" (315). In McCarthy's *Outer Dark* (1968), a book of many affinities with *Blood Meridian*, Culla Holme comes across several calamities such as this; and though he seems ignorant of them, he is accused of each. Ultimately it remains ambiguous whether Culla is falsely accused or not, though his blindness and lostness and inner guilt are clear. A similar if subtler ambiguity invests the scene with the penitents since the man commits no other murders until he kills the boy Elrod. But his presence in that isolated spot and the resonance of the vicious murder of the Christ penitent with the harnessmaker's murder of the Christ-like traveler hint that the man's conscious attempt to evade the judge's legacy/prophecy is severely compromised. Some aspect of his blindness is evident enough when he spies the old woman kneeling within sight of all this butchery, confesses to her something of his past life, and offers to take her to safety and serve as her protector—a role he has already undertaken and thrown over with the traveling party he deserted. But this woman is a mummified corpse, recalling the old hermit with his mummified slave's heart and his admonition that a man can know his heart but doesn't want to. Whether the man learns anything from this witnessing is unclear.

When the man meets Elrod, he kills again in full consciousness of his act, and this knowledge sends him back to the judge. Elrod is another ambiguous and portentous figure. As a violent fifteen-year-old who likes meanness and who swaggers with a youthful sense of invulnerability because no one has succeeded in killing him yet, he is the kid's double. The man's opposition to him suggests his repudiation of the youth he has been and his belief in his own moral progress. But Elrod impudently denies the man's violent past, ironically leading the man to reaffirm his capacity for violence. Elrod plays into the chaos of the man's heart,

stirring the impulse towards violence that the man has struggled for years to repress and deny, and provoking the man's angry threat: "You keep him away from me....I see him back here I'll kill him" (322).

The killing itself is both self-defense and ambush. But the act shatters the man's pretense of reforming his life. In destroying this image of his violent history, the man paradoxically resumes the path the judge would have him follow, exerting his will over another. Since the act is ambiguous, the man might still find his way out of the dilemma of his divided heart by recognizing its duality and exerting conscious control and moral responsibility; but though the man outwardly owns this killing, he does not accept inward responsibility for it, suppressing remorse. "You wouldnt of lived anyway," he tells the dead Elrod (322). When the boys tell him that Elrod and his brother are the grandsons of a man who "was killed by a lunatic and buried in the woods like a dog" (323), another echo of the harnessmaker parable and apparent affirmation of Holden's lecture about the inevitability of sons' inheriting the dark side of human nature, the judge's abiding influence is evoked again. Holden seems an inescapable presence despite the man's years of evasion, and after killing Elrod, the man immediately sets out for Fort Griffin as if for a preordained rendezvous with the judge.

Though the man denies it to the judge and maybe even to himself, at some level this meeting is of his own election. Though he appears passive, he goes to embrace his fate as if to a suicide—for the man clearly expects to die. As he approaches the saloon he turns in silent farewell to the world and his life:

He looked back a last time at the street and at the random windowlights let into the darkness and at the last pale light in the west and the low dark hills around. Then he pushed open the door and entered. (324)

His fear of the judge's impending retribution is telegraphed in his evading Holden's glance, in the man's denial of both his own agency and the judge's in bringing them together again, and in his sexual impotence with the dwarf whore who elects him (her recruiting him reenacts his earlier recruitments by White and Glanton; her dwarfism recalls that of the fool). Despite his terror and passivity, however, the man delivers himself to the judge in the jakes in response to the most elemental of human urges.

The judge, of course, has claimed all along that this was fated, inevitable. He may finally succeed in convincing the man of this. The man's killing of Elrod may impress him with the futility of his attempt to direct his own life or to assert his moral sense. But the man's active seeking/passive acceptance of his death is not much like that of Glanton, who claims agency even after bartering his soul and meets death with the

defiant challenge, "Hack away you mean red nigger" (275). The ambiguity is whether the man's fear and passivity betoken despair and surrender and constitute a clear victory for the judge, as his dance suggests, or signify something else.

In *Dr. Faustus*, in a context apropos of devils' tearing the flesh of their victims, which John Sepich has suggested is what the judge does to the man in the jakes, Christopher Marlowe suggests that reassertion of moral responsibility is the way out of the Faustian pact. When Faustus tries to repent and Mephistopheles accuses him of "disobedience to my soueraigne Lord" (188), Lucifer, Faustus tries to deflect his punishment by shifting the blame to his spiritual counselor, telling Mephistopheles to torture him instead. Mephistopheles replies:

His faith is great, I cannot touch his soule,
But what I may afflict his body with,
I wil attempt, which is but little worth. (189)

Faustus is unable to avail himself of the strength that fortifies the old man, as his very fear of such bodily harm is what keeps him from repenting (191-92). In *Blood Meridian* the kid / man repents while he is out of reach of the judge and yet, it is fairly certain, ultimately subjects himself to death at the hands of the judge though he fears this bodily harm as much as he always has. The Faust context and the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* point to an option the man, like Faustus, seems incapable of grasping: the valuing of the spiritual quest over the life of the material body. If in the jakes the man delivers up his body to free his spirit, he might be seen as having discovered a creative solution to the double-bind of his dual nature. But the ambiguity in McCarthy's depiction of the man's surrender to the judge is just sufficient to hint this ungrasped alternative. The man's suicide at the judge's hands is an act finally neither of atonement nor of transcendence of his clay; it signals his abdication where persistent struggle and responsibility are called for.

Like *Pierre*, *Blood Meridian* is largely a novel about ambiguity—the ambiguity of man's history, of his intentions, of his very nature. Here, as in many of McCarthy's other novels, the narrator's reticence about the psychology of his protagonist, the kid, keeps before us the mystery at his core. If the judge, a portentous embodiment of mankind's evil and self-will, is a mystery, he is no more mysterious than the hearts of the men he infests and dupes. Were such men not so commonplace, *Blood Meridian* suggests, we might see them for the chimeras they (and we) are. ❖

NOTES

¹ For discussion of the infantile features of the judge, see Rick Wallach, "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian's* Evil Archon" (126).

² John Sepich (119-21) shows that the judge's recipe for gunpowder is based in

fact and that McCarthy's source is *Foxfire* 5.

- ³ Grappling with the difficulties of Holden's relatively erudite rhetoric, some readers have mistaken the judge for the philosophical spokesman of the novel. However, Vereen Bell has commented on Holden's inconsistencies, concluding that "[t]he fact that his rhetorical authority obscures real contradictions for both himself and his listeners is a sign that he has contrived a belief system for which unwavering conviction itself is the objective" (125). Dana Phillips asserts that Holden's speeches are "first and foremost literary performances" (441). And Rick Wallach observes, "Behind his valorization of science and disavowals of mystery...the judge is an obfuscator who drives matters into cul-de-sacs both literal and figurative where he can substitute obliteration by violence for resolution" (132).
- ⁴ Sepich (*Notes* 111, n12) identifies the passage as from Valéry's essay "The Yalu" in *History and Politics*. Sepich notes that the passage is spoken by a Chinese man and articulates the Eastern view of Westerners. That McCarthy is concerned chiefly with a set of dilemmas indigenous to mainstream western culture is reinforced not only by the subtitle of his novel (*the Evening Redness in the West*), but also by the narrator's characterization of the Delaware scouts who are with Glanton's gang but not philosophically of them: "If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet and men of other colors and beings which no man has looked upon and yet not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts" (138).
- ⁵ In his unpublished paper, "Parodic Parable, Allusion, and Apocalypse: McCarthy's Appropriations of Biblical Rhetoric," Robert Jarrett discusses "the scene's reenactment of the dramatic structure of parable: first story, then repudiation or puzzlement among listeners, the teacher's granting of hermeneutic key for interpretation, and final response, protest, or discussion."
- ⁶ Their complete transformation into "Indians" is signalled when they ride into a pueblo and murder the unoffending inhabitants, incited by their fright and their "visible frailty": "Many of the people had been running toward the church where they knelt clutching the altar and from this refuge they were dragged howling one by one and one by one they were slain and scalped in the chancel floor" (181). The gang's attack on these souls recreates the scene of slaughter that must have occurred in the church that the kid and Sproule stumble across after White's troops are destroyed. Following as it does their almost accidental killing of the Mexicans in the cantina at Nacori, this act confirms them in their predation on Mexican citizenry, and after they hunt down and murder the band of Governor Trias' soldiers who happen upon the scene, they receive the last of the bounty that Sonora will offer. When they leave Chihuahua, "they...turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun" (185).
- ⁷ The triumph of the dark side over the bright side of human nature is metaphorically enacted when black John Jackson beheads white John Jackson at the gang's campfire. This shadow-show may well be orchestrated by the judge as another tactic in his campaign to bend the men to his will. Black John Jackson is a favorite of the judge; when he is left behind at

- Nacori, the judge himself rides back to recover him. And the judge later hints that he holds all men on his tether (245-46) and finally taunts the kid to acknowledge that he, the judge, has orchestrated their final encounter (328).
- ⁸ Pierre's act of interpreting the portrait of the father may inform McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), as well. See my discussion of the competing pictures of Kenneth Rattner projected by his wife, who keeps a photograph of Kenneth in captain's uniform as an icon on the family mantle, and by John Wesley himself, who paints over that image when he imaginatively recollects his father's life as he stands by his mother's grave ("They aint the thing': Artifact and Hallucinated Recollection in Cormac McCarthy's Early Frame-Works," ed. Rick Wallach, *Myth, Legend, Dust: Critical Responses to Cormac McCarthy* [Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000]). In contemplating the chair-portrait of his father that his mother dislikes, as opposed to the drawing-room portrait associated with her idealized image of him, Pierre thinks to himself, "believe not the drawing-room painting; that is not thy father; or, at least, is not all of thy father. Consider in thy mind, Pierre, whether we two paintings may not make only one. Faithful wives are ever over-fond to a certain imaginary image of their husbands; and faithful widows are ever over-reverential to a certain imagined ghost of that same imagined image" (101). Like the traveler's son in the judge's story, John Wesley runs the risk of being broken before the idol of his father, but through the creative act John Wesley finds a way out of the double-bind defined by the judge.
- ⁹ The Latin passage is from Goethe's *Autobiography, Truth and Poetry* and translates: "No one against God but God himself" (*Pierre* 1450).
- ¹⁰ See Sepich, 14-24, for a discussion of McCarthy's historical sources for Holden, and 105-06 for the bad blood between Holden and Chamberlain. Sepich follows Chamberlain's editors, both Roger Butterfield (1956) and William Goetzmann (1996), in regarding *My Confession* as autobiography, but both the internal and the biographical evidence offered in each edition convinces me that it is actually an autobiographical novel.
- ¹¹ For an interpretation of the gnostic elements in the epilogue, see Leo Daugherty's "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy" (159-74). Many readers have seen a reference to the fencing of the west in the holes the man makes as he progresses across the plain. This is a plausible extension not only of the setting of the novel proper but also its concern with man's will to control and harness life, as in the extermination of Indians, wolves, and buffalo. While my reading gives rather different import to the man who strikes fire out of the rock, I find this critique of American notions of progress and Manifest Destiny complementary to the metaphysical import of the epilogue, especially as a commentary on the kid's moral progress.
- ¹² Chamberlain writes that on the day of the attack, "Tobin, Hitchcock and Webster volunteered to go to the river bottom to cut firewood—each day three men were detailed for this duty—while I was to guard the animals . . . As per arrangement we four met about ten in the forenoon, behind a huge sand drift about a mile from Fort Defiance . . ." Hearing the battle, the four ride back towards the fort and see it overrun by Indians. From this, they infer that Glanton and the others have been "rubbed out" and blame themselves for "deserting in the hour of danger and death." But Tobin interprets the death of Glanton as a form of Providence: "It's the hand of God! To him, and you,

Peloncillo Jack, His blind instrument, we owe our lives" (*My Confession* 290-91).

¹³ *My Confession* abruptly ends just before the defectors reach San Diego, but the postscript by editor Roger Butterfield suggests that historically three of the four arrived in the city. William Carr's deposition about the Indian raid on Fort Defiance was also signed by Marcus L. Webster and Joseph A. Anderson. Butterfield comments, "'Long' Webster... was named by Sam [Chamberlain] as one of his companions on the trek across the desert. Carr and Anderson are unknown to history but the names could easily have been assumed. Chamberlain of course was a deserter from the army and had reason to hide his identity" (299). For the Carr deposition, see Sepich, 132-35.

¹⁴ Sepich suggests other allusions to the Faust legend in Marlowe, Valéry, Benét, and Heine (121-27).

¹⁵ The kid is mirrored by a fool again in California, where he sees it through a window. When he investigates, he finds it is "not the judge's fool but just some other fool" (312). The appearance of this other fool may nevertheless hint that the judge's influence and manipulation of the kid have not ended. McCarthy uses the mirroring technique extensively in *Child of God*, where Lester Ballard is frequently confronted by self-reflections—often only dimly recognized—through windows. There they are always ungrasped opportunities for insight. In *Blood Meridian*, though, the confrontations seem always to occur through the agency of the judge as a means of hoodwinking and controlling the kid.

¹⁶ Peloncillo Jack's antipathy for Holden in *My Confession* can also be read as his recognition of his worst self. Jack leaves behind his life as a "prospective Theological Student" (7) in Boston, and moves west, becoming increasingly involved in acts of sexual licence and brutality until he murders an unoffending Indian and immediately joins Glanton's gang with his feelings of guilt still fresh. Jack's initial assessment of Holden, that "his desires was blood and women" (271), can at this point in the narrative almost apply to Jack as well, though Jack never goes so far as to rape and murder women and children. Jack's progress west is a journey into the heart of darkness only partially acknowledged and feebly resisted.

Indeed, in Chamberlain's historical novel, three of the principal characters in Glanton's gang have as easily fallen away from their earlier religious teaching as they have left behind the "civilizations" to the east—Jack, Tobin, and Glanton himself. Tobin "was one of the best fellows in the world, son of an Irish gentleman, was sent to Maynooth College to be educated for the Priesthood, was expelled, came to America, and was now the wild rollicking Texas Ranger" destined to become a member of Glanton's scalp-hunters (102). Of Glanton, Jack says he moved at an early age from South Carolina to Texas: "Nothing remarkable distinguished Glanton in his youth from the other young men of the settlement, without it was a deep *religious* feeling and a strict moral conduct" (268).

¹⁷ Bones are associated with mere matter throughout the novel, pointing to the futility of the expriest's fashioning his cross to "exorcize" the judge. The ambiguity of Tobin's gesture is furthered in the traditional symbolism of crossbones as a warning or threat of death.

¹⁸ Cf. the misshapen dog who tries to share the abandoned building Billy Parham camps in at the end of *The Crossing* and who is "the harbinger of God knew

what" (424). In superstitious dread of what the dog portends, Billy drives the dog off.

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Swarm Season

Jeffrey Utzinger

Banners rippled at the wind's behest, hovering over crowds that milled and buzzed. A spectrum of color against a backdrop of brown grass, restrained by the sidewalk and a traffic cop's hand, awaiting the signal that would free them to spill over the curb and into the street. I watched from my truck, stopped at a red light. The light changed to green and I moved down the road past short haired women and men in a rainbow array of t-shirts, holding hands, holding signs, holding up traffic with their protest parade. An hour before I stood with my wife, "brushed with the hiss of rustling wings" as our hive threw the first swarm of the season.

Christa was planting Lantana and Indian Hawthorn in a bed she had dug next to the shop. I was burning tree limbs and brush we had cleared for a fence in a pile stacked higher than my head. The center sent off a rush of heat I could hear, but over the crackle and draft, Christa was calling my name. I slipped my leather gloves into my back pocket and walked to where she stood pointing a trowel.

"Hear that?"

"It's the fire."

"No, I think it's the bees."

Our hive sits on the east side of the house about twenty feet from the back door. We sometimes raise the shade in the bedroom and watch the bees as they work while we're lying in bed. As we turned the corner of the house, the hum became a buzz. Bees poured from the entrance, dripped down the side, clustering on the cement blocks that hold up the hive, churning on the ledge like dirt from a plow, moving up the side and filling the air. Hundreds formed a funnel taller than the house, sunlight catching their wings as they ascended and spun.

Cold fronts breaking or sunshine after several days of rain can heighten a hive's activity. A hundred or so will rock back and forth near the entrance, making a pattern that mimics thread on a loom, but the flurry of bees was more like a whirlwind as I crept round the laundry room to approach the hive from behind. I hoped they had cabin fever and were getting out to stretch the legs, fan the wings. Christa circled the house and stood thirty feet in front of the hive, scanning the four large oaks that grow on that side of the yard. I hoped they'd choose a limb on our land, one preferably low to the ground.

"There they are," Christa said. Through the veil of bees I could only see her shading her eyes with one hand and pointing with the other to the sun. I made my way through scrubby trees and brush, following the fence line to where she stood.

"There's a clump, baseball size. About thirty feet up."

We watched the mass swell as more bees piled on, and I added my six feet to our six foot step ladder, envisioning myself balanced precariously from the top rung, adding two more feet for an outstretched arm's reach and still came up over fifteen feet short. We live in the country, and the nearest place to buy bee supplies is in downtown Austin at a pitch-and-putt course. The logistics could be solved on the two-hour drive, so I grabbed my keys and the checkbook and left Christa on the phone soliciting advice from folks more seasoned in the safe handling of bees.

The old man who runs the course is usually washing golf balls on a stool by the window, but sometimes he's sleeping in the sun. He's over eighty, only hears what he wants to, and didn't recognize me even though I stop by once a month. I made my way to the clubhouse, shuffled my feet, faked a cough, and rattled the old man awake with my keys. He placed a nine iron and putter on the glass counter, but I said, "I'm here about bees." The equipment sits on the other side of the shop, and I could easily gather whatever I need in the time it would take for him to fold the paper, take off his glasses, and slide off his seat. But I waited patiently as he handed me a brood box, ten frames of wax-coated foundation, bottom board, inner cover and telescoping top.

The old man figured the prices in a small spiral notebook. He read me the total, and I handed him the check.

"My first swarm of the season," I said, gathering equipment.

"Where'd they land?"

"In an oak tree, about thirty feet up."

He laughed and said, "I've heard of guys shootin' the base of the limb to knock down a branch."

"That's a thought." I've been dove hunting a dozen times in my life, and only been able to knock two birds out of the sky. The shotgun approach could mean a bee massacre.

"They think it's spring already. Mild winter and no freeze. Mine have been going crazy for weeks."

"Good weather for golf."

"I guess."

He put my check in the drawer and returned to his chair as though weather good for anything hadn't concerned him for some time.

The return trip to Smithville landed me in the middle of the parade, and while I waited for the policeman to weave traffic through the crowds, I listened to the vibration of people and the hum of idling cars. The energy that only a city can provide is one I thrived on in my twenties but one I crave less and less: the constant flow of cars and faces, sitting behind a city bus, exhaust and mindless chatter, waiting in line for everything. A healthy hive of bees can support sixty-thousand bodies in a space the size of a filing cabinet full of dividers, drawers, and paper-

work. It shouldn't surprise anyone who has lived in crowded quarters that after only two months of gathering nectar and service to the queen, the average worker bee is ready to drop dead.

Theories abound surrounding bees' swarming behavior—weather, overcrowding, weak queens, but I like to think they grow restless, sick and tired of the same grind, living in quarters with thousands of siblings. The wear and tear life of the working bee. My theory, of course, doesn't hold. Swarms aren't rebelling against anything, evidenced by the fact that they take along the queen where they find a hollow log or an attic to continue the only business they know.

As I pulled into our drive, I noticed that the step ladder stood with an open jar of honey on top beneath the branch that just hours before had been garlanded with bees. Workers will stay at the swarm site, usually overnight, protecting the queen until the scouts return with a detailed report, delivered in dance, regarding directions to a new hive location. The branch, though, was bare. I searched other branches, stepped back to look at other trees, moved towards the fence line, and saw nothing but bark lichen and leaves.

"They left about an hour after you did," Christa said from the porch.

I wanted to scream, throw large objects, try the shotgun approach on an empty limb.

"I walked through the woods but never saw which direction they went."

"It's not your fault."

I covered just over two acres, stopping beside every tree, knocking on ones that looked hollow, peering into holes on tiptoe, then considered driving through the neighborhood, looking for an exterminator's truck since a garage or front porch eave will often strike homeless bees as a good place to begin again. It seldom strikes the owner that way. My walk yielded no bees.

I've a full time job and don't need the honey to sell, don't even care for the taste, but sometimes enjoy chewing the comb. The most common mistake a beginning beekeeper can make is too much manipulation of the hive when bees do best left alone. The swarm had cheated me out of a reason to handle them up close once again. It was early spring—still time for the hive to build to sixty thousand, to pack more honey and pollen than we could eat, sell, or give away. But I don't keep bees for the numbers. I keep them because few others my age do, for the murmur they make when I open the hive, for the elbow-deep-in-bees sensation I get even while wearing long, leather gloves, and for the thrill of watching them spiral with sunlight reflected on wings. I keep them because they pay no respect to the idea that they are creatures that need to be kept.

* * *

Two weeks later on Easter Sunday, everyone was here—Christa’s parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandma, with a few friends on their way. The women cooked potatoes, made Jell-O salad and dessert. The men wandered around the yard, made small talk, drinking beer. Smoked pork tenderloin was the main course, and my only task was to man the grill, so I started drinking Shiner as soon as we got home from church. The coals were hot, and I’d hit that zone where a week of preparation was over. The guests were here. Time to relax.

“I think the bees are swarming again,” Christa announced from the front porch.

A whirlwind of bees can excite fascination if you’ve never seen one before, but two swarms, in as many weeks, is enough to kill a peaceful buzz. The family had gathered at a safe distance and were admiring the rush of bees by the time I rounded the corner, slipped behind the laundry room, followed the fence line, whacking shrubs, to meet Christa beneath a tree. The swarm was headed in the same direction but this time had chosen a new tree, one that grows next to the house, one without any low limbs. A clump was forming on a branch about level with the roof. The men followed close behind, looking relieved that there was something to do, so I called out a list of things we needed, while waving them towards the shed. Uncle Delbert hefted the ladder. I handed Leroy the tree saw and removed a few frames from an empty brood box while Bruce gathered pieces of rope. Christa’s mom stopped me at the shed door and said the fire was going out. I wedged the box beneath Bruce’s free arm, because I knew there was no way the bees would wait.

Delbert was halfway up the tree by the time I’d soaked more briquets. The saw didn’t even reach from the ladder, so Bruce was tying a rock to the end of the rope. Everyone was still clustered near the base of the tree. I wondered what kind of disasters my home owner’s insurance covers, as I envisioned the rock smashing into the center of the swarm, Delbert falling over backwards, and the family covered in bees. Bruce flung the rock, which made a perfect arc over the targeted branch. The rope fluttered at his feet.

I ran back to the grill, struck a new match, flames engulfed the meat, so I slammed down the lid, waited a few seconds, flipped it open again to a pouring black smoke. The meat might taste a bit charred and a little like fluid, but I wanted it to hurry. I wanted everyone inside. Delbert had the rope over by the time I returned. The men alternated taking tugs on the branch, but instead of a shower of bees and a holiday ruined, nothing much happened at all. A few rose from the clump each time the branch moved but then settled down once the motion stopped. The brood box sat empty. The women lost interest and returned to the house.

Christa’s mother emerged half an hour later to announce that dinner

was served. I had forgotten the meat and decided I was hungry, so I wrote off the swarm. The prayer freshly finished, Burton knocked on the door, asked about the ladder, was filled in on the swarm, shown to his seat, and entertained us with stories. Burton has a B.A. in philosophy, religion, and biology, a Ph.D. in genetics and evolutionary biology, a photographic memory, and more books under his belt than anyone I've met; he also got me interested in bees. The meat was then passed, a bit smoky but tender, beans wrapped in bacon, potatoes, and salad, the glasses refilled, seconds offered, declined, the bread remembered and used to sop up the plates, coffee made, pies cut and served, thanks returned, and we hit the door.

How we ended up on the roof I don't quite remember; there was more wine with dinner, but that's no excuse. After Burton had his turn tugging the branch, he suggested we get a frame full of brood from the hive. I showed Bruce how to start the smoker and had him cranking on the bellows. Burton gathered twigs for fuel while Delbert remained with the bees pulling on the branch. I got suited up, and we descended on the hive, pulled a frame from the bottom box, and shook off the bees, cut a hole through the corner, threaded it with rope. I handed it to Delbert who ran it up the tree. The idea was that the bees would cluster around the brood and that after we had lured a large number, we could lower the frame into the new hive.

A bee suit will make you sweat in almost any kind of weather. That morning it rained off and on early, so it was humid, and I was drenched. I grabbed a beer and went to change while everyone remained watching and waiting for the bees to make their move. I don't know how long we waited, but I pulled up a lawn chair, and someone began to tug the rope since the bees were ignoring the brood.

"We've messed with them long enough," I finally announced.

"What if we tried brushing them onto the frame?"

"It's too humid. They might be cranky."

"You think a broom would work?"

"They're too high. Forget it."

All I can say is we're guys. The slightest presence of danger means that we'll never give up. I scrounged up a brush-looking pole used to knock down cobwebs and dirt. Bruce duct taped PVC pipe to the handle and we handed it off to Delbert who hadn't left his post. The pipe was too flimsy and the brush waved in the air, occasionally hitting the bees.

Someone mentioned trying from the roof, and I went inside to change shoes, since I was wearing cowboy boots and didn't think they'd fare well on a tin roof. The ladder was set up on the porch by the time I made it back outside. Burton was handing the brush to Bruce. I joined him, and we crawled up the slope, balanced our way across the apex. We stood watching one another, our feet uncertain.

"A package of bees costs only thirty dollars. I'm certain you're both worth much more," Burton offered from the front yard.

Bruce took a few swats at the bees, but his arms were too short, so I took the pipe, just long enough to reach the swarm, and gently began brushing the bees onto the frame.

"It's working."

"Easy."

"Rolling bees might make them mad."

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

I heard a sound like a firecracker that spins when it's lit just before a bee popped me beneath my left eye. The brush hit the ground, and I heard Burton shouting, but by the time I turned, another one drove a stinger above my right eye.

"I'd get down if I were you," I said walking slowly towards Bruce, who sat like a statue on the peak of the roof.

"I'm kind of afraid to move."

"Just move slowly. You'll be all right."

"Get the stinger out," Burton called from the ground. "Brush it gently with your finger so you don't release more venom."

I've read and heard contradictory information on the importance of removing the barb once you're stung. The sac on the end of the stinger continues to pulsate once the bee falls away. Some say the longer it remains, the more protein spreads through your system. Others say if you're allergic, once the point is in, the damage is done.

Bruce brushed the two stingers from my face, and we made our way down the ladder. My body temperature was rising, but I wrote it off to frustration, humidity, and beer. The looks of the family when I lit on the porch suggested that perhaps I was wrong.

"You're starting to swell already."

"Looks like they were going for your eyes."

"Does it hurt?"

"Thank God you didn't fall."

"You should have quit."

I wondered if anyone had heard my suggestion that we quit before we climbed onto the roof. The stings had swelled to half-dollar size by the time I got to a mirror. Christa rubbed cream and gave me two antihistamines, but I read the side of the bottle with an alcohol warning and decided to only take one. The conversation ceased when I returned to the porch, and everyone checked out my head, everyone except Delbert who had picked up the brush and continued to prod at the bees. My hands began to tingle and my stomach to itch. When people spoke to me, they focused on my head. I announced, "I'm going to change clothes."

My entire stomach and midsection were covered in a rash, and by the time I changed I had hives—on my hands, up my arms, inside my

armpits, down my legs, on the tops of my feet. Christa met me in the hallway, and I showed her my arms. She got her purse as I put on shoes. Burton came into the kitchen.

"I've been thinking, maybe you should go to the hospital."

I showed him my arms as I walked to the door.

"We're on our way."

The hospital is only five miles away, and the waiting area was empty. A nurse checked my blood pressure while Christa filled out some forms, and the nurse asked if I had trouble swallowing. I had been taking small gulps since we got in the car to make sure my throat wasn't swelling shut. My head though must have looked quite impressive because everyone on duty just happened to stop by. She gave me two large pills and a small cup of water.

"I've had a few beers; is that going to hurt?"

"Nah, these will take down the swelling," the nurse said.

I popped them in my mouth.

After about five minutes or so, a man in a white lab coat walked over, poised with a shot.

"Looks like you been sunbathing."

I looked at my shorts and flip flops.

"No, I was just hot after I got stung."

"No, the rash on your skin. Looks like you been sunbathing."

I was certainly glad to provide entertainment on a slow Easter Sunday afternoon.

He swabbed my left arm, and I looked away, the least painful of the three injections I'd received that day. A new warmth spread through my body as Christa and I waited and talked. We decided, all things considered, the food had been delicious, her mother's decorations nice as usual, the conversation not too strained. That getting stung on the head was unconventional, but an effective way, nonetheless to clear one's house in a hurry of holiday guests.

Christa gave updates on my face every ten minutes, and by the end of the hour the swelling abated, and the hives disappeared. The doctor returned, told me to be careful and take antihistamines every two hours, and then sent us home. Everyone was gone except Christa's parents. The swarm was still in the tree, but I didn't care. I lay on the couch in my office reading *Notes of a Native Son* until the beer, shots, and pills knocked me clean out.

My left eye was swollen shut when I awoke the next morning. It was still dark in the house, but I found my way to the bathroom, and even without glasses, peering through one eye, I knew I was a mess. I went back to bed. A few hours later Christa woke me up. Her parents were leaving, and I declined the offer to tell them goodbye. After they left, I put on my glasses, but my cheeks were so swollen the frames sat lopsided on

my face. I returned to the mirror for a closer inspection. The flesh around both eyes protruded an inch further than normal. The left eye was still shut. My entire face was round. Christa was sympathetic and polite, and by mid-afternoon we had a good laugh. She said the swarm was gone, and we wished them good riddance.

I had decided to keep bees after reading four books. Everything I'd read said bees aren't aggressive in a swarm. They've got no brood or honey to protect, so they're not likely to sting. I'd seen pictures and heard stories of beekeepers in t-shirts and shorts removing swarms from branches without so much as a veil. Of course, I'd also read that most beekeepers will write off a swarm if it's so high you need a ladder or if conditions seem unsafe. The idea that they're creatures of a predictable nature never occurs to the bees which is why I'll climb rooftops to knock them from trees.

* * *

The phone rang on a Thursday morning, the first week of summer. I'm an errant member of a beekeeper's association, and during a meeting I missed, Burton put my name on a swarm list. An older couple in South Austin had a swarm in their yard, and their niece was calling around to have them removed. My previous attempts and lack of brood boxes, the fact that they lived an hour away, and the restless nature of bees who had sat two days in the rain and would likely rise up now that the sun had broke through, didn't stop me from asking directions. I wanted to capture a swarm.

"One more thing," the lady said, before I hung up the phone, "my uncle wanted to make it clear that he's not charging anything to pick up the bees, but he's not paying anyone either."

The old man and his neighbor were waiting in the drive to greet me as soon as I stepped out of the truck. They knew a bit about bees but wanted to know why they had landed on the ground, why they'd swarmed in the first place and what I was going to do. An image of my swollen head crept into my mind with each question, but I had driven for an hour so fought off the urge to pretend I had the wrong house and crawl back to my truck.

The old man pointed towards two pecan trees in his backyard.

"Keep walking straight ahead. They're right between 'em."

I walked briskly towards the pile to avoid any more questions.

They looked like a glorious writhing mud puddle. The easiest way would be to find the queen, put her in the box, and wait for the rest to follow, but I've never been able to pick out a queen in a mess of her workers.

I walked back to the truck and began suiting up. White coveralls, bee

veil, and gloves. I left the smoker for the moment since I was already taking this extra precaution. Halfway back to the swarm, the old man asked if he could take my picture.

"You don't have to pose. I want an action shot."

I rested on my haunches, running my fingers through the bees, hoping his idea of action was a smooth transfer of bees from the ground to the box. A hum rose as I made a few passes through the swarm. There was no way I was going to find the queen. I looked up just as the camera snapped. I poured a handful of bees into the box. To my surprise, most stayed, so I repeated the process until there were more bees in the air and in the box than were left on the ground. I stood to let things calm down/

"Is it working?"

"I think so. I'm going to get the smoker started to see if I can get them to stay in the super."

The lighter fluid must have evaporated because match after match landed in the smoker and burned only a few seconds. I looked for twigs lying around, but the rain had left everything damp. My glove box was full of receipts, check stubs, and napkins, so I grabbed a handful of trash and began stuffing lit paper into the smoker.

"You got any lighter fluid?" the neighbor asked his friend.

"How about alcohol? That burns, doesn't it?"

"You mean rubbing alcohol?"

"Yeah."

"It burns, but not for long."

"I got gasoline."

I was fanning the paper, pumping the bellows, and praying something would catch when the old man emerged from the house with a bottle full of clear liquid. I thought he was kidding when he offered me moonshine.

"This shit will burn."

He dug the cork out with his pocketknife while I furiously lit matches, blowing on deposit slips that smoked and glowed but never caught on. The old man leaned over and poured moonshine into the smoker. A white-hot flame flared for a second, then nothing. Some paper was smoldering, so I stuffed the smoker full of sawdust and began pumping hard. I didn't think it would last long but wanted to return to the bees before the old man disappeared into the garage to seek gasoline.

Two separate clumps had formed in the box, a third dripped down the side. I couldn't tell which held the queen, so I smoked them all in an effort to make them unite. A handful was still on the ground so I scooped them into the box until almost every bee was either inside or hovering nearby. I moved the box about ten feet away and returned to check the original spot. A large bee, looking rather royal, was crawling along the ground with a few attendants in tow. I scooped her up gently, careful not

to crush her with my leather gloves, placed her in the super, and stapled the screen over the top.

"God damn, we did it," the old man said, handing me a beer.

"I finally rustled a swarm."

"You get all of 'em?"

"Enough."

We sat in lawn chairs, and in the midst of a whirlwind of questions about my wife, my job, politics and religion, three beers and a few bees that had been left behind, I realized that I keep bees because they're creatures one could buy and sell, but in order to work them, they have to roam free. I keep them because pesticides and parasites have virtually made the feral bee disappear. I keep them because once folks know that you do, they always will ask you, "how are the bees?"

I keep them because my grandfather did. My father tells stories of his walking on comb, licking honey from his hands. I keep them because my mother's father did; because my grandmother said that he came home one afternoon after helping his brother coax swarms from hollow logs, stung seventeen times on his arms and his head, which swelled so badly that by nightfall he looked like a stranger lying in bed. I keep them because I like the stories that old men tell at beekeeping meetings, where they bring their wives and notebooks with dates written in pencil of the day every year the white clover bloomed; and because of the stories Burton tells of a boyhood in Indiana, of two hives his parents bought him that grew to fourteen, and of his lifting a cover on a day it was raining, having his t-shirt pinned to his back, or of his sitting with binoculars on sunny afternoons watching workers land with orange and red pellets tucked in their legs. I keep bees because I long to be that little boy, discovering fear and a fascination for life, and because I want to live long enough to become that old man with half moons of wax beneath fingernails, propolis stains on white cotton shirts, dispensing wisdom, sweet as honey, from a tattered notebook.

Fiction

Last Train to Machu Picchu

Andrew Geyer

I somehow missed her at the station.

I blame it on the President of Peru, Alan Garcia, who went on radio and TV to let “his people” know that he was doubling the price of their bread. I blame it on the protest that started up in the *Plaza de Armas* in Cuzco two minutes after he finished letting them know it and became a riot in about two minutes and a half. The bread riot hit the shopping and tourist section just as David and I walked into it, and the looting became general—bakery windows shattering, plate glass crashing on stone streets, people shouting, the red-brown cobblestones of Cuzco disappearing under the sometimes-bare feet of mothers and fathers and children carrying loaves of bread, canned food, shirts and pants on hangers, radios and TV’s with the price tags still on—and then everything went gray in the smell of tear gas. There came the roar of machine gun fire, the meat-locker thud of billyclubs breaking bones, soldiers and police beating anyone carrying anything, beating anyone taking pictures—and David bobbing up and down in the crowd snapping shot after shot as we were carried two blocks downhill into the station, where we clawed our way onto the train that was already moving, pulling out for Machu Picchu early, ahead of the mob.

I somehow missed her on the train.

Pressed tight against the other backpackers who’d managed to shove their way on and the locals who’d bribed their way into First Class, and their baggage, and the hawkers—who were supposed to be barred from First Class cars but waded through yelling, *Pan dulce! Trigo tostado!*—and the smell of hot bread and fresh-roasted corn carried in wooden boxes, I caught no sight of her. I leaned out the window to breathe and was distracted by the Andes Mountains passing gray and green and brown, cloud-wrapped, capped with snow. Three pale, thin contemporary modern dancers from New York craned their heads around David’s and mine, demanding our immediate attention, our place at the window, our lungfuls of air, until a pair of gangling Swedes with neon rucksacks proposed, very practically, that we view in turns. And while I hung sometimes head and shoulders out the window breathing deep into green river gorges, sometimes stood wedged against the wall of the car hardly breathing at all, she remained an anonymous body among bodies fighting for air.

I somehow missed her.

The train braked into Aguas Calientes and the shoving match started and my whole world closed down to the black fedora and broad shoul-

ders of the Indian woman ahead of me. The red-and-black patterned blanket around her shoulders snugged the baby against her back, his tiny face staring into mine very dark brown and stoic. We inched forward, the black fedora bobbing with the Indian woman's slow steps I could feel in my body until we stumbled out into the open air and became separate again. The Andean sunset faded moment by moment as I made my way through the mix of mud and raw sewage that lined the tracks. Up a set of concrete steps, then up streets as steep as steps, I climbed fast toward the far youth hostel. Separated from David and the dancers, half-lost in the Andean evening and gasping the high air, I stopped for a moment, alone. For the first time since Cuzco I thought about bare feet on cobblestones and the smell of tear gas and the sound of machine guns and clubs breaking bones and I breathed a quick prayer for those people. Then I looked back down the slope at the tourists swarming up behind me and breathed silent thanks for the parting advice of the practical Swedes as they shouldered their rucks and de-trained early for the three-day hike up the Inca Trail, to catch their first sight of Machu Picchu from above.

I was thinking of God and Machu Picchu when she appeared.

Below me, the yellow gleam of the streetlamps turned the mist that had started to fall into tiny drops of urine drifting gently down onto the ramshackle stucco buildings, the passers-by. She walked into the lamplight and made the world stand still. And there was at that moment no God, no Machu Picchu, no urine-mist—only the sight of her face, pale-gold beneath gold hair. Then she passed on, winking out like eyes closed into the sound of gutters draining stone streets, the sewer-scented stillness of the Andean night.

Crushed again, this time by tourists pressing forward to get the last rooms at the last hostel in town, I was glad to be in front even if I died there. I braced both elbows against the wooden counter that had been worn smooth by elbows braced exactly as mine were now and wrote as fast as my fingers would move, racing the last of the room keys dwindling from the rack behind the front desk.

"Do you think," I heard someone say, "they will have beds enough for all of us?"

I held out finished registration forms, one each for David and myself, along with my passport and two red-and-blue-and-brown thousand-Inti notes. Then, nodding down the counter at the line of backpackers frantically filling out forms and waving Inti notes, I tried to make eye contact with the desk clerk.

"It doesn't look promising," I said.

"Then do you think you could help me? All the other hotels in town are full, except for two cots in the lobby at a rather unpleasant place called Gringo Bill's."

The lean Indian face of the desk clerk looked as desperate, almost, as the white tourist faces. But his eyes were black. Black, and with the fixed, wide-eyed stare of someone terribly rushed but trying not to look panicked, they took in my registration forms and passport. In them, I saw my two thousand-Inti notes disappear.

"*Un doble?*" I said.

"*Sí,*" he said, rapid-fire. "*Dos camas. Una pila.*"

"*Y el baño?*"

"*Es en la sala.*"

"Please!" I heard the voice come again, behind me. "Please, can you help me?" I saw the clerk's eyes slide past me, off to one side of the line where the voice had come from. I saw them freeze. My eyes couldn't help but follow.

And change.

Pale skin, pale hair, eyes dark green—a kind of anti-symmetry—every part of her perfect, ground fine as a lens that takes in every single thing and turns it upside-down.

"*Necesito un otro cuarto,*" I say, feeling myself slide more Intis toward the desk clerk.

"A double," I hear her say.

"*Un doble.*"

"*No hay un otro cuarto,*" he says. But the Intis disappear. Another registration form seems to materialize out of the counter. I hear him go on, much lower, "*Del lado.*" Next door.

Two wooden cubes appear with room numbers painted in white dots on all sides, like dice, and keys tied through holes in one corner onto leather thongs. The numbers read 3 and 5. But when I reach out to take them the clerk shakes his head.

"*Necesita primera una forma,*" he says.

"We've got to fill out a form," I say.

"Von Kreis. German spelling. V-O-N K-R-E-I-S," she says slowly, as though she is used to dictation and giving me time to pick up the pencil and find the space on the form. "Vera. Passport number: 200218. Occupation: Student. Place of birth: Munich, Bavaria, West Germany. Current address: Judenstrasse, 8+10/210, 9604 Bamberg."

"I've got it," I say. Then, "*Muchas gracias,*" to the clerk and sliding more Intis, I take the keys.

"And you?" she says.

"And me what?"

"Well," she says, narrowing eyes as deep green as river gorges, "you know everything about me."

"Only your passport," I say.

"What about yours?"

"Hauser," I say, "*Deutsche Rechtschreibung.* H-A-U-S-E-R. John.

Passport number: J304811. Occupation: Undecided. Place of birth: San Angelo, Texas, U.S.A. Current address: In transit."

"You speak German, then?"

"*Ein bissien.*"

"Tell me, how does one come to be 'in transit'?"

"One comes to a fork in one's road and plows straight ahead."

"Well, I am glad you found the path that led here," she says, taking a key with fingers cool and smooth as high mountain water. "If not, I would be sleeping in the street. Or on one of those awful cots at Gringo Bill's."

"I was warned by two practical Swedes that if I wanted a room, to climb very fast to the farthest youth hostel up the mountain."

"I see no Swedes," she says.

"They decided to hike the Inca Trail."

"That is not so practical. I read in the newspaper yesterday that the bodies of two German girls were found on the Inca Trail. They had been raped and murdered. The paper said it was the Shining Path. There was hardly enough left of them to match bodies to passports."

Then she digs into her daypack, pulls out a roll of Intis, starts trying to hand them to me.

"Wait," I say. "Why not buy me dinner instead? Or better yet, let me buy you dinner."

"I have a friend," she says.

"Then it must be a girlfriend," I say, knowing no man in his right mind would send Vera off alone, after dark, in the rebel-held mountains.

"*Nicht wahr?*"

"Ja," she says. "A girl friend."

"Well I have a friend who's a boy. Why not get our friends together, and find some food? It would be safer."

Call it inspiration.

Looking into her face I feel again as though I am in the bread riot at Cuzco. Her eyes catch me up and carry me along, my feet hardly touching the floor as I shoulder our rucksacks and follow Vera, wondering where in the world she will set me down.

"The Galapagos," she says, "are a must-see," in her slight German accent and her English that is better than mine.

"Volcanoes," her friend says, "and black lava beaches, and water so clear you can see the ocean floor from the surface."

The friend's name is Heike and next to Vera she looks as plain as the corn on her plate. The rest of us ordered spicy Andean chicken and a rich bean dish flavored with red peppers and pork. But Heike ordered vegetarian. And the only non-meat offering at *Café el Gato Negro* in Aguas Calientes is roasted corn.

"The giant tortoises," Vera says, "are more than a hundred years old."

And there are sea lions, and marine iguanas. Even equatorial penguins.”

“All with no fear of humans,” Heike says, “so that you can approach them in their natural habitat.”

It isn’t the plank walls around us, built out of the same bleached-gray wood as the table in front of us, or Heike looking up from her uneaten corn to stare at Vera sitting next to me and then back down into her corn—or even the contemporary modern dancers waving from one of the five other tables in the cafe and David going back and forth between us and them—that let me know the dinner is a disaster. Rather, it is the sight of Vera sitting next to me, staring off into space and talking about someplace she would rather be.

“How do you get there?” David says, looking across the cafe. At the same time less pale and more colorless than Vera, the dancers lack the spark of deep green life in her eyes. Whispering among themselves and watching David watch them, they giggle as they wave. David giggles and waves back.

“You can go by boat,” Vera says, “from Guayaquil.”

“And hire smaller boats,” Heike says, “to take you around the islands.”

“It sounds expensive,” I say.

“It is much cheaper than flying,” Vera says.

“How much cheaper?”

Heike looks at Vera staring out into the remembered Galapagos, then at David giggling across the cafe. “You may find it,” she says, “less dear than the cost of this meal.”

Is she jealous, I wonder? Is she warning me away? I catch the eye of the Indian woman in the corner, the same one who took our order and cooked our food. I signal for the check, holding up both hands and writing into one palm until I see her red-and-black patterned skirt start across the gray plank floor.

Then I look back at Heike, who seems to be the only one paying me any mind. “That was one of the good things about growing up on a ranch in Southwest Texas,” I say. “You always knew what was what and who was who.”

But outside again, watching Vera’s face flash and fade past mist-haloed streetlamps, the only thing on my mind is the bathing suits under our clothes. There is a hot spring in town, and we are headed there now, climbing away from the restaurant beside the tracks. The thought of my Intis running low, the trickle of gutters, the smell of raw sewage—all seem far away with Vera walking beside me.

Call it desperation.

Seeing the heavy wrought-iron gates shut, padlocked, set into a ten-foot wall between the four of us and the hot spring, I take the wall at a run. I plant a foot halfway up and leap skyward, catching hold of the rough

wooden ledge at the top. Then I pull myself onto the platform I find there. Ignoring completely the whispered objections of Heike and David about capture, police, Peruvian jails, I hunt up a long wooden pole with nailed crossbars and lower it over the wall. I only let myself think far enough ahead to steady the ladder as Vera starts to climb.

"Are you crazy?" David says.

"I am going back," Heike says.

"Go back then," I hear Vera say. "Maybe we'll see you later."

I raise the ladder behind her.

Inside it is open to the sky and mist drifts down on the path that leads to the pool. A cloud of steam hovers over the water. The light of a single bulb reflects off the surface, bleaching the steam that swirls up and the mist that drifts down gray-white as the Milky Way. The light glistens on the wet concrete around the pool so that the courtyard seems to be floored with planets and stars. There are dressing rooms on two sides with hooks on the doors to hold clothes, but Vera has no bathing suit. She lets fall her long skirt slowly, lets fall her jacket and shirt, and stands naked in the light for a moment. Then she slides, lean and lithe and clean-lined, into the water.

I slide in behind her and the feel of the pool is almost scalding after the cold mist on my skin. Roils of water glide like hot fingers across my body. We meet in the middle where the water is deepest. Our toes barely touch bottom and for the first time we go past passports, past places we would rather be, into the gray-white space where the mist drifts down from the sky like the sweat of stars.

Later, much later, I do not know if I slept. I close my eyes but there is only Vera's face behind them, the feel of her body cooler and more smooth than the feel of the pool. I do not know if I remember our coming together there in the water or only dream. There is no sense of time. Only waterlogged fingers and steam rising up off our skin as we pull on our clothes, whispering of Machu Picchu together in the morning, and after, the train back to Cuzco and on to Lake Titicaca.

In the morning we climb the mountain together and I know that the pool was no dream. A wide asphalt road snakes back and forth, black against the deep green mountain. We walk across it again and again, Vera and me, and Heike, up through low trees and underbrush, over outcrops of rock covered with moss, dodging busloads of tourists too lazy to make the climb. Out the windows of one bus lean David and the dancers, yelling something that gets lost in the diesel breeze. Instead of waving back, we laugh out loud at them. Anyway, Vera and I laugh. Heike looks hard at Vera and does not smile. But as we pass through the layer of clouds and into bright sunshine, even Heike has to laugh at the impracticality of it—of paying ten thousand Intis to ride a bus for a mile. I help Vera up over the stones through a gate at the top of the road finally,

to catch sight of Machu Picchu from below.

Deep green Andean peaks float like islands in a sky of clear water. Gray, worn by wind, the ruins cover the flat space on top of the mountain as though they have always been there, and will always be, waiting for Vera. I look at Machu Picchu and she is all I see. Vera sitting on stones hand-cut and carried, joined together without mortar into walls that once held emperors' wives. Vera walking among rock-ribbed tiers of earth that once were fields. Vera standing, her hair blown back by the wind, on smooth stones that used to be an observatory where seasons were measured by the sun and stars and months by the moon.

Call it divination.

In the ancient look out post at the head of the Inca Trail we stand, the three of us, and look down at Machu Picchu. Andean peaks surround us, the same shade as Vera's eyes. I look out into them and confess that this is the first time I have ever stood on top of a mountain, and Vera laughs at that—at the impracticality, she says, of not being well-traveled enough to have ever scaled a peak. I try to explain that in Southwest Texas there are no mountains, only hills, and that the rolling plains of prickly pear and mesquite were once underwater, so that sometimes in the dry white strata you find fossils of creatures who lived in the sea. But I stumble over my words and she goes on laughing—at the impracticality of it, she says, only at the impracticality.

But farther down the wall, I see Heike shake her head. "You may find," she says, "that you would have been better off on the Inca Trail, lost or in rebel hands with your practical Swedes."

Later that afternoon, standing in the mix of mud and raw sewage next to the railroad tracks, I think again of those words as I wait for Vera. I stand alone next to the passenger car we agreed to board together until the train starts to pull away. I walk beside the train as it picks up speed, looking into the restaurant where we ate dinner, looking in the windows of ramshackle buildings, walking faster, running now—until David leans out the doorway of the last Second Class car on the train, catches me by my rucksack straps, and hauls me aboard.

"Are you crazy?" he yells. "You could've been killed!"

"Have you seen Vera?" I say, from the floor.

"What?"

"We were supposed to be buying Second Class tickets together, for the train to Lake Titicaca."

"Jesus," David says, "why didn't you say so before? I talked to Heike. She and her friend bought First Class tickets. She said to meet them in Cuzco."

"Who said to meet them in Cuzco?" I say. "Heike or Vera?"

"Heike," he says. "No, Vera."

"Was it Heike or Vera?" I say, fighting the urge to kick David out the

door.

"Heike about Vera," he says. "I think. For Christ's sake, get up off the floor. They've got chickens in here."

In a Second Class corridor with the dancers and chickens and David, I watch the mountains pass outside the door and try not to think of anything at all. It is easy to ignore the dancers, who are as practical as the Swedes but in a different way. Apparently their New York academy is very prestigious, and they are too sensible to waste more than giggles on someone who never knew it existed before yesterday. But not even the sour stench of chickens in cages is enough to keep my mind off the expression on Heike's face at the *Café el Gato Negro* and again at the look-out post—and the awful, empty feeling that I'll be seeing it again at Cuzco when I get off the train.

It is indeed Heike's face I see and the same expression on it. We meet in the station, in the thickest part of the crowd. But despite the brush and bustle of bodies and the mocking look in Heike's eyes, the only thing I feel is sick of laughing—sick at the thought of the three of us on the mountainside laughing together at the impracticality of paying ten-thousand Intis for the bus ride to Machu Picchu and sick at the thought of Vera laughing alone in the look out post at the impracticality of me.

"It's just not practical!" I say, forcing myself to look away. Far up the track, the engines are being changed.

"It is completely practical," Heike says. "This is our last week in South America. Vera wants to spend it in La Paz, on the cocoa plantation of the man she met in the Galapagos."

"Why the hell didn't she tell me?"

"I tried to tell you myself, but you never listened. If anyone was impractical, it was you."

"Me?"

"It was you who queered things right from the start. You and those dancers and that mad dash up the wall. Don't you see? It was David that Vera wanted. She noticed him on the train. The one who wanted you was me."

"I don't think I know what practical means anymore."

"Practical," Heike says, "means exactly what Vera is. She can always find someone else to be impractical for her. After all, think how practical it was just now for her to send me."

So I sit far back in Second Class with David and the dancers and every chicken in Peru, and I think about practicality. The train pulls out of Cuzco station and out of Cuzco town and into the high mountains, and I think about Vera being what practical means. Until finally, someplace deep into the high plain that runs the length of the Andes, everything in my head clicks together—and I understand that I have to work my way up to First Class.

I leave my rucksack behind with David and make my way forward, wading through Indians, tourists, hawkers, pickpockets, and animals in and out of crates. But it is the conductors that are most difficult. They won't let anyone forward without a First Class ticket or a hefty bribe. The train is very long and at the first stop it is splitting, with the back part going on along the *Altiplano* toward Lake Titicaca and the front heading off through a gap in the mountains and on to La Paz. Time stretches out into wading and bribing in much the same the way the mountains stretch along the high plain. Just about the time I run through the last of my Intis, I feel the train begin to slow.

The conductor doesn't want to let me off the train. By the time my feet hit the crushed rock beside the tracks they are already uncoupling the front from the back, which must wait for new engines. I run along past car after car looking in windows. Finally, in the second First Class coach from the front, third window, I catch sight of gold hair. I reach up and knock on the glass. But sitting there in her First Class seat next to Heike, Vera shows no sign at all of having heard. She just sits and stares out past the *Altiplano*, past me, her deep green eyes turning the world upside down until the train starts to pull away.

It picks up speed slowly, the way old trains pick up speed. A thick black cloud behind fades long and low. Gasping in the thin air, breathing the burnt-sweet smell of diesel, I search the windswept plain for a hand out a window, a flash of gold hair. But there is nothing, not even a station, just a running-together of tracks and the back end of a train waiting on engines here where Andean peaks run like low hills, empty of Vera. ❖

It was a bad time for a relative to be dying. With an acquaintance, even a friend, you could go about your business, get in a full day's work, eat well, have great sex, while the person wasted away. And when they finally shut up shop, you could cram all the grief into one or two hours of wake and funeral, recite some sweet nothings over rosary beads, and it was over.

Blood relations were different. Whatever your circumstances, their withering malady hung on your back like an e-boli infected monkey, every so often biting you viciously on the neck. And my own circumstances just then were critical. You see, I was kicking heroin. Not that writhing, jerking, leaving a trail of spit on the bathroom floor crap. That's only in the movies. Your common, everyday, heroin withdrawal is more like a bad flu, a frightfully bad flu—sweats, shakes, nausea, vomiting—and I was proficient, having kicked more times than I could count. I had chucked the kit yet one more time when word came, straight from the corpse's mouth.

"Hey Jude," Uncle Ray greeted me in a soft, distant, voice, a bad telephone connection, I figured, common in the lines between Victoria Island and Los Angeles.

"Sweetie," he said, when we had exchanged pleasantries, "we've always been straight with each other, going way back to when you were a little girl asking about Santa Clause, remember that?"

"You told me Santa Clause was really Che Guevara," I answered, incredulous, "and his workshop was in Havana, Cuba."

He laughed weakly, deteriorating into a hard cough, and I knew there was more to his feeble tone than distance.

"I'm dying, Jude," he revealed without wavering. "Cancer. It came on so sudden, I'm not sure what to make of it myself."

Of course, I had to say something that meant something, and through the haze, I instinctively uttered the first thing that came to mind, "I'll be on a plane tonight, Uncle."

Once out, I knew I had stumbled on the right answer.

"Thanks Jude," he said, warmly. "I couldn't imagine going without one last duet."

"Swan song," I thought to myself, then steered the conversation to superficialities—friends, music, Los Angeles since his departure decades before.

His exodus had left a void. Growing up, I had no family to speak of, my father a question mark, my mother a child herself, hopelessly inadequate. So I had stuck close to Uncle Ray, a pretty good blues pianist

for a white guy, who lived what struck me then as a scandalous, and therefore romantic, existence—booze, drugs, after hours clubs, twenty-four hour women. He taught me the subtleties of the blues, encouraged a budding singing career, and inadvertently exposed me to the vagaries of heroin.

“By the way, Jude,” he added as we said our good-byes, “you sound like you might have something of a bug yourself. Are you sure you’re up to the trip?”

“Just a slight cold; I’ll be there,” I assured him, but whatever conviction I had quickly dissipated when my trembling hand made even the simple act of hanging up near impossible.

I cursed myself, then him, with the shameless zeal only a withdrawing junkie could muster. But I had promised a dying man, not the kind of deal that could be so easily left on the side of the road, like a heroin kit. And so I muddled through preparations for the trip—made plane reservations with a quivering voice, then packed, or what passed for packing, absentmindedly tossing clothes with no relationship whatsoever, into a small valise.

The cab ride to L. A. International was a blur, the details of check-in, a tortuous assault. The flight itself was spent huddled, sweat-soaked and trembling, beneath a flimsy airplane blanket, like Ratso Rizzo on that bus to Florida in *Midnight Cowboy*, enduring the piteous stares of the flight attendants, just a whispered profanity from wetting my pants.

With stopovers, I arrived on the island in the afternoon, thrust into that ethereal state lingering just beyond physical sensation, where the psyche retreats when the body becomes uninhabitable. It was a place I had been before, after days of fasting and insomnia brought on by non-stop heroin use.

* * *

Any other time, Victoria would have been a pleasant getaway, a picturesque island, a quaint city with a European feel. Uncle had migrated there in the sixties drawn by an abundance of blues clubs and, over the years, had played with some of the greats—B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, Elroy James, Howlin’ Wolf, Muddy Waters, and his favorite, Big Mama Thornton.

I had hoped to kick up there in peace, but arriving at Uncle Ray’s, the atmosphere was strangely more party than deathwatch. People in vivid colors were scattered throughout his flat, pockets of men and women in lively conversation, a duo playing guitars in the living room, a raucous poker game rumbling in the den, three or four in the kitchen cooking what appeared an enormous amount of food.

Uncle Ray was in his bedroom surrounded by friends, engaged in a

lively discussion on the role of God in the playing of the blues. He was still incredibly handsome for a man his age, any age, with features hard to place—dark skin and eyes, short-cropped hair, pepper leaning to salt, distinctive but generic at the same time—he could as easily have been from Iran, the Cayman Islands, or the Bronx.

I stood for a few minutes at the door, marveling at his easy interaction with a roomful of intimates, his voice booming, his laugh full, throaty, nothing like he had sounded on the telephone. Except for the fact that he was laid up in bed, there was not a whisper of death around this man. I thought for a moment he had been mistaken, or I had been in such a stupor, I had misunderstood, or maybe it had all been just a ploy to get me up here. Then, catching his breath, he winced, a look of pure pain crossing his face for just a split second. The crowd also seemed to flinch, then it passed, the entire room drawing a collective sigh.

“Jude,” he called spotting me through the bodies. “Jude, come here baby, have a seat,” he called, patting a spot on the bed next to him.

I put down my valise, moving unsteadily to his side, soaked to the bone, nearly collapsing into a long, desperate hug. He knew immediately something was wrong.

“This is my niece, Jude,” he announced. “The only relative with any balls still speaking to me.”

When the conversation had again dispersed, he turned to me, speaking softly, managing a private conversation in the busy room.

“All right, Jude. What the hell’s up?” he said sternly, searching my averted eyes. “This is no goddamned cold.”

“Heroin,” I muttered. “I haven’t fixed for a few days, so I’m kinda’ withdrawing.”

He looked at me for what seemed a very long time.

“Well then, it’s doubly good you’re here,” he finally said rubbing my neck. Then he lay back on his pillow, keeping a firm grip on my hand.

As afternoon edged into evening, the flat began thinning out, and by nightfall was deserted, Uncle Ray fast asleep. The empty room seemed to draw out his sickness, his dark face against the white pillow revealing a definite gauntness, his breathing labored, as if his comrades had taken his life juices with them. Having suffered miserably through the day, the shakes now returning with a vengeance, I kissed his hand, and also left his side, making my way to the empty kitchen.

Locating a bottle of Cabernet, I poured a large glass and gulped it down, straining for saturation. It calmed the shakes but primed the nausea that had been lurking all day, driving me to the bathroom where I vomited up what little remained in my system. Then I washed up, and tossed down a second drink, this one staying put.

Although I was not feeling what could be described as hunger, I could not recall when I had last eaten and figured in my damaged state,

it was a function I should not completely ignore.

Returning to the kitchen, I searched through the food cooked earlier in the day—eggplant parmigiana, roast duck, chile rellenos, a salmon dish, paella, black beans and rice—neatly packed and refrigerated. The provisions would have warmed his heart, he loved to eat, but in my delicate state, any one of these might have caused me to lift, sputter, and crash to the ground like one of those Russian rockets seen in historical films.

Back behind the entrees, I located a container of more modest chicken soup, microwaved a cup, and worked it down along with a slice of sourdough.

“Jude?” Uncle’s voice sounded miles away, and oddly frantic.

“Jude? You here, baby?” Again, almost pleading, a shallow murmur echoing through a cavernous flat.

“I’m here, Uncle. Hold on,” I called, then spit out what remained in my mouth, and returned to his bedroom.

“Sorry, I was just getting something to eat,” I said, falling into the chair next to his bed and again taking his withered hand, where age and sickness seemed to have accumulated. Although I continued to sweat and shiver, the wine, wash, and bites of food had propped me up, allowing me to draw a few unfettered breaths.

“Eat all you want, honey. I understand there’s a helluva’ lot of food in there, and when I die, I don’t wanna leave any leftovers.”

It was the first mention of death since I had arrived, and for the first time since I had gotten the word, I began to cry.

“Jude, honey. What’s that about?” he said reversing our hands, the corpse now comforting the cadaver. “Andy Warhol said that. It’s *his* niece that should be crying for godsakes.”

The utter absurdity of his statement drew a smile.

“Andy Warhol? The wolf’s at the door and you’re giving me Andy Warhol? Any idea how much time you’ve got?” I asked, again deadening the conversation.

It was a brutally frank question, maybe even heartless if it were someone other than Uncle Ray. But our relationship was based on a clean table.

“I should be dead *now*,” he laughed. “What you saw today was my wake. My idea. I always wondered what it would be like to attend your own. It was really quite touching. By the way, I had asked that everyone leave at the end of the day, so you and I could spend some time alone together. Some will return bright and early tomorrow morning to see how I’m doing.

“Anything you want to say about the heroin?” he asked, the sweat flowing freely between our hands.

“Want details?”

"I only want what you wanna give me."

"I started to speak, thought I'd spoken, but my words were mangled by a wave of rampaging shakes, stiffening my body, wrenching the color from my face. Uncle struggled over the bed, cradling my head to his chest.

"Looks like we're both dying, Jude," he said sweetly, rubbing my head. "But you're definitely going about it the hard way. Now, what do you want to tell me?" he asked, sensing the episode had passed.

"There are no tricks here, Uncle. I shot heroin, I got hooked. No bullshit, no excuses."

"I didn't expect any, Jude. I wouldn't accept any. So what're you gonna do now?"

"Stay here with you, until . . ."

". . . I die, honey, bite the dust, kick the bucket, expire, that's it baby, that's all folks, adios amigos. I'm okay with it, Jude. I fully expect to return, and if I don't, well, I'll never know the difference, will I?"

He let go a short, staccato laugh, sounding exactly like Popeye. I couldn't help but join him.

"There's a Howlin' Wolf album on the stereo there," he said, pointing to the system against the opposite wall. "Could you put it on for me?"

I did as I was told, carefully placing the outmoded vinyl platter, long since replaced in the modern world with tapes and CDs, onto the player.

"I'm going to miss you, Jude," he sighed as I returned to the chair, delicately lifting and caressing his hand. Then he began to speak of my childhood, evoking a simple time, decades removed, of gentle tunes, soft sun, wonderfully sweet fruit, as Howling Wolf wailed at the new moon, lulling me into a deep, sound sleep.

I was awakened around dawn by Uncle Ray, rejuvenated it seemed, eyes clear, the color returned to his cheeks, a warm smile across his face. He was sitting at his piano at the foot of the bed, singing a blues melody that once passed as a lullaby,

*. . . all along this path I tread,
my heart betrays my weary head,
with nothing but my love to save,
from the cradle to the grave . . .*

The song hung in the air, almost tactile, filling my nostrils, sitting sweet on my tongue. Uncle looked up from his piano, directly into my eyes, then was gone, leaving a deathly still room, infused with sunlight. But the taste, the smell, they were still there, and I turned to him on the bed, his head just off the pillow, his face etched with that same smile he had delivered minutes before.

"Damn him," I thought to myself, fighting back tears. "He doesn't look at all sick." But of course, he was dead.

I realized, then, something else had passed, the shriek of withdrawal, taking with it an anxiety that seemed to have hung on my chest like a horde of red ants, from the moment I had spiked that first vein.

Centering his body on the bed, his head on the massive pillow, I crossed his arms over his chest, as I had seen done on television, and kissed him gently on the forehead. Then, fulfilling what I considered his last wish, I made my way deliberately to the kitchen and laid out every bit of food in the house, readying the leftovers for the funeral guests, just arriving. ❀

Poetry

Caminado Sobre Agua

para mi abuelo, Federico Garcia de Peñitas¹

René Saldaña

The man
Who I had thought, as a child,
Could walk on the water
That gathered, flooded
At the end of the dirt driveway
After a storm,
I find could not walk on water;
Instead, walked into it,
Pants' legs rolled up to his knees,
To hold my hand, or to be with me
As I splashed in the mudbrown water
That in a few days would be
Rampant with swirls from tadpoles' tails,
Dimples on the water's surface.

It is he who occupied my days,
One, and a thousand more,
With stories of how it used to be,
Standing beside the coma bush
Squeezing the innerds of the tadpole sized fruits
Into the cupped palm of the spoon to make gum.
"This," he would say

Pointing in the direction of the expressway,
"Used to be dirt
From the Loop to Rio Grande.

*En carreta o a caballo lo caminabamos.*²

*Fue mucho después que lo hicimos en carro.*³

*Pero no como los de hoy.*⁴

*Ahora la tienen muy facil, mi'jo."*⁵

*Un día, más la eternidad me acuerdo de ti.*⁶

I know what it is to work hard,
I wanted to tell you.
Things haven't changed as much as you think.
The very stars that you looked on then

I look on today. They are my tears for you.
The sun burns just as hot.
Y que calor hace, Abuelo, how hot today is,⁷
And sweat rolls down my neck and back,
Streams down my legs
Like the streaks drying on my skinny legs
When we left the cool of the water
To talk about the old days
And the flowers in your gardens.

NOTES

- ¹ Walking On Water for my grandfather...
- ² In a carriage or on horseback we traveled it.
- ³ It wasn't til much later we did it by car.
- ⁴ But nothing like today's.
- ⁵ Today, you all have it real easy, son."
- ⁶ One day, plus all of eternity I remember you.
- ⁷ And how hot today is, Grandfather, ...

Yorick

Javen Ronald Tanner

The sky was muted stone. Small rain
Summoned old ghosts, who rose in the
Stinging scent of the wet desert.

We had come to touch the red sand hem;
We had come to be healed.
Our bodies had already changed,

But we knew something of resurrection:
We felt it in the scratch of the sage,
The desolation of the cattle fences,

The low swoop of the red-tailed hawk.
Under the petroglyphs,
We read the stories—

Hands, antelope, gods.
We moved in a gentle ceremony
Through great barrels hollowed into stone.

We touched ancient corncobs and pottery,
Pinion beads and juniper sprigs.
Though we did not know it,

We had come for the exhuming:
And when we uncovered you
The world went silent.

The subtle shock of history
Broke in small fevers,
A hot dew under our eyes.

We were afraid to touch you,
But we did it slowly,
Feeling only hasty desecrations could be cursed.

Two spiders trickled out of your left eye,
Sand fell from your teeth, and you were majestic.
We had questions for you:

*Who are you, and who
Left you here? Did they wail
With the slow burning of loss?*

*Is it good to sleep in the earth?
To mix blood with soil?
Flesh with dust?*

We took turns holding your skull, testing its weight,
Rubbing the smooth curvature of sound bone.
We believed the stories—

Hands, antelope, gods.
And we were whole again,
Quickened in the cold spell of mortality.

Tamarisk

—A rejoinder to Dick Barnes

Lynn D. Gilbert

Useful as it is—mesquite
or “screwbean”—there’s no good
wishing it back. It packed its fat bags

and moved on. Its neighbor, athel
or tamarisk, “alkali-eater,
moved in and set up house

on this sandbar where the Cimarron
takes a new tack
sliding down through Kansas.

Up on the mountain, where
juniper gives way to lodgepole pine,
the wind remembers

snow, that smell,
but forgets the screwbean,
the sweet pods of mesquite,

its lacy shade spread like drying
curtains, even its thorns.
Make friends with lean athel,

its limber grey-green whispers.
Bend with it and the river
and the wind coming around

the far fork of the canyon
with its satchel full
of grit, its dusty shoulder.

The End of Symbolism in the Land of Enchantment

Chris Patrick Morgan

1.

As retribution for their dissension,
their wills, Oñate ordered his Spanish guard
to maim every male Acoma,
sever one of their feet and force them
into slavery.

This is common knowledge in New Mexico.

To commemorate *cuartocentenario*,
the 400th anniversary of the Spanish arrival,
several Acoma picked the lock on the gates
of the Monument to Oñate and removed the foot
from his statue.

Why must they write letters to the editor
explaining their actions?

2.

“The *horno* is one aspect of Spanish oppression
we chose to incorporate in our daily lives.”

— Taos Pueblo Tour Guide

3.

A 14-year old boy finds a clay pot
in an unmemorable cave on forgettable scrublands.
He possesses the naïveté and willingness
to learn and understand, traits which make
our children so precious, and so he takes the pot
to the Los Alamos National Laboratory for study,
and some top men at the Los Alamos National Laboratory
date the pot to the early 1600s: a combination
of Pueblo clays and Spanish mortaring,

with a blending of new and old techniques.
The parrot feathers woven in-between the layers
indicative of the original trade routes between
native peoples of Mexico and New Mexico.
Living history.

The Los Alamos National Laboratory decides to keep it
locked up in a glass case, on display for those of us
with Q clearances.

4.

Rio Arriba County, nestled in the Rio Grande Valley between
the artist colonies of Taos and Santa Fe, has the highest rate of
drug-related deaths in New Mexico, which has the highest
rate of drug-related deaths in the United States of America...
so reads a story in the Skagit County Herald in Washington
state, and the residents cut tulips and roses from the lowlands
surrounding the Skagit River and send them to New Mexico,
which suffers from drought, an overabundance of funerals
and a lack of flowers.

5.

Carmen was a flop.
His master work ridiculed,
Bizet died depressed.

Santa Fe's premiere
of Carmen. The patrons pay
no heed to Bizet.

6.

Feynman made a one-dollar wager
with a colleague on whether the test
at the Trinity site would burn up every
atom and molecule in the atmosphere.
Payment for the bet was left behind,
taped to a new, unknown,

metamorphic rock, either to be stolen
or eaten by an oryx.

7.

The unveiling of the new Waste Isolation Project Plant in Carlsbad, New Mexico, the first underground storage site for low-level nuclear waste in the United States of America, was delayed for several months while scientists, anthropologists and archaeologists assembled with concerned citizens advocating nuclear safety in the meeting rooms at the Northern New Mexico Community College to craft symbols or diction or a language that would say “this stuff in these containers is bad, bad stuff” and be understood 10,000 years from now, when the half-life of the plutonium finally expires, or in the event that New Mexico is invaded by one of its neighboring, non-English speaking, hostile foreign powers. Mexico. The Republic of Texas.

8.

On the same day of the anniversary of the Alien crash landing near Roswell, with believers and skeptics alike assembling for debate and the swapping of UFO memorabilia, up in the nearby Sacramento Mountains, a quarterhorse named Elviseverywhere finishes last in the eighth race at Ruidoso Downs.

9.

The youth counselor sits with his head in his hands behind his desk, a view

of sunset in the Jemez in his window.
He sighs and accepts defeat. Santa Fe
has a generation of bored children.
They have no use for the pueblo dances,
art galleries or the mountains. Santa Fe
children wish for beaches and Disneyland,
having photographs taken with Mickey Mouse.
He leaves New Mexico to take a similar
position in Newport Beach, California,
only to find the children of Orange County
equally bored. They wish for mountains.

10.

Amid the cow skulls and ornate Southwestern
designs covering the walls of the KiMo Theatre,
there are swastikas. A cosmic symbol
of eternal well-being and spiritual good health.
And even though the Albuquerque cinema
was constructed while Hitler was still
in jail, there are some who call
for the swastikas to be removed.

If we'd allowed armies to dictate
our symbols, roses would
forever be scorned.

Corpus Christi Storm

Chris Patrick Morgan

It is the day of the sesquicentennial
celebration. We are struck by

the whims of distant hurricanes.
It has rained here every august

for the past 10,000 years, but still they try:
under awnings and gazebos, with damp hair

and lungs black, sooty as West Virginia.
I light a cigarette. It is not political.

Seasonably moist, you make like
a recluse: doors and windows behind

plywood and plaster. Turn the music
up a little louder. To my left: rain.

To my right: a cold shower. I part
the squalls and cast the water

into wine, if only to watch all
the alcoholics and problem drinkers

rush from bars and office buildings
with extended tongues. Where

did you get such a beautiful
halo? The ozone is burning,

and as the music and the revelers return
to the square, I find a darkened diner:

the waiter's arms folded, watching
Maddux pitch to McGwire.

The pop singer entering the grocery store
meets my eye, and we remember:

Vancouver's Commodore Ballroom.
The storm has washed ashore in

rural south Texas, affecting only stray
herds and the flights of butterflies.

their wings as wet as my soul.
I am freezing. I have so much to do:

young children swept down arroyos,
unnoticed as the parade moves

down Palace Avenue, while a semi
skids and nearly collides with a kayak.

I cannot remove these scars, these pox,
I cannot stand alone against wind

and river. I am a child in a parlor
at dawn on a saturday, waiting

to be punished: a kicked shoe
crushes a clock face.

Reviews

***Beyond the Frontier: Exploring the Indian Country* by Stan Hoig. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998; 352 pp. \$34.95 hardback, \$17.95 paper.**

Stan Hoig, in the Preface to *Beyond the Frontier*, explicitly states that the purpose of the book is "to consolidate in historical sequence the major explorations and expeditions into, across, and bordering the territory that was once the Indian Territory and is now essentially the state of Oklahoma; to provide an overview of the region when it was the habitat of the Native Indian; and to reveal life as it was in the region before the white man's influence became pronounced" (XI). This seems, at first glance, a daunting task, and one that would be impossible to accomplish successfully in a book of this modest size, as the author chooses to begin his work with the Spanish exploration of 1541 and trace the history of the region through to the end of the 19th century. Hoig does manage to live up to this promise.

He provides his readers with something beyond the typical reference book of Native American history. He has mined the archive of letters and stories and has incorporated these findings into a very readable text. While offering historical accounts, Hoig surpasses and then illuminates for the reader the true nature of the explorers through their own words. Letters to loved ones and multiple journal entries of explorers serve to show the personal side of the historical account so often lacking in books of this sort. This approach allows the reader to create personal relationships with the explorers.

In addition to the personal nature of the content, Hoig also provides the reader with a working knowledge of the actual historical events. Hoig's background as a journalist enables him to relate the events in something resembling a newspaper account, with all the pertinent information stripped to its vital essence. While some may see this as a hindrance to true scholarly research, the book markets itself as a supplement to more traditional reference works, not as a replacement for them. Hoig mixes history and culture, investigating the individual practices of the region's Indian tribes, as well as the practices of the various explorers. The appendix offers a brief biographical sketch of eighty-six different explorers who are featured throughout the course of the book. By marrying both the personal nature of the correspondences and journals with the historical facts, Hoig creates a book that works well to supplement other research texts.

The book has one fault: not enough visual information. Hoig traces exploration routes through various regions but fails to adequately illustrate these routes with maps, forcing the reader to either take it on faith or consult a map of the area. Hoig does, however, provide several maps,

but the book would benefit from more detailed geographical references. However, this weakness is overshadowed by the book's excellent content, as it approaches history from a unique perspective, offering a much more personalized version of history, and presents it in a reader-friendly format. In short, Native American history scholars would be well served to supplement their own reading with Hoig's book.

TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

ANDREW BLAIR SPENCER



***Martial Spirit: The Life and Works of General Charles King, 1844-1933* by John Bailey. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999; 308 pp. \$99.95 hardback.**

Professor John Bailey's *Martial Spirit: The Life and Works of General Charles King, 1844-1933* is a fascinating, insightful, critical biography of a military man, who served as an officer in the Southwest following the Civil War and, after retiring from the military, became a well-known writer of popular fiction. While providing a comprehensive overview of the period, Bailey renders a compelling portrait of his subject with excellent discussion of influences and patterns in his writing and analyses of specific works.

For students and scholars of Western fiction and film, especially of the Southwest, the most interesting and informative chapters are the final two, "King's Frontier Novels" and "The King Legacy." In the former, Bailey deals with the most substantial part of King's writing, his thirty-four frontier novels, and analyzes the conventions, stereotypes, and settings. One of King's important contributions is the picture he renders of post-Civil War military life on the frontier.

Drawing from his own experience, King presents a positive view of "the frontier army and the role it played in national expansion. Good triumphed over evil when the military clashed with 'savage' Indians or when crimes were committed by civilians and misguided soldiers." "Gentlemen of honor and women of romance" fill the pages of King's stories as he stresses "togetherness and hospitality" in the lonely frontier existence and argues that the American soldier "never received adequate recognition for his deeds of patriotism and valor." In some ways these novels could be considered the fictional counterpart of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay delivered in 1893, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The good people in King's stories gain strength and courage while learning independence and resourcefulness from their experience in living on the frontier.

In the final chapter "The King Legacy," Bailey concentrates on the

"vision of frontier military life" King promotes. As a former frontier soldier, King attempts to relive his "Western experience through the eyes of ... his characters." According to one editor, "King depicted the American soldier and army life ... with his pen as faithfully as did the late Frederick Remington with his brush." Twenty years before Owen Wister made the cowboy a national hero, Bailey notes, "King was busy developing the image of the Indian-fighting trooper in mass culture. Indeed, King ranks as one of several 'co-creators of the Western,'" romanticizing and celebrating the American West and glorifying "patriotic and gentlemanly citizens."

King became friends with Buffalo Bill Cody, and they collaborated on several Western films, forging a vision of the West that was violent and filled with "evil, bloodthirsty Indians battling heroic cavalrymen to the death while white families huddled in vivid anticipation at isolated frontier forts." His friendship with Cody continued until Cody's death in 1917.

One of the most interesting discussions in the book concerns the question of King's influence on John Ford's Western films. Bailey persuasively argues the likelihood that Ford and / or his writers, Dudley Nichols and James Warner Bellah, were familiar with King's fiction. As Bailey suggests, there are many close similarities between the military life King writes about in the various forts scattered along our frontier during the 1870s, 80s, and 90s and John Ford's dramatization in his "cavalry trilogy": *Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Rio Grande*.

Both King and Ford portray the Indian in similar ways; both emphasize the hierarchical structure of the military; both depict a lively social life in the forts, featuring parties and dances; and both dramatize the courage and honor of the officers and foot soldiers alike, showing particular sympathy for the Irish immigrants.

Bailey is especially good in his analysis of *Fort Apache*, emphasizing Ford's skill at mythmaking, and he draws some fine correspondences between the film and King's novel *The Colonel's Daughter*, showing that King and Ford "had the same vision of army life on the frontier."

In addition to rendering a vivid picture of the complex and varied frontier life flowing through King's Western novels, Bailey has created a stirring picture of a lively and memorable personality at a crucial moment of our national expansion. He has also included a bibliography of King's works, in addition to a general bibliography very useful to anyone interested in the American West, particularly the Southwest, in the latter half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. This is a highly readable, well documented biography of the man Charles King and an excellent history of his time.

QUINNIPIAC COLLEGE

LEN ENGEL

***Ten Texas Feuds* by C. L. Sonnichsen. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000; 248 pp. \$16.95 paper.**

When Charles Leland “Doc” Sonnichsen died in 1991 at age 89, he left a rich legacy of books about the Southwest and was widely seen as the inheritor of the mantle of “Mr. Southwest” that J. Frank Dobie wore for years. Doc’s Southwestern ties were made rather than born, resulting from his intense research and writing and his dedication to his subject. Unlike Dobie who was born and reared in the Southwest, Doc Sonnichsen was born in Iowa in 1901 and came to Texas in 1931 to teach at the Texas College of Mines in El Paso after finishing a Ph.D. at Harvard.

With jobs scarce during the depression, Doc stayed as the school changed to Texas Western College and then to the University of Texas at El Paso, devoted himself to seeking and telling the region’s stories, and developed a strong interest in the intense history of feuding in Texas. He wrote a 700-page manuscript that he was forced to trim. He cut ten stories and published the rest as *I’ll Die Before I Run* in 1951. The ten edited stories became *Ten Texas Feuds*, first published in 1962 and now republished with a new foreword by Dale Walker.

Included are the stories of the Regulators versus the Moderators in Shelby County; “Old Rose and Senator Potter”; the “Frank’s Case”; the Hoodoo War; the story of Sam Hasley of Bell County; the El Paso Salt War; the Laredo Election Riot; “A Feud for Miss Sue Pickney” of Six Shooter Junction (Hempstead); the Mitchell-Truitt Feud in Hood County; and the tale of Gentleman Jim Miller of Pecos. Several of these tales have entered Texas literature: Elithe Hamilton Kirkland fictionalized the Potter story in *Love is a Wild Assault* and John Graves made the story of Cooney Mitchell a central episode in *Goodbye to a River*.

And Doc Sonnichsen must have learned something from all this research; he served as the chair of the English Department at UTEP for twenty-seven years and still lived to a ripe old age.

SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

MARK BUSBY



***Pobre Raza! Violence, Justice, and Mobilization Among Mexico Lindo Immigrants, 1900-1936* by F. Arturo Rosales. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999; 281 pp. \$19.95 paper.**

Based on extensive archival research conducted on both sides of the border, F. Arturo Rosales’ book, *Mexico Lindo* explores the history of the Mexican immigrant experience in the United States from the 1890s to the mid 1930s. The theme and temporal focus are important because the

1890s marked the beginning of large-scale immigration from Mexico that has continued almost unabated into the present day. This book offers a detailed historical treatment of the time period to which the author dedicates himself and also speaks to issues of contemporary importance.

The violence and turmoil of the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution from 1910-1919 dislocated hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, and many crossed the border into the southwestern United States. When they arrived, they entered a climate characterized by Anglo control of Mexican labor and joined other Mexicans who were either native to the region or had immigrated and found work on the railroads, in the mines, or as agricultural laborers during the 1890s. This massive influx during and after the Revolution provoked a reaction by middle-class Americans who perceived the Mexican immigrants as a threat to the society and culture of the United States. As Mexicans moved into industrial jobs in the Midwest, much of the white and black working classes began to resent them as competitors who lowered wages and took jobs. And although other immigrant groups from eastern and southern Europe shared some of these same burdens, Mexicans occupied a unique position.

Throughout much of the Southwest, especially in Texas, many Anglos had held negative attitudes about Mexicans since the first half of the 19th century. Proponents of Manifest Destiny justified U.S. encroachments into Mexican territory by denigrating what they saw as a mongrelized Mexican culture and people. Those sentiments were exacerbated by the anti-American overtone of the Mexican Revolution that manifested itself in threats against American property, border raids, and ethnic violence that disrupted society, especially in Texas. Partly due to the violence of the Revolution and efforts to justify American intervention in Mexico, one of the negative characterizations that Americans attributed to Mexicans was a perceived innate propensity to disorder and crime. So, in that climate, Mexican immigrants often found themselves in a situation where the only Americans that wanted them around were employers who desired them for their low-wage labor.

Because of language barriers, high rates of illiteracy, negative suppositions about them, and because they occupied subordinate economic and social positions, Mexican immigrants often came into contact and conflict with American institutions designed to maintain labor control and enforce law and order. Based on sound research and a fair-minded analysis of the data, including a chapter detailing Mexican on Mexican violence, Rosales demonstrates that Mexican immigrants soon became acquainted with the negative aspects of this encounter in the form of police brutality, prejudice in the courts, disproportionate arrest and conviction rates, the uneven application of the death sentence, and violence from white civilians that often went unpunished. The sting of

these experiences in America fostered the development of an intense expatriate nationalism in Mexicans that idealized "Mexico Lindo" (Beautiful Mexico) in contrast to their lives as immigrants. The image provided a sense of identity and community in what could otherwise be an alienating and hostile environment. Developing this theme allows the author to explore the role of both the Mexican government, especially local consuls, in defending the rights of Mexicans in the U.S., as well as the active role of the immigrant communities themselves.

Situating the first big wave of Mexican immigration within the context of mistrust and border violence, Rosales then offers a thematic treatment of immigrant experiences with American law enforcement. Due to the limits of space we cannot delve into the particulars here, but some discussion of the method and conclusions are in order. The book is presented in ten separate chapters that deal with particular aspects of Mexican immigrant interaction with the American legal system, police, civilians, or with U.S.-Mexican extradition practices, for example. The approach is effective in one way, as each chapter represents a coherent piece, but the stark delineations between themes detracts from an integrated cohesiveness to the book. As a result the reader does not get the sense that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Despite that drawback, Rosales integrates hard statistical data and particular illustrative episodes with cultural factors to explore the regional varieties of American ethnocentrism and provide a multi-layered perspective on the treatment of immigrants in the Southwest, California, and the Midwest. For example, the treatment includes analyses of popular attitudes such as those in Colorado that created the image that Mexican coal miners in Weld County accounted for two-thirds of all criminal cases. Rosales found that Mexicans actually represented no more than 10 percent of most cases, which was proportionate to their percentage of the population. By blending fact and perception the author offers valuable insight into the period studied.

At the same time, a healthy accumulation of data demonstrates patterns and frequencies of criminal activity by Mexican immigrants that lead to some fundamental conclusions. One is that Mexican immigrants attracted inordinate attention from the law. Between 1910 and 1930, Mexican immigrants clashed with the law more than other immigrant groups, but by the end of the 20s, the arrest rates began to decline along the border as immigrant communities matured. That contrasted with the experience in Los Angeles and Chicago, where police-Mexican polarization increased due to a rapid Mexican influx into those areas at a later time than occurred in border regions and into less mature *colonias*. Again Rosales offers both economic and cultural explanations for these phenomena and the waxing and waning of Mexican criminality and anti-immigrant sentiment.

One of the most interesting chapters of the book treats civilian violence. Again, Rosales explores a variety of motivations for Anglo violence toward Mexicans, which was most prevalent when employer abuse or collective action by working-class whites was carried out with the blessing of local authorities, as was often the case in Texas. This revealed the existence of a deeply embedded inequality sanctioned by American social and value structures, but which manifested itself based on regional realities. Eventually, as immigrant communities grew older and more assimilated, and as the violence and suspicion from the Revolution subsided, both Mexican crime rates and violence against Mexicans declined.

This work bridges an important interpretive divide between two phases in Chicano studies. Earlier scholarship concentrated on detailing examples of the past victimization of Mexicans in the U.S. in order to document their oppression, while recent approaches emphasize the agency and accomplishments of Mexicans despite the obstacles they faced. Rosales recognizes the importance of more agency oriented interpretations, as is revealed by the discussion around "Mexico Lindo Mobilization," but he effectively demonstrates that oppression and racism were defining ingredients of the Mexican immigrant experience and that they still require analysis and reinterpretation. One critique of this work may be that studying crime and violence sets up a confrontational discourse that highlights conflict and diminishes other realities. While that may be true, the issues presented here are offered as an important part of a larger whole. This book is well researched, clearly argued, and based on a wide array of Mexican and American newspapers, a twenty-year span of personal interviews conducted by the author, and the theme is important. The work stands as a valuable contribution; the issues it addresses, the data it offers, the conclusions it reaches, and the questions it raises for other time periods should provoke further research and inquiry.

SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

PAUL HART



***Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films* by Bernard F. Dukore. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999; 244 pp. \$18.95 paperback.**

In recent years a renewed interest in Sam Peckinpah's work supports the claim that he is one of the United States' most significant film directors. This claim is echoed by Bernard Dukore who writes "that Sam Peckinpah's feature films establish him as a major film director, one of the best America has produced, who is worth serious attention" (2-3).

Dukore's *Sam Peckinpah's Feature Films*, published thirty years after the release of *The Wild Bunch* (arguably one of the most significant Western films made and a counter-hegemonic film to the selective tradition of the dominant Westerns at the time) is a major contribution to the reassessment of Peckinpah's work. Dukore's assessment of Peckinpah's Westerns rides the same landscape as other writers, such as Stephen Prince's edited work entitled *Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch*. Dukore's book is important because he addresses Peckinpah's feature films—Western and non-Western—from *The Deadly Companions* (1961) to *The Osterman Weekend* (1983). An informative filmography is provided. The book is structured around four chapters: "What He Did," "Their Own Laws, Their Own Trails, Their Own Ways," "I Would Give You Some Violence," and "Continuing Companions."

Chapter One is relatively short and establishes that Peckinpah was not only a significant director but also a superb screenwriter. Peckinpah would take the freedom of changing the script during the filming process to enhance the film. In addition, Dukore convincingly demonstrates that the studio bosses or producers did make major changes to his films during the editing process, which undid Peckinpah's films, as evidenced by the restored versions. In this chapter Dukore points out that what Peckinpah did was make films "his own way."

In Chapter Two, Dukore claims that Peckinpah's style was influenced by the existentialist philosophies of Camus and Sartre, along with some intercutting of Plato, Tennessee Williams, and Bertolt Brecht. Using existential categories, such as choice, freedom, and bad faith, Dukore shows how Peckinpah's characters are flawed and ride the moral ambiguity landscape where there are no absolutes, only choices to be made in action. This is evidenced by four members of the *Wild Bunch*, Pike, Dutch, Lyle, and Tector, who choose to go out in a ballet of violence because there is no life beyond the gun. In addition, their choices are structured around the brutal event of Angel's being terrorized by the car, symbol for advancing modern technical rationality. A similar choice is made by Billy the Kid in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Dukore writes: "To Garrett's assertion (in the prologue) that times have changed, Billy replies: 'Times, maybe. Not me'" (179). And of course, the times change, but Billy isn't around to see them because he chooses death rather than face the future.

In Chapter Three Dukore shows how Peckinpah's filming and editing techniques force people to confront the issue of violence in brutally realistic ways. Dukore notes that for Peckinpah both women and men are capable of acting violently, suggesting a critique of traditional gender roles. While people tend to ignore and/or insulate themselves from violence, it is an aspect of society and even more so when cultures collide during times of social transformation. Dukore's analyses of

Peckinpah's filming and editing techniques demonstrate how Peckinpah makes us confront violence and in so doing (in, for example, *The Wild Bunch*), he undermines the classical Western view of killing, where a man is simply shot and falls down. Dukore notes that Peckinpah wants the viewers to experience subjectively "a truer representation of the real effects of violence..." (77). To awaken people from the dream world of sanitized violence, Dukore discusses how Peckinpah uses a variety of camera angles, camera speeds, jumpcuts, and intercuts in his violent scenes to get his desired effect.

In Chapter Four Dukore discusses several themes that provide variety in the Peckinpah *oeuvre* and yet connect the films to each other. Some of the themes are revenge, the use of flawed heroes as social deviants, an emphasis on realistically brutal violence, a belief in acting from a code of honor but not always consistent with it, an analysis of the end of an era, and a critique of American society. The critique focuses on the forces of the power structure that cares little for other people's lives and gets them to do its dirty work or killing for it.

Dukore's book shows how Peckinpah films represent a dark, critical side of American filmmaking, especially the Western, in much the same way that Cormac McCarthy critiques Western literature. Take for example the last sentence of *All the Pretty Horses*: "Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come" (302), a world where the dark side of the modernity (technical rationality) holds sway over the landscape.

PIEDMONT COLLEGE

KEN MELICHAR



***Contested Landscape: The Politics of Wilderness in Utah and the West* by Doug Goodson and Daniel McCool. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999; 266 pp. \$19.95 paper.**

First: let me explain how the book came to be and why the research is so extensive. Daniel McCool is associate professor of political science and Doug Goodson was a graduate student in that discipline in 1997 when he and other students in a class on "The Politics of Wilderness in Utah and the West" were given this challenge: each one would author or coauthor a book chapter based on original research. This book, this in-depth study of one of the major issues facing America, is the splendid result.

The dedication and use of public land in America has been a two-faced situation: on one hand, the public has certain parks and forests set aside to save them from exploitation; on the other hand, many corporations raped the land, often with the cooperation of those in charge of the

natural treasures.

Until twenty-three years ago the vast majority of lands were run as private preserves without regard to the public's wishes. Our first National Park, Yellowstone, was created 130 years ago in 1870, yet not until 1976 did the agencies in charge of public lands have to disclose their decisions and policies to the public. As a result of the National Forest Management Act and the Federal Lands Policy Management Act (both of 1976), the age of the bureaucrat was replaced, but not all to the good, by competing interest groups. Now, often people in special groups locked in fierce competition try to direct the use of public lands. This book, however, does not take sides; its purpose is to document what lies ahead for any group interested in land use.

Layers of federal and state laws affect business, recreation, and conservation uses of land, particularly in the West. The book's great value is that it explains the complex problems facing people whenever someone wants to alter land policy. As such, the volume is technical; it is filled with maps, tables, and charts; and it presents a logical view of how politics influences the use of, and the future of, our national land heritage.

The book also addresses the economic questions inherent in this matter. The most difficult question is "how to place an economic value on wilderness. It is as subjective as it is scientific" (209). For instance, will there be a "loss or gain of jobs that will accompany designation" (211) and would nonuse of the land generate more income (via retirees, vacationers) than business use? But beyond all of these individual points is this major one: "Do we really want hordes of people coming to the remote, beautiful places of southern Utah, whether they be miners, backpackers, or retirees?" (213).

Is the land for the people? Is the land for business? Can it exist for both?

Prior to the Environmental Protection Act, this question was moot, since business tended to control the use of land. Then a small book by a famous scientist, a series by a national magazine, and the blundering of Congress combined to show all was not well with America's vast land. After Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, business leaders and quite a few Senators exploded at the very idea that insecticides might be dangerous and that industry might not have the true interest of America at heart. (Read "Firestone," anyone?) As one man in California declared to the *New Yorker* (on June 29, 1962) "we can live without birds and animals, but...we cannot live without business.... As long as we have the H-bomb everything will be O.K."

Congress was unable to ignore Carson, and her view prevailed. But even though nearly 40 years ago the public awoke to the necessity of protecting natural resources from business, the situation has not been

totally and logically settled. Today, disputes about land use proliferate. Should urban development have precedence? Should we continue to pave one million square miles a year in America? At what point does protecting the environment become of foremost importance?

These questions face local areas as well as states. And what we decide to do in the future about wilderness areas will influence our decisions about other areas. And to reach sensible conclusions the public and the interest groups must know the facts. This book provides them in abundance. It is complex, yes. It is far-reaching, yes. And it clarifies many minor points too.

Beyond this, why care about Utah? It is because these issues are not separated by geography or ideology. How Utah approaches and resolves its situation will reveal what can and what cannot be done in other states as well on the question of conserving the land. Anyone interested in preserving the land for future generations, and who is willing to approach this volume as a textbook and not as mere popular literature, will be well rewarded.

The volume is a necessary one. Many thanks to those graduate students for their valuable accomplishment.

SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

JOHN S. HILL



***Writers on the Range: Western Writers Exploring the Changing Face of the American West* by Karl Hess, Jr. and John A. Baden. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998; 279 pp. \$34.95 hardback, \$19.95 paper.**

The breadth of Karl Hess and John Baden's *Writers on the Range* is almost as extensive as the Western rangeland itself. In twenty-one essays, divided into three thematic sections, Hess and Baden bring together environmentalists, storytellers, academics, feminists, poets, policy theorists, and ranchers (of the sustainable stripe) in an attempt to untangle the convoluted—and highly contested—blend of land use in the West. Thankfully, this collection has dispensed with the turmoil of defining the boundaries of the West. Hess and Baden spend little ink deciding whether or not California, Hawaii, or even Texas belong within the confines of their collection. Rather they straightforwardly present the West directly through their choice of essays, editorially painting an picture of a West of open spaces, large trees, sagebrush, desert, and quiet rugged mountain ranges. But their West is not just a land of spectacular beauty and solitude. This West is a space for living: a space where one finds a livelihood, raises a family, and dies.

The first section of *Writers on the Range* tackles head-on the challenge to environmental conservation presented by the ever-growing Wise Use movement. While still linking Wise Use to the "Lords of Yesterday," that is the entrenched politicians and institutions responsible for the maintenance of "traditional" Western lifestyles and vocations (ranching and mining for instance), the writers in this section maintain a sensitive position toward Wise Use ideals. Pointing out the fallacies of Wise Use's highly subsidized "free market" ideology, all of these writers affirm the legitimate tragedies of lost jobs, lowered wages, failed mortgages, and general heartache that have gone with the disappearance of industries and jobs traditionally tied to a locale and which often sustained multiple generations in Western families. Undoubtedly, these writers side against Wise Use, but all of their essays deeply consider the reasons for Wise Use's popularity in the West (and New England), attempting to incorporate some of its sensibilities into the creation of an environmental legacy.

In Part Two, Hess and Baden gather a Western "collage of vistas" (xvi). This section includes an essay by Linda Hasselstrom, poetry by Judy Blunt, and Stephen Bodio's hilarious sketch of the strange and hyper-multicultural folks residing in Magdalena, New Mexico. Part Two also presents a tapestry of the West: women's ranch life in Idaho, sustainable cattle production in Wyoming, broken marriages, carnivalesque towns, and computer commuters. These writers crush the Stetsons of Cowboy Poetry into the dust. Their narratives simultaneously detail the heartache of Old West mores and the distaste toward computer commuters and lycra-clad mountain bikers. But they also joyously celebrate the tolerance (which I might question) and open space of the West as well as the wisdom of cows.

The final section of this collection looks to the future of the West. Starting with the assumption that the traditional extractive industries indigenous to the West for the last 150 years are no longer economically viable, these writers ask how the West might reconstruct itself so as to maintain its beauty, culture, and economic health. These three components of the West remain at odds today as "traditional" industries may maintain "traditional" cultures but destroy the West's beauty, and Washington-centered environmentalism, bent on saving land for land's sake, decimate the West's decade-and-a-half old extractive economy. Collectively, these "policy scribblers" (xvi) attempt to project a viable future for the American West that provides stability and health to both its residents, new and old, and to the land itself.

Make no mistake, this book leans to the left. In the "Foreward," Ed Marston, publisher of *High Country News*, addresses the readership of *Writers on the Range* with a distinctly green "we" and writes: "We are appalled at the people our neighbors elect by wide margins to the state houses and the U.S. Congress. We are alienated politically" (xii). The

inclusive “we” of Marston’s *Writers on the Range* remain distinctly outside of the West’s democratically derived majority opinion. Marston’s brief lapse into assumed green collectivity makes me question the moral high ground of parts of this collection. Who, exactly, is “we” and who are “they”? I’m not sure if “I” should be appalled at the Stetsons, dirty baseball caps, and boots, or Lycra and Patagonia™. Regardless, even after this possibly alienating slip in the Foreward, Hess and Baden’s collection recovers its political breadth rather quickly. Most problematic throughout this collection, though, is its lack of attention about to the power of multinational capitalism. While the “policy scribblers” of the final section present numerous intriguing visions of the 21st century West, I found that they rely too heavily on the possibilities of local economic control and cooperation. While these ideals seem ideologically sound, the writers needed more attention to the effects of late capitalism on economies that do not produce profit or distribute profitability among members rather than controlling individuals. While the policies remain sound, these writers simply ought to have kept a critical eye on the economic (and cultural) enemy of their visions.

In all, *Writers on the Range* is a valuable book for anyone with an interest in the American West. Wise Use members will gain insight into the changing face of Western environmentalism, just as environmentalists may better understand where their movement intersects with their adversary’s ideals and needs.

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

DAN MOOS



***Bisbee '17* by Robert Houston. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979, 1999; 287 pp. \$15.95 paper.**

No adult in the year 2000 can pick up an American political novel without a deep sense of misgiving: you instinctively know that it will not resemble “serious literature.” Most of these books turn out, also, to be crushingly boring even to the political junkies who buy them. The literary record of the past century in the U.S. makes the case. Only one novel, *All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren, can be defended as a political novel that could also be called serious literature. It was, broadly speaking, a novel of the Left. So is *Bisbee, '17*, but it is considerably farther to the Left than Huey Long’s Louisiana populism. It is also, and get this, a political Western novel with a radical agenda that makes a stab at being serious literature.

Before we come to the Western angle, perhaps we should attempt to define exactly what a political novel is. Many great novels have a clever

murder mystery as an important subplot but which no critic would think of pigeonholing into the mystery *genre*. In much the same way we have books like Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that have powerful political content but simply are not at heart political novels. The same thing could be said of Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place*, the closest thing to a great political novel that Texas has produced. The timeless themes of fate, personality, conscience, love, and loyalty seem to overwhelm the more pragmatic problems of government, reform, and revolution. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is not, in this sense, a political novel, but *In Dubious Battle* is. Its themes of worker exploitation and antiunion violence dominate everything; exactly the same thing is true of *Bisbee '17*.

Robert Houston is the author of ten other novels and is the director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Arizona. His grandfather was a "Wobbly." The principal characters of the early U.S. radical Left who figure prominently in Houston's novel are Big Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Mother Jones. They were leaders of the International Workers of the World, a diverse organization, composed of socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists—people who became authentic heroes to student radicals of the late 60s and early 70s, SDS, the Movement, etc.

On one side in this novel are the copper magnates who are prepared to use terrorism and mercenaries against the underpaid and overworked miners. In the middle are Art Matthews, son of a mine owner who flirts with leftist idealism, and Jim Brew, an ordinary citizen who is drawn into the labor violence. On the other side are Bo Whitley, the confident local strike leader; his ex-wife, Flynn; and Haywood, the IWW leader who arrives, agitates for a strike, and then leaves before the labor war breaks out. War it is, since the owners have machine guns and cannon and the Wobblies have enough dynamite to blow Bisbee off the map.

For decades before and after the turn of the 20th century, Bisbee, Arizona, had been the queen of the Western copper camps. The U.S. had just entered WWI. Copper was, of course, vital to the war effort: with zinc, it formed the basis for all rifle and machine gun cartridges and artillery shell casings. Bisbee was a company town, owned jointly by the Calumet and Arizona and Copper Queen Mining Companies, financed by northeastern capital and seen by Woodrow Wilson and his Cabinet as absolutely essential to U.S. military preparedness.

But a general strike by the miners during July of 1917, led by the International Workers of the World (yes, the "Wobblies"), resulted in labor violence unprecedented in U. S. mining history. The largest posse in the history of the West broke the strike and forced thousands of miners onto a train that took them into the middle of a barren New Mexico desert and simply dumped them there without food or water. Add to all this the

fact that after nine years, the Mexican Revolution had continued apace. Bisbee awoke mornings to the thunder of artillery across the border and the roar of primitive airplanes, piloted by *gringos*, using this 16 year-old invention for a purpose the Wright Brothers would have hardly dreamed of: dropping bombs.

The mining aspect of Western life has never, to my knowledge, been fully developed in its fiction. You would never suspect from reading Wister to McMurtry that England, Scotland, and Wall Street once owned vast U.S. lands.

So this does not sound like the background for a Western literary novel, (still an oxymoron in effete English Departments all over the U.S., Cormac McCarthy notwithstanding), but that is exactly what it is; it's a Western. No doubt about it. Bisbee is, of course, far west of the Mississippi, has the requisite aridity, and, at 8,000 feet above sea level (in the Mule Mountains, even better!) has the requisite altitude. You don't have to insist upon high country in a Western novel, but, if you don't, your location had better be close to the Mexican border. Bisbee is right on that border, and the town is almost surrealistically picturesque, like something out of an early Clint Eastwood film. Bisbee was originally built on the floor and sides of two narrow canyon walls, Mule Pass Gulch and Brewery Gulch. It was the only town of its size in the west without house-to-house mail delivery; the postmen simply couldn't climb the steep streets.

Add to all this the unique character of Harry Wheeler, the sheriff of Bisbee, who finally organizes the strikebreakers. For every heroic sheriff in Western writing there are two rotten ones. The latter are either flatly on the take from outlaws or, with the rest of the justice system, under the thumb of powerful special interests. Wheeler, with his two six-guns and silver spurs, is a fair minded man with a somewhat bruised personality. But as the pressure builds, he inexorably moves to the Right. Yes, it's a Western.

George Orwell would have loved this book. For Orwell to have found a socialist slant in what he would have called a Wild Western would have left him in stunned surprise. Orwell describes the Soviet film *Chapaiev* (1938):

[T]he atmosphere is familiar. All the usual paraphernalia is there—heroic fights against odds, escape at the last moment, shots of galloping horses, love interest, comic relief. The film is, in fact, a fairly ordinary one, except that its tendency is "left". In a Hollywood film of the Russian Revolution, the Whites would probably be angels and the Reds demons. In the Russian version, the Reds are angels and the Whites demons. That is also a lie, but, taking the long view, it is a less pernicious lie than the other."

Houston's novel is a lie, too. The Wobblies tend to be angels and the Arizona (and northeastern) capitalists tend to be demons. But this is also a less pernicious lie than, say, one made up by the other side.

An interesting footnote to this story occurred only twenty-five years later and blurs Houston's angel/demon comparisons and provides a rather sad commentary on the future of relations between the political left and organized labor. Joseph Stalin was angry over the slow delivery of lend-lease weapons in 1943, the story goes, so FDR sent his top aide, Harry Hopkins, to the Kremlin to smooth things over. Hopkins explained that strikes were delaying delivery of the needed war materials. "Strikes!" exclaimed Stalin. He raised his eyebrows. "Don't you have police?"

FAYETTE COUNTY, TEXAS

HENRY LYLE



Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen by Larry McMurtry. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999; 204 pp. \$21 hardback.

Roads by Larry McMurtry. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000; 206 pp. \$25 hardback.

Duane's Depressed by Larry McMurtry. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999; 431 pp. \$26 hardback.

Many of us have spent a lot of time traveling with Larry, have been getting in and crawling out of pickups and cars with him for more than forty years. In the Spring of 1957, I climbed in the cab with Uncle Roy McCardle in McMurtry's short story "Cowman," published in North Texas State College literary journal, *Avesta*. Now with these three new works, we're still traveling. In between, we've put in a lot of miles. After Lonnie and Hud quit driving back and forth to the ranch in *Horseman Pass By* and Lonnie took off down 281, we got really started and have had little time since to take a breath as year after year new travelers have issued from McMurtry's pen—Danny Deck, Cadillac Jack, and Gus and Call, being the most notable.

Of these three new books, the one I like the least is *Roads*, but I like it a lot. It is a quiet little book, not in a rush although, for the most part it's about driving at high speeds on America's interstate highways. McMurtry chronicles various trips he has chosen to make. He flies to some distant place, rents a car, and drives fast back to Archer City hardly noticing or commenting on what he sees. He considers these highways as parallel to the rivers which were the main means of travel earlier in American history. To point up the similarity, he says "the" 10, or "the" 35, just as

he would “the” Rio Grande. This nonstandard reference to the highways gets quite irritating.

He may choose to mention something he knows about the area he travels through. He may not. This is no *Blue Highways*. He writes, “It may be that Annie Proulx and William Least Heat Moon are successfully—if a little masochistically—probing America’s heartlands. I salute them, but that’s not what I want to do. I merely want to roll along the great roads, the major migration routes that carry Americans long distances quickly, east-west or north-south. What I really want to do is look.” We need to approach the book in the same way, relaxed, just looking at what McMurtry chooses to tell us. We get bits from his reading, his life, his opinions, and occasionally something he sees out the window, something on the side of the road or even a chair in the road. It’s a miscellany.

My favorite part of *Roads* is where it intersects with *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*—on a road in Archer county. In his next to last chapter, entitled, “August, Short Road to a Deep Place,” the only one not about a trip on an interstate, we learn about his many trips on the dirt road from the McMurtry ranch to Archer City. We even learn about a fifteen-mile trail drive to the railhead when he was four. He ends this chapter,

I have looked at many places quickly—my father looked at one place deeply. Most of the citizens of Illiers (Combray) just saw the path that led to Swann’s house as a path: it took Proust to see it as a world—which on a homely scale, was how my father looked at Sam Cowan road or the other country roads he road or drove along for some seventy years. For him those roads were crowded with memories. Now as I age, I’m just beginning to understand how memory loops back on itself. Earlier memories advance, more recent ones recede. My short drives along Sam Cowan Road grow ever less simple, as people I met on it long ago crowd in again: the syphilitic, the old skunk woman, the iceman, the snake hunter who doubles as a bovine obstetrician, the cowboys, the Dutchmen, the Ikards, my grandparents, my father.

These are the people also of *Walter Benjamin*. In many ways it is a much more personal book than *Roads*. We learn much about McMurtry and his family. What I liked best about it was not his theorizing about the end of the cowboy way of life and the short time it lasted. What I liked was the information about McMurtry’s family, particularly about his father’s fascination with grass. McMurtry wrote, “What interested him more on both the intellectual and emotional level was grass. To the extent that he had a religion, it was grass, a religion whose grandeur and complexity were worthy of him. He was born and lived his whole life on one of the great prairies of the world, on the shore of a sea of grass that stretched northward into Canada, and he retained a religious feeling about grass to the end of his life.” The tragedy of his father’s life and that

of ranchers like him was that although they worked hard and skillfully, they could never succeed: "At best they held their own, living off credit, struggling, working, seeking a method that would improve their chances."

We also learn some things about McMurtry's childhood reading and his years as a book scout and bookstore owner. He discusses the loss of the great bookstores of his youth. Indeed, he talks a lot about loss, different kinds of losses, most poignantly about the loss of some part of himself following his heart operation. He touches on this briefly in *Roads*, but it is treated in greater detail here. "From being a living person with a distinct personality I began to feel more or less like an outline of that person—and then even the outline began to fade, erased by what had happened inside. I felt like I was vanishing, or more accurately, *had* vanished." He goes on to say, "I became, to myself, more and more like a ghost, or a shadow. What I more and more felt, as the trauma deepened, was that the self I had once been had lost its life."

Not surprisingly, *Duane's Depressed* deals with an aging character who is depressed. I like this novel as well as any McMurtry has ever written. It even makes me like *Texasville* better. The too abundant farce of *Texasville* is nowhere in evidence here. Instead, we find Duane at the moment when he has grown dissatisfied with his life. He reacts instinctively to this dissatisfaction by parking his pickup, hiding his keys, and walking wherever he goes. Such an action in West Texas marks him as a crazy man. He remains resolute as he moves out of his house of pandemonium into his hunter's cabin, living there only with his dog, Shorty. About three-fourths of the way through the book after the death of his wife in an automobile accident, he comes to grips with what is bothering him,

Mixed in the sudden pain was the feeling that he had arrived at the far edge of himself. The list of things he had never done was far longer than the list of things that might be considered accomplishment. All that he had done in the way of building things had merely slipped away, into the great stream of human effort, gone as silently as the sand below him slid into the flowing water. What had happened to his life? Why in sixty two years had he made so little of it? He was not educated, he could speak no language except a crude English; he had never visited a great museum, or seen a great picture, or heard a great symphony.

He goes on to express more of his inadequacies and to wonder how he could ever make up for what he had missed." He flounders toward a solution to his problem, considers a trip to the pyramids in Egypt, meets with and falls in love with his psychiatrist, Honor Carmichael. Altogether, it is well worth the trips, traveling by foot and bicycle with Duane as he journeys toward better health.

And it's been worth the trip traveling with Larry through these three recent works. Now I've got to get a copy of *Boone's Lick*, so I can catch up.

SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

DICK HEABERLIN

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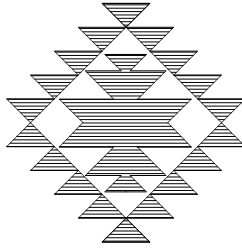
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