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Wayne Greenhaw

Secrets Behind the Walls: Of Mexico, the Beats & Love

I knew her only a few weeks, but it was long enough to make an impression that would last a lifetime.

I was eighteen. Filled with ambitions to become a writer. I traveled south from my home in Alabama to a place very strange to me. I had no idea that my first summer on my own would include meeting the premiere Beat writers of that generation.

I caught a passenger train, the *Southerner*, from Tuscaloosa to New Orleans, where I boarded the *Southern Pacific* to San Antonio, where I paid a taxi driver five dollars extra to rush me to a station across town, where a steam engine and two cars were ready to pull out and head across the south Texas desert to Laredo, where I climbed onto the *Aztec Eagle* and upgraded to a first-class Pullman berth for $14.

When the *Aztec Eagle* stopped at the remote depot at 11 a.m. the next day, I stepped down with my two bags and portable typewriter. I was suddenly surrounded by children chirping like hungry, excited birds, all reaching toward me, grabbing eagerly at my bags.

"No!" I said, "Get away!"

When they persisted, I slapped at their dirty little hands.

"No!" I said.

They continued, grabbing and pulling.

As the train disappeared down the tracks, the tattered children carried my bags away. I ran after them, thinking my bags would disappear and I would be left without clothes, books, or typewriter.

When I caught up with them, they were placing my bags into the trunk of the only car in the dusty yard. Next to the car stood a driver who asked in broken English if I needed a taxi. I looked around, saw no building other than the depot and no other car, I nodded.

The children surrounded me. They poked their open palms toward me. Their large dark eyes stared at me hungrily, like baby birds at feeding time. I looked toward the driver, who ignored me.

While the driver slid under the wheel of his old car, I reached into my pocket, pulled out a handful of change, and tossed it toward the children.

I scrambled to get into the backseat while they fell to their knees and grappled for the coins.

"*Casa Jorado, por favor,*" I said.

The driver started out across the desert. No town in sight. Nothing but flat brown desert and hills in the distance.

Then came a shout from somewhere behind us.

The driver slammed on brakes. The car slid to a stop.

I wanted to shout, "Go!" but I had already exhausted what little Spanish I knew. I felt helpless. I twisted and saw a man running toward us. He was saying something frantically. I had no idea what his words meant. He opened the door and slid inside. He turned and grinned and said something. I nodded.

The driver released the clutch and off we went across the desert in a cloud of dust.

Instantly, I wondered if I were being kidnapped. These two Mexicans were in cahoots. They would take me out into the desert—a strange, desolate place to a boy who had known the open pastures, thick forests, cottonfields, and friendly villages of the South. I had never been away from home alone. Once, when I was a child, I traveled with Mama and my little brother by train to New York, where we lived near the Army post where Daddy was stationed on Staten Island. In the summertime of my youth we would travel as a family to Florida or the hills of east Tennessee. I had gone with friends to Panama City Beach where we'd gotten drunk and acted fools, staying for five or six days. But I'd never been away for an extended time, and certainly never into a foreign country where I couldn't speak the language.

I was scared.

Then the car turned eastward. In the distance, spread out over a hillside, was a town. White buildings glistened. In the middle of a labyrinth of pastel plaster walls shaped in various-sized rectangles was a giant pink steeple reaching high into the bright

blue sky. I recognized it as the centerpiece of the photographs of the town of San Miguel de Allende I had seen in brochures advertising the Instituto.

At the entrance to *Casa Jorado* I passed through a large wooden door into a dark hallway where walls were covered with old photographs. Standing there, staring at the shadowy, faded faces of Mexicans from past generations, I heard brusque sounds of "Malaguena" being played allegro on a slightly off-key piano.

At the end of the hallway the hacienda opened to a sunny garden with colorful jacaranda blooms, lemon trees, bougainvillea, and other flowering plants. To the left, through a high doorway, a young woman sat at a baby grand piano. She played the notes of "Malaguena" with verve, turning her dark head from side to side as though she were entertaining thousands in a huge concert hall. She was lost in the sound. When she stopped, halfway through, I applauded. She glanced toward me. Her face flushed pink. She ducked her head, turned, and fled to the far side of the large room.

"Senorita?" I called. But she was gone.

Behind me, from a dining room emitting the delicious fragrance of a Mexican *comida* with garlic and coriander and onion, stepped a gray-haired woman. Short, with prominent nose and high forehead, she introduced herself as Dona Jorado, the mistress of the house.

She led me onto the patio, pointed out the honor-system bar, took me to my small room, and gave me serving times for breakfast and *comida*.

2.

In my spartan room was a single bed without springs. In an old-fashioned chifforobe I hung my clothes. I situated my portable typewriter on a small wooden desk beneath double windows. Here I placed three books: a tattered paperback of *From Here to Eternity*, a well-worn hardcover Viking *Portable Faulkner*, and a paperback Webster's. Then I ventured out to explore the territory.

After I passed several peacocks loitering lazily in the garden, I walked down the cobblestone street toward the Instituto. As I strolled by high walls hiding a very large building with a dome, I

noticed wooden doors even larger than those of *Casa Jorado.* A gigantic padlock fastened the doors shut. The significant lock intrigued me and made me wonder what was behind those walls. It looked like a church. But most churches in Mexico were open to parishioners twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

I soon learned that in almost all of San Miguel, like many Mexican towns, the streets were lined with walls. Wooden doors opened to houses or stores.

At the Instituto, after signing papers, I was introduced to a tall man with thinning gray hair and piercing eyes. Stirling Dickinson had come from Ohio to Mexico twenty years earlier and had started an art school. After World War II he joined with a former governor of Guanajuato to establish the Instituto on the estate of the Canal family, which owned the first building of the compound first constructed in 1735.

In his soft Midwestern voice, Dickinson told the story of how Fray Juan de San Miguel walked barefooted from the valley of Mexico where Mexico City is now located to this hill one-hundred-and-fifty miles north. He built a shrine near the train station where I had arrived this morning.

By 1810, after Spanish-born political bosses ruled the country for two-hundred years, the Mexican-born Creoles, led by a handsome young landowner from San Miguel, began to talk of rebellion. Ignacio Allende started a club called the Society for the Study of Fine Arts in which the idea of freedom was discussed. With him was Father Miguel Hedalgo, a priest from nearby Dolores. Together, they organized the rebels. Father Hidalgo issued his famous *Grito*, "Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe! Long live independence!" which can still be heard on the streets of San Miguel every September 16th. For Allende, Hidalgo, and several other leaders, the revolution was short-lived. They were captured and beheaded. Their heads, on public display in iron cages, withered away for ten years in Guanajuato, until another great Mexican leader, General Anastasio Bustamante, who later moved to San Miguel, took them down and buried them with honors.

Dickinson told the story as we sat on a patio behind the school looking out over the town. The view up the hill was breathtaking: the spire of the central church, La Parroquia, pointing high into

the sky, several domes with multi-colored mosaic-style roofs, layer upon layer of earthen-shaded rectangles, all fit together like a huge cubist canvas.

After *comida* of boiled chicken, potatoes, a stewed cactus-type vegetable, and well-buttered *pan*, I lay on my cotton-filled mattress and listened to song birds and fell asleep. After waking, I reread a scene from *From Here to Eternity*, my favorite novel. In the quietness of late afternoon I listened once again to the first twenty or so bars of *Malaguena*, wondering if she would ever learn more of the tune.

Later, as I started out, first gazing at the ancient faces of the people of yesteryear in the entrance hallway, I heard once again the sound of the piano playing the song I was beginning to hate. I looked through the antique-filled parlor and saw her smooth high-cheeked olive-shaded face lighted by a brass lamp. My first thought: *She's gorgeous.*

She glanced up, her eyes catching my stare, and she cast her vision downward quickly.

As the song started again, I moved out the door and started toward the center of town, the *jardin*, where I knew I would find the *La Cucaracha* bar where I knew *gringos* hung out.

Four years earlier, hospitalized in a Birmingham children's clinic for surgery and treatment of scoliosis, the result of infant polio, I had read an article in a men's magazine: "How to Live in Paradise for $100 a Month." It described San Miguel as a writer's haven and told about happenings at the *Cucaracha*. It was written by an ex-GI named Richard Magruder, whom I would meet forty years later in the Mexico City airport. We became friends, spending time together in Atlanta, Acapulco, and San Miguel, before his death a few years ago.

At the *Cucaracha*, I met a number of so-called writers. Most drank more than they wrote. And they liked to talk. Before the end of my first night, one of these writers said he was friends with Jack Kerouac, and he knew that Jack and his Beat friends would visit San Miguel soon.

3.

I went to class at the Instituto. I wrote. I read my stories in class. My teachers did not like my Southern way of writing. They chided me for having my characters "yell" or "holler," and their faces soured at some of my descriptions. I was too country. They instructed me to read F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories about growing up. All of these teachers were from the Midwest or West or New York.

By the time the Beats showed up, I was totally frustrated with trying to write clear, unobstructed prose without southernness.

Allen Ginsberg, an overweight, bearded poet, spouted philosophy at the top of his shrill voice until he disappeared the first night with a friend and didn't show up again until the others were ready to leave.

Neal Cassady was a square-shouldered, athletic, sharp-faced railroad brakeman with sunken, brooding eyes.

On that first afternoon, Ginsberg announced, motioning toward the pale high-boned face of Jack Kerouac, "We all worship at the feet of this great Beat god." As he unfolded from the forest green five-year-old Mercedes Benz, Kerouac's fine-boned face was haloed with the bright Mexican afternoon sunlight. With downcast eyes, either shy or trying to hide from the sudden brightness, our mutual friend introduced us. I offered my hand, and he gave me a shake as limp as an earthworm. I was surprised. I had expected a good, strong, manly handshake from the Dharma bum whose writing I admired especially for its powerful drive that seemed never to cease as it grabbed the reader and carried him along at breakneck speed, riding the rails or the highways, as vast as America. There was no power in his touch.

As he chewed his cud like a benevolent cow from a Buddhist pasture, his light, bright blue eyes seemed to focus beyond me on something halfway between here and there. I suspected that he had been gnawing on something that settled his mind on a never-never land far, far away. "Hey, man. I want to meet Montezuma and climb into that soul where something fitful is happening NOW!" He exploded with a sweet gentle loudness.

From somewhere in the depths of the Mercedes appeared a skinny naked girl with breasts the size of small pancakes and stringy dark hair and ribs that showed pitifully. Her name was Callie, but they called her Sunshine, and she'd been hitchhiking from some small town in the upper Midwest. Somewhere between Nogales and San Miguel she had lost her clothes. She found a pair of shorts and a halter and sandals. But when she stepped out onto the street, our friend Bill Evans, an adventure writer who had lived in San Miguel for several years, warned: "You better find some more cloth to cover yourself. The police will have you behind bars in a minute, dressed like that. Or undressed like that."

"What's wrong?" she asked incredulously, looking down at her scrawny body.

"This isn't Acapulco or some beach resort," Evans said. "They frown on women wearing pants here. If you walk downtown like you are, you'll be arrested. They have very strict laws."

She shrugged, crawled back inside, shucked off her shorts, snapped a knee-length skirt around her waist and pulled a peasant's blouse over her head.

Minutes later we were all sitting in the outer room of the *Cucaracha* drinking. Kerouac sat in the largest chair and leaned back and gazed up at the ceiling where Bill Evans was pointing out the three chipped places where movie star Robert Mitchum had shot his bodyguard's revolver, leaving his "autograph" in the early 1950s while shooting *The Big Country*. Gazing upward, Kerouac said, "I wish I had a gun," and someone volunteered. "Chucho's got one."

Chucho was a rotund Mexican descended from the early *Chichimeca* Indians who first inhabited the area more than a hundred years before San Miguel became a town. He was especially friendly to his *gringo* clientele and before the summer was out invited me and several others to his ranch where we rode horseback into the hills and viewed his latest fighting bulls.

Neither Chucho nor the gun appeared. Ginsberg began talking about Jack Kerouac as Saint Jacque, navigator through the wilderness of stars. Kerouac smiled. It was all so much fun: the cosmic joke and jokester, the forerunners of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, who would come later to San Miguel

in their psychomobile fashioned from an old Bluebird schoolbus. These ancient mariners were paving the way, like the literary Columbus or Magellan, watching the horizon for new territory to explore, knowing they were the Huckleberry Finns of the twentieth Century.

"Saint Jacque led us to this nirvana, man," Neal Cassady said. "It's the place where I've been wanting to be all my life. I mean, like I was in Denver doing boring shit, man. Major boring! But now, here we are in paradise with the Minerva of Madness, this doll-chick Sunshine, who is light, all light."

Sitting in a corner with Sunshine, sipping my *Cuba Libre*, I listened to Sunshine ramble on a long monologue about how she spent last summer with a bunch of guys in the mountains of northern California. "We were seeking God in the wind," she said. Kerouac said that was a good place to find Him. If you're quiet enough and have patience, you will find the jazz brain that you need to carry out the essence of being," he said, and Sunshine tilted her head to one side, her eyes lighting, saying, "I'm aware."

Listening on and on, I wondered if they really knew what the hell they were talking about, and later Kerouac, without being prompted, spoke loudly: "Ride your bicycle upside-down into space and hear the howling of the prophet Allen who sits on yonder throne, sharing the universe of Ignorance that can only be a Karma dream."

After listening late to the talk, I awakened early next to Sunshine on the floor of Bill Evan's fourteen-dollar-a-month apartment high on the hill above town. Just before dawn we all rode out to Taboada hot springs on a rocky knoll. We undressed and stepped into the steamy fog of the waters while a silver sun sparkled over the edge of distant hills to the east.

After the soothing baths, we lazed in the early morning sun, bright now and warm, and we went to the nearby village of Atotonilco, the Nahuatl Indian word meaning "the place of hot springs." A dark, foreboding cluster of building, the Sanctuary of Atotonilco, with six chapels separated by patios and walkways behind high walls was built in 1740 by a priest who had inherited great wealth. He spent his entire fortune building the primary chapel, Our Lady of Health, and its surrounding counterparts to

celebrate penitence. The priest worshiped by whipping himself with thorny branches of cactus plants, a practice which he passed on to his parishioners.

That morning we entered in silence. I stood next to Kerouac as we stared up at the wall covered by the shadowy figure of Christ carrying a cross on bloody shoulders. Inside the sanctuary was another portrait of Jesus bleeding profusely. Thorns punctured his skin at numerous places, even the cheek, forehead, side and thigh, from which the blood flowed.

We moved silently, our eyes scanning the scenes: Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Cardinal Virtues. Kerouac, whose eyes seemed dilated as he gazed upon the paintings, gasped at the brutal grace of the bright, clear violence.

After Allende and Father Hidalgo were beheaded, the rebels who continued to fight against the Spanish used Atotonilco as their hideout. Under the shield of night, from 1810 to 1820, they rode out to attack the trains carrying silver from the mines at Zacatecas and Guanajuato.

When Spanish troops captured the village, the priest was arrested and sentenced to be hanged in the morning. They marched him down the dusty street and locked him in the shrine. That night, according to local legend, the priest escaped through a tunnel that led him to the basement tombs of La Parroquiain the center of San Miguel. When the Spaniards returned, they thought the arrested priest had actually vanished or had been taken away by angels.

Outside the sanctuary, Kerouac said, "It is joy we are witnessing. It is the love of hurt. It is what life is all about."

I looked back toward the strange place. I had not seen the same thing. But I shivered with a weird feeling.

In the next several days I learned that *On the Road* had been written in "the long night of life" without stopping on a single roll of paper, "banging on the typewriter like it was a brain-drum," the author said, "beating it out to the tune of the night and the morning and the noon-day sun, man, like letting my brain find its own rhythm, because that is the Dharma and the Karma, and it makes all the difference in the world to have Buddha sitting on your

shoulder, conducting the orchestra of your writing, letting it flow. Every day is like today, and it is Saturday."

I, the realist, said, "No, it isn't: it's Thursday."

But he said, "Every day is Saturday, and there is nothing to do."

I went to my little room and wrote his words in my journal, another habit insisted on by my new Midwestern teachers: Fitzgerald kept a journal, therefore all young writers should. At the downtown corner bookstore I bought a paperback of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was not recommended by the professors but which I wanted to reread anyway.

During the next few days I heard Maria Elena Jorado play her first twenty bars of *Malaguena* at least a dozen times. Standing in the shadows of the hall I watched her intense dark eyes concentrating on the keyboard, making her music, and I wondered what was wrong in her world that caused her deafening, maddening repetition.

The next morning, after spending hours the night before with Kerouac and Cassady, I awakened abruptly to the screeching sound of a peacock's cry.

Moments later I heard Maria Elena's voice, frightened and angry. "No!" she screamed. Then came the staccato sound of a slap.

I rushed to the windows. Looking out across the green lawn glistening with dew in the morning light, I saw the girl caressing her high-boned cheek. Tears watered her over-sized dark eyes. Before her stood a tall, distinguished-looking, gray-haired man who turned quickly and stiffly, like a soldier, and strode away.

The girl's eyes lifted and roamed. When she saw me, she lowered her eyes instantly. She too turned and walked quickly toward the house.

4.

That evening at the Cucaracha, Kerouac talked: "There are empty shapes and empty dreams wandering through the heads of youth. Don't accept reality, don't take it at face-value. Forget what any creative writing professor ever tell you. Regurgitate life."

Later I asked him about John Steinbeck, and Kerouac shook his head almost violently. "Don't believe that ragged, stupid nonsense, a Dust Bowl mentality that reeks of dishonesty, written with the heart of a historian. You can't believe history! Never! History filters down through the academic world of the intellectual fools who sit in red-brick ivy-covered towers and breathe the tainted air flavored with the tangy taste of money, believing only in their own superior intellects. History can only be told by those who lived it, not by wretched professors who study it. Believe the love letters of saints and whores, not the texts of pampered professors. Believe the weeping, moaning, tear-stained outbursts of mothers whose children have died in front of their eyes, not the dry-heaves of historians. Did John Steinbeck suffer? Did he die a dozen deaths on a flight from Oklahoma to California? No!" Kerouac ranted as I watched amazed and slightly alarmed. I was eighteen, a child of the Alabama backwoods, and I had seen religious men fling their arms and had heard them shout emotional cries of the spirit. I thought I would hear better from a man whose writing I admired. Saint Jacque of the Beatniks said: "Steinbeck listened to the words second-hand, read about the troubling times, but he never felt the hunger eat at his belly. He was never Tom Joad."

Later, Neal Cassady walked with me out of the *Cucaracha*. "Don't worry about what Jack says," he said. "He gets all cramped inside. The joy of the road turns sour sometimes, especially when he gets all wound up inside. After a trip like this, Jack locks himself in a room away from the world and does as he preaches: regurgitates life. And then he becomes whole again. The creativity is part of the whole, but to find the source of creativity, he attacks the world like a soldier attacking the enemy."

I went to my room at *Casa Jorado*. I lay awake and thought about Kerouac and Cassady, about Sunshine and Maria Elena, and I felt deep-down lonesome, empty inside.

The next morning I read Steinbeck's words in *The Grapes of Wrath* and loved them again. I felt the emotions of the scenes. I started a short story about a cousin back home in Alabama, a Southern boy who had Southern ways and loved his coon dog more than money.

Several days later the Beats went on their way. Through the years I read more of Kerouac and liked his work in spite of my memories. I even cried when I read that he had died in a little ordinary house in retirement Florida. And I also cried when I read that Neal Cassady had gone back to San Miguel to find a girl not unlike Sunshine. He started walking the railroad tracks from the depot to Celaya and joined an Indian wedding party and drank *pulque* with them on top of Seconals and other drugs. He sang with them and danced off into the night, counting each rail. The next morning his comatose body was discovered near the tracks, and he died in the hospital at San Miguel.

5.

Early on a July morning after I finished reading *The Grapes of Wrath* I was awakened to the loud pop of a gun firing.

In the garden Maria Elena Jorado stood in the brilliant early morning sunlight with a long-barrel revolver hanging from her limp hand. Her face was tilted forward, her dark eyes streaming with tears.

On the perfectly manicured green slope lay her father, Don Alejandro Jorado, the scion of a Creole family that had dwelled in San Miguel since the days of the first revolution.

I heard a near-silent gasp and saw Dona Jorado float in her sheath of loose garments toward her daughter, enveloping the girl into her arms and leading her away from the body upon which she cast a quick and disdainful glance.

By the time a team of medical people arrived, Maria Elena had been whisked away into the bowels of the residence.

Over coffee, another guest who had lived at the hacienda for years said, "She finally did it."

"How long..." I started.

"Over a year," he said. "She tried breaking it off three or four months ago. He wouldn't. When she cried out to him, he beat her. Sometimes unmercifully. I would hear it, but..." His voice trailed off. Then he spat, "His own daughter!"

Don Alejandro lived. Maria Elena was taken to Mexico City to live with her aunt, her mother's sister, who had married an industrialist there. I later heard that the girl had entered a convent.

6.

Late that afternoon I wandered high on the hill in the maze of narrow cobblestone streets lined with walls shaded in yellows and reds and browns and hews of green. I passed a little gray adobe hut built precariously high atop a stone embankment. It seemed sort of twisted, slightly off-square, like it was ready to slide and topple.

From a cluster of rainbow colors in a triangle of hanging pots, where brilliant rays of late afternoon sunlight shone like a powerful spotlight, I heard a high-pitched lilting sound. At first I thought it human, then — as it swirled up an octave, like I imagined a nightingale might sound — I knew it could not possibly be a person. It was too perfect.

I gazed up from the cobblestone street to the tiny suspended porch. Beyond the triangle of stone pots draped with colorful flowers was a small bamboo cage holding a yellow bird no larger than my forefinger. Perched on a miniature swing, the bird opened its black beak, and a warbling yodel filled the air. A streak of red across its throat vibrated like an instrument of percussion. I stood in the middle of the narrow winding street and took a deep breath and felt a sudden renewal of strength and wonder. I watched and listened.

When the small round face of a child appeared on the porch, looking down, a hint of embarrassment touched me, but I smiled and said, "*Buenos tardes*," in my Southern drawl, and she gave a similar greeting as I strolled off on my way to the top of the hill to look back on the sunset as — in the distance — the bird kept singing the wordless tune.

Lee Smith Interview

Don Noble is the host of Alabama Public Television's BookMark and professor of English at the University of Alabama. Noble interviewed novelist and short story writer Lee Smith in the fall of 1999. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Noble: I really appreciate your taking the time to come in today.

Smith: It's always fun to come back to Alabama.

Noble: A lot of our viewers may not know as much about your life as your readers know, lots of them. Your fictional home place is your real home place — Grundy, Virginia.

Smith: Uh huh.

Noble: What was that like in the '40s when you were a little girl there?

Smith: Well, I think it's safe to say that it was one of the most remote areas in this country. It's a tiny town deep in the Appalachian Mountains, in the coal mining Appalachian region of Southwest Virginia. It was completely isolated geographically from every place. It was just real hard to get to. We never went out. So, consequently, we were culturally isolated, and educationally isolated, and in terms of healthcare and all kinds of things. Yet that made it a very special place to grow up. Of course, when I was growing up there I was just dying to leave.

Noble: Were you?

Smith: You know, just like all kids are. I mean I had cousins living on every side of me and was conscious of what a hillbilly I was. But later I came to understand that that was really one of the most privileged upbringings, the most interesting place that I probably would ever be.

Noble: Culturally it was a distinct place.

Smith: Absolutely distinct culturally. One aspect that has fascinated me so much since is the language. Because I think all writers are molded by the way we first hear language. And I heard this rich, picturesque speech that I cherish. And I think that we all need to cherish. And I think that

we all need to cherish everything that is regional, and different, and special. Everything that doesn't sound like it's overheard in a mall in Cincinnati. I was raised by a lot of older people, too. And my daddy would say things like *a creek coming down the mountain, turkey tails out in the bottom.* Use these wonderful sayings like all the kinds of words for the age of a child, like a "knee baby." Or a "little set-along" child that you put at the end of a row of corn when you were hoeing corn. Or a "shirttail boy." It was just more specific and beautiful, like African-American English. So I was real lucky for hearing that.

Noble: Organic imagery. Imagery that was for everyday use.

Smith: That's right. That's right and I heard it and I grew up with wonderful music. Very privileged with the music, and just this whole very specific Appalachian culture. And I was the last generation because then TV came in. That changes everything.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Noble: When I talk to writers, very often there is a story of how long and hard the process was of getting that first book into print. But that is not going to be your story, is it? Tell the story of your first book. You wrote a novel as an undergraduate, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed.*

Smith: Yeah, I wrote a novel as an undergraduate mainly because I had been kicked out of school and I needed six hours of credit in the worst possible way. And my teacher, Louis Rubin, said, "Why don't you just write a novel?" And so I said all right. And I wrote a novel. And it was a simple novel because it was from the point of view of a nine-year-old child whose parents are breaking up, and she creates a fictional world to live in for a while which is more comforting for her than the real world. I had written several stories with this kind of viewpoint character that is this deeply weird, imaginative child, and it was pretty easy to expand her story into a novel. And I did, and through what I almost think of as a fluke, it was actually published

several years later. I've thought a lot about this because if that novel were being sent out for publication today nobody would take it. I mean there are so many fewer serious literary novels being published today and that's what they consider a "quiet" novel. I was very lucky to break into print at that point. I did have a kind of dry period later on that other novelists usually have at the beginning. And I was ready to quit.

Noble: I have seen it in print, people talk about "the two careers of Lee Smith."

Smith: To my mind, a writer is a person who is writing rather than a person who is publishing. But what happened is I published three novels. They did well, critically, and sold nothing. Publishing those novels was like throwing them out the window into the ocean. After that, publishing *itself* began to change and began to be looking a lot more at the bottom line. So when I wrote my fourth novel, which was a depressing book, *Black Mountain Breakdown*, deeply dark, with a lot of ambivalence and a dark ending, they just said, "Sorry, honey. We haven't made any money on you so far and this is really depressing and we are not going to do this." That is what Harper and Row said, which published my first three.

Noble: Well, whether there are two "careers" or not, I mean there is a difference between the first four and the ones since. The first four are dark, and they are traumatic. And the heroines are tortured girls who have been secretly raped by their uncle. Or have nervous breakdowns or are in some sort of pain.

Smith: The heroines are not what you'd call self-realized women, right? I mean, there is a certain way in which I think I've sort of written fiction almost like other people write in their journals. 'Cause I started so young and I've done it so continuously. I think what was happening was I was also growing up. I was into a very painful first marriage and then out of it, and then on my own and then feeling more confident as I went on through my thirties, and I think this kind of thing is probably reflected in my work.

Noble: Those characters are not married women with small children. They are nine-year-olds, ten-, eighteen-year-olds.

Smith: They are nine-year-olds...but, I think, particularly in the South, and I'm hoping this is changing, but in the South, it was hard for a lot of us women, for a long time, to not be "girls." To not write about "girls." To understand what it would be to be a woman, to be making your own decisions, all your own decisions, and so on. So I think maybe I was writing about girls because I was sort of psychologically not able to grow up as fast as I needed to. But I think it was hard. We were raised to please and to be good wives, and be this or that, and it was hard suddenly to begin to take yourself seriously. I mean for years if I was seated on a plane next to somebody, and they said what do you do for a living, I never said I was a writer.

Noble: No?

Smith: For years I didn't say it. I would say, "Oh, I'm a housewife, or a mother, or I'm a teacher," and sometimes I'd just make things up, like "I'm a dietician." ...Now if anybody asks me, I say I'm a writer. But there was an evolvement in my own self-confidence and consciousness of myself. And I think it does have to do with the time and place where I was born and how I was raised, you know, to be a lady and not put yourself forward.

Noble: In your novels there is almost always a female central character. I mean that's perfectly natural. There is a big difference between the early heroines and the later ones. The biggest difference to me is not only that they are older, but also the earlier ones tend to have been raped. The females of the second half of your career are very sexually agressive.

Smith: Yeah, they are. That's right. Well, I think they are just more able to sort of take matters into their own hands, to not feel that they should be passionless, to not feel that they should be only acted upon, or that they are the prey, or they are at the mercy of the world. Just to feel like they are acted upon rather than acting. I do think those books mirror the real generations of women coming along.

Noble: Well Ivy in *Fair and Tender Ladies* has a funny line. When Ivy actually says after she becomes pregnant something to the affect of "Now that I'm ruint..."

Smith: "It frees me up."

Noble: "Frees me up." Instead of wallowing in humiliation and shame, she is now liberated.

Smith: Right. Well keeping up appearances is very *hard*. Being a lady and keeping up appearances and all this kind of thing is very hard. It is much better to be like Ivy and just be a natural person in the world.

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Noble: The other big issue, I think, that distinguishes the second four of your works from the first four is that the second four are wildly multigenerational.

Smith: I think the older you get, you get this sense, or I have gotten this sense, that life is so much more complex. So much more complicated. We are all so much more interrelated to other people and to events than I ever had any notion of as a younger person. I think when you start getting older you get more interested in the long haul. I get really interested in people and who their parents were and who *their* parents were and how certain traits play out down through the generations and how certain things about where they live influence what kinds of people they become and we become. The field of my interest has expanded a whole lot. There is a point at which suddenly you don't see yourself as central at all. You just see yourself as just that little part of the whole thing. It is very vivid, very liberating to me.

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Noble: Which of your books do you think of as your favorite? Which one is your baby?

Smith: There are two that are my babies actually. One of them is

Fair and Tender Ladies because just speaking as a working writer, you can never separate the book that you write from the circumstances of your life. When I was writing *Fair and Tender Ladies*, everyone in my family was really sick. My mother was dying, she had emphysema; it was a long, drawn-out thing, but I was right there. One of my sons was very, very sick, and my dad was real sick. When I began writing that book the main character, Ivy Rowe, started getting stronger and stronger because I was falling apart and I really needed a role model. Somehow, having that book to write settled me for the two years that this was going on. It was like this enormous source of strength. I got this fetish sort of thing that if I finished the book my mother would die so I kept not finishing it. I kept writing real, real slow towards the end. And then finally, my mother did die, and then I finished the book two days later.

And then another one, and I can't tell you why except for the intensity with which it literally wrote itself, was *Saving Grace*. It is sort of like a book that had just been given to me as a gift. Up comes this voice and the voice just says, "All you have to do is sit down." Just put yourself in front of your typewriter, put yourself in front of your legal pad, and the book will write itself. But I also enjoyed writing *The Devil's Dream* because I love country music so much, and I was all over the South doing research. I was riding the buses with Kitty Wells. I was backstage at the Opry. I just had the best time.

Noble: To change directions, you've written about religion in a lot of different ways. If I sat down to write an article called "Religion in the Fiction of Lee Smith," it would be a very complicated article.

Smith: I think our actual experience of religious life, of our spiritual self, is enormously complicated. There are a lot of frauds. There is a lot of chicanery. There is a lot of junk out there. But I'm one of those people who has always very definitely felt personally this religious impulse. When I was a kid, I used to embarrass my mother by rededicat-

ing my life all the time and jumping into the little pool, in the little tent behind the big tent, and coming home dripping wet all over the linoleum. "Get out," she'd say. I have always been interested in ecstatic religions of all kinds. But terrified of it myself. It's like the idea of, well, if you are born again in those terms, who are you? Are you gone? You lose yourself, I mean. I think one reason that I wrote *Saving Grace*, and *Saving Grace* means a lot to me, is just because I am too cautious a person. I think I just wanted that experience vicariously so I wrote the book.

Noble: But Grace's father is not finally, to me, a nice man.

Smith: He is not a nice man at all. But he damned sure feels the spirit in a certain way. He is dangerous. And this is the thing that I can never resolve. But also that book to me is about *children*, the powerlessness of children. Because so many children are born into these dire situations. Grace is born into a family where her father is a serpent-handling minister, a charlatan, yanking his family all over.... But the fervor of that experience is something that is very hard to replace in your later life. Just the intensity of it is very important. But I think rather than living it myself, I wrote that novel and that is why I got so wound up while I was writing it, to experience in some sense that sort of ecstatic religion which Grace finally goes back to. She has to come full circle with it. She has to make her own spiritual journey. She's *going* to go back.

Noble: I don't see it in the book. That is not convincing to me at the very, very end that she is going to renew that kind of relationship with the church.

Smith: Well that was my intention. But I think there is a lot of ambiguity in the way it is actually written, and I was so surprised to find out that there are many readers who didn't think that was what she was going to do in the end. I based that on my own experience of talking with serpent-handling believers, and particularly people who have grown up inside the church like she does, with a father like that.

Noble: You've been interviewed a number of times by a number of people, but there is one quote of yours that just knocks me out and that is, "I admire passion."

Smith: I just admire and have always been drawn to people who are passionate about whatever it is that they do. Last week, I was up in the mountains talking to this old man who makes the most amazing fiddles. And he's been doing it all his life. And when he talks about it his face is on fire. He is old, old, and he carves out the fiddleheads, and he does all kinds of things. He does horses; he does dogs, all kinds of things up there. He can't tell you how he knows what he's even going to do. He just goes at it. This kind of thing fascinates me. I said, "Well how do you know what that's going to be?" And he said, "Well, I don't know. I just carved away everything that wasn't a horse." Men and women, too. I mean I write about very passionate men and very passionate women too. These are the kinds of characters that interest me.

Noble: When I see that quote, and I've seen it more than once, it looks as if you're a sideline person who is admiring the passion of others. And I thought, "That's not right."

Smith: No, I am very much engaged. I am very much engaged in life, family life, and everything. I'm not sitting on the side lines staring into my computer somewhere.

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Noble: Do you literally know the last sentence of a novel before you begin? Or is that just a piece of folklore?

Smith: Well, no, it's the way I write. But it doesn't always work out.

Noble: But you do start out that way?

Smith: Yes, I spend a lot of time doing what I think of as pre-writing. Otherwise, I'm never sure I'm ever going to be able to finish the book so I sort of think the book all the way through. I have a pretty good sense of where I'm going and generally after I write the beginning of it, I will write the last sentence. When I said I didn't want to finish

that book before my mother died, I knew what the last sentence was.

Noble: And you had had it from the start?

Smith: Oh yeah. But I didn't want to get there, but I sort of do, and I always write it on the wall somewhere. I have to kind of look at it. I'm aiming at some point. Several times it has changed. It gives me a sense of maybe I'll be able to finish this book, because this is always in question when you write a novel. You are in the middle; you've expended all this energy, all this time. You should have been doing other stuff, but you've been writing this novel, and you think you are nuts. You just want to be sure that you'll be able to finish.

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Noble: I know that for years you have taught creative writing at NC State and other places as well. This is God's work, of course, but I'm more interested in the workshop experiences with people who aren't college students and who are out in small towns.

Smith: Well, I directed a "Creative Writing with Literacy" project up in Eastern Kentucky where I went up for long residencies for four years. It is people who have just learned to read and write and you get them into writing their own story. Writing about their lives or writing about things that moved them and that they care deeply about. Working with that kind of a student, watching people write something creative for the first time, is like watching them fall in love. It is just fabulous. It just brings back that old thrill. When I went out to do this, I was at a point in my own work when I was really kind of jaded. I was hearing too much about publishers, advances, and agents, and I was, on the other hand, academically hearing too much about deconstruction, English department chicanery, and all this kind of stuff. So it was like remembering why I ever wanted to be a writer in the first place. It was just the thrill of language.

And I like to do all kinds of writing workshops with all kinds of nontraditional students.

Noble: *Where* do you do them?

Smith: Well, I do them a lot with retirement centers...I do them at mental hospitals. I think that writing is so important to us as people, not just to those of us who are trying to create a product to sell. The writing itself is what really matters. So I like to be a midwife. It is just something that I like to do. But also, I have been very fortunate to have teachers who encouraged me, and you sort of like to pass that along.

Noble: You're at the point now where, I guess, there must be a dozen critical articles about your work and a book about your work. I've read these. I've read lots, lots, of the literary criticism about your work. Every time I read something that somebody has written about your work, I try to imagine what *you* think when you look at this. The Aphrodite Myth, Joseph Campbell and Sexual Female Wounding, all kinds of quests. What do you make of this?

Smith: Oh come on. I mean, I think it is just crazy. I think that academic literary criticism, certainly, has become as "creative" as creative writing and this is nuts. I didn't have anything like *that* in mind. Naturally, I'm flattered by the attention, but I'm somewhat mystified.... I think if you worry about how other people interpret your work or what they might say, it'd really drive you nuts. So I just figure you just gotta think, "Okay, I made this book and it's a thing in the world, it exists in the world, and it's got to take its lumps and suffer its interpretation. It's gotta be tough." But I am a teacher too and I do the same thing to other people's writing that they did to mine. I have a certain bias. I know what I think a story means and what these repeated images mean and what they add up to. I'm aware that the writer of that story may not have been aware of that pattern that I've found.

Noble: Years ago when you had two little children, you would hire a babysitter for two or three hours at a stretch and you would go into your back bedroom with a pencil and a

legal pad and write. And that was your time to write and you were paying for it; literally, the clock was running, and you wrote with a pencil and a legal pad. Do you still?

Smith: Yes, I do. In fact it almost embarrasses me to say this to people because we have all become so computer mad. My first draft is, not so much a pencil as a pen, but I'm writing still on legal pads. I'm writing still by hand my first drafts because I guess about writing you get superstitious. If it has worked, why mess with it? Also for me, I am so closely, I have to be, so closely tied in and tuned into my characters for them to sort of speak through my actual hands, through my body. It makes it really real for me. I don't want any artificial thing between me and them. I don't want a machine there. I mean later I will type it into a typewriter, onto a computer. I'll go through multiple drafts. I'll do all the stuff. But I just feel like in a certain way that I'm transcribing the voice of the characters often, or the voice of the story, and I don't want anything to get between me and the story. I think I have always been a writer who has been not so much a writerly writer as a speakerly writer.

Noble: Right.

Smith: Who is more tuned to the human voice.

Noble: Right.

Smith: And I think that is accurately maybe shown in *Oral History*. I think I have a bias there.

Noble: It is *oral* history.

Smith: Yeah. But I think in *Fair and Tender Ladies* I was showing what the writing itself meant to Ivy. And really, trying to write a novel about aesthetics. I think I was trying to write there too a novel about an artist. I have always been very interested in artists who operate in the world at large in ways, like a beautician say, who fixes everyone's hair in town, or the florist. I love these figures and Ivy operates as an artist in her own life. She is turning her life into a kind of art, which is her letters. And even though it is not published, is it not art?

Jeffrey Goodman

The Romance of Modern Classicism: Remarks on the Life and Work of John Finlay, 1941-1991

During the last decade, eminent critics have praised John Finlay's collected poems, *Mind and Blood,* for their "fundamental importance," predicting for them a future "in anthologies, sympathetic studies, [and] a deserved place in American letters." According to William Bedford Clark, this is poetry "we cannot in good conscience ignore." John Finlay wrote as many enduring poems as any poet of his generation in America or England — poems that succeed in making classical methods modern, and modern subjects classical.

How did a farm boy from rural Enterprise, Alabama, become one of the most distinguished American poets and literary essayists of his generation? A preliminary answer is simple enough: years of hard work, sufficient opportunity, and literary genius.

1. Blood: Enterprise, Alabama (1941-1959)

Enterprise, Alabama, was incorporated in the 1890s as a lumber town. Cotton and peanut farming soon followed. This was home to John Finlay's father, Tom. Tom Finlay's family were hard-working business farmers with three- or four-hundred-acre tracts that made them "land rich" in local eyes. Finlay's paternal grandmother, known as "Ma," frequently hosted afternoon teas in her white, wooden farmhouse.

Jean Sorrell, Tom's future wife, belonged to the established gentry in Ozark, a somewhat older town 15 miles away. At the turn of the century, her grandfather was Ozark's town doctor. Her father, Martin Sorrell, was a lawyer from a prominent Birmingham family who had clerked locally for Hugo Black. Her mother, known as "Mama," was an elementary school teacher and school administrator. Her uncle Waldo had served a term in the Alabama legislature during World War I; and her brother Walker was a physician in Montgomery.

John Finlay's family history on both sides was marked by tragedy, including drug-dependency, alcoholism, insanity, and violent death. For instance, Finlay's paternal grandfather died of a heart attack after beating a stubborn mule to death. His mother's father, the lawyer from Birmingham, died of insanity at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa, leaving behind a wife and three small children in Ozark.

John Finlay never liked farming. Enterprise to him meant only the dull, hard life of farm chores, like milking cows or driving the tractor in the Alabama sun. Weekends in Ozark, however, meant his grandmother's library of classics and sweet hours in her leisurely and educated company. Annie Laurie Cullens, an old family friend, observed Finlay's bright mind and precocious interest in his grandmother's library. Miss Cullens was a newspaper poet with connections to Mencken's wife and the cultural set in Montgomery. She gave John books, and he sat at the kitchen table while she and Uncle Waldo debated the merits of Eisenhower vs. Stevenson, atheism vs. theism, or argued over the latest novels reviewed in the Sunday *Times*.

Back home in Enterprise, when Finlay drove the rusty tractor under the high July sun, he might steady a copy of Shakespeare on the seat. On the pokey yellow school bus, he read. He named the cows he brought home from pasture after Greek gods and goddesses. By the age of fifteen, he was reading Wordworth's collected poems.

At Enterprise High School, Finlay's favorite classes were in the humanities. He avoided high school sports, but played bridge socially, and he took a leading role in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and other plays. He was vice-president of his senior class of forty-three, class orator, and voted "most scholarly."

One of Finlay's high school friends, Elaine Kerr, remembers him as a witty, thoughtful, and distinguished young man. "I always picture John strolling down the hall lost in thought," she recalls. "He was good-looking: tall, slender, fair. There was something about the perfect posture, the proud way he carried himself that made him look quite aristocratic. His conversation was often sophisticated beyond his years." However, "he could fit right into a crowd that had nothing more silly on its mind than having a good

time. He could tell racy stories in naughty, boyish delight one minute and quote from Shakespeare the next. He was already incredibly well-read: F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. John could speak about them, and hosts of others, in great detail. He sometimes related stories about Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald as casually as if they were eccentric neighbors from next door."

In the summer of 1959, Finlay's friend Ceci Carter, Annie Laurie's niece from Montgomery and a gifted violinist, managed to escape Montgomery's summer heat for the prestigious Interlocken Arts Camp in the cool, wooded shade of Michigan. On July 7, Ceci wrote to John:

> *Johnny, you'd be in heaven up here. It's the greatest— way out. The drama, the opera, dance, orchestra, art—just everything—oohh rapture! Guess what our orchestra is playing this week? Beethoven's Fifth! We're doing Tchaikovsky's fourth next week. Oh, Johnny, you can't imagine my thrill and fascination with this place. It's so lovely and so beautiful, all of it.*

Ceci was studying literature, too, taking a French class reading Voltaire's *Candide*. She found parts "gory and gruesome." The entire summer's program was devoted to the classics; the next scheduled play was *Antigone*. "I wish you'd go to Montgomery and work for [your uncle] Walker Byrd," the letter concluded, "instead of digging wells on the farm."

Beyond Enterprise, there was Ozark. Beyond Ozark, there was Montgomery. Beyond Montgomery, there was Interlocken, Michigan, the remainder of the United States, and a Europe that embodied the classical, artistic mind that the bright, young Southerner, at the age of eighteen, was already anxious to assimilate.

"I then moved outward to become myself," Finlay wrote in "The Wide Porch," the first poem in his first book. From a biographical perspective, he was saying: when, on any occasion, I moved outward from Enterprise, it symbolized a parallel growth in the poetic mind. When Finlay bade farewell to the farm community of Enterprise for the university town of Tuscaloosa in September

1959, he carried his provincial values with him, like Aeneas his household gods. Oddly, Finlay's provincial values had a great deal in common with classical values: his father's capacity for intense, sustained work; his mother's family and friends' culture of mind; and the Baptist and Methodist faith of his ancestors.

Did Finlay strictly observe these same values? Certainly not. At times, he was irresponsible and immature. He was a notorious procrastinator. He could be two- or even three-faced, if he had to be. In his own eyes, he was a sinner. Nevertheless, traditional values always sustained and strengthened him, especially in times of personal and psychological need. And a fourth value cannot be omitted. This was a plain sense of fun, an ability to seize and savor the pleasure of the moment. Observed against rural Alabama's natural beauty, on the one hand, and against farm life's tragic difficulties, on the other, both so closely observed in his poetry, these ideas formed the real substance of the counter-romanticism of Finlay's poetic imagination.

2. Mind: Tuscaloosa, 1959-1966

Finlay entered the University of Alabama in the fall of 1959 as well-armed intellectually as any provincial in the class. He was not unaware of this. Within his first weeks on campus, he did two things very typical of the rest of his life. First, he used his semester's allowance for room, board, and textbooks to buy books for his personal library. Then, at Annie Laurie's urging, he introduced himself to Hudson Strode, an English professor who was at the time the most famous man of letters in Alabama. Finlay eventually took Strode's literature and creative writing classes, and Strode and his wife practically adopted Finlay as a son. They frequently had him to their home for dinner, from which he returned with uproarious tales of marital squabbles, and included him in their travels across the South. On one trip to Mississippi, Strode introduced Finlay to John Crowe Ranson. "He looks like a Baptist preacher," Finlay remarked in his notebook. "But what a poet!"

One year Strode went so far as to secure Finlay a $1000 scholarship from a wealthy banker friend. In return, Finlay attached

himself to the influential Strode, reportedly a vain and pompous man, via compliment and outright flattery, a method that he would apply to nearly every influential literary figure he sought after in years to come. Finlay had sensed early on that, without family or financial backing, he would succeed as a writer only by his own wits.

Another influence on Finlay at this time was August Mason, a poet and English professor who was one of the last of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. The Agrarians argued for a balance between the life of the soil and the life of the mind. Finlay found this, at least in theory, very compatible with his own beliefs. For twenty years, Mason had taught a university course in the art of *verse*, as distinct from the art of poetry. It was probably Mason who introduced Finlay in seminal ways to the works of the Agrarian poets, including Allen Tate, and to the modern classical poet Yvor Winters. Just as Strode and Mason had quickly replaced Annie Laurie and Uncle Waldo as literary models, soon Tate and Winters would replace Mason and Strode, as Finlay expanded his literary mind ever further outward from Enterprise.

During the Tuscaloosa years, Finlay's successes were considerable. As an undergraduate, he was allowed to join Strode's prestigious Advanced Fiction Writing class. In 1962, Finlay was named as one of four members of the university's G.E. Academic College Bowl team and was flown to New York for the competition. Appearing on television that Sunday, he impressively answered a number of questions in the team's near victory over three-time champion DePaul University. The quiz show's host, Allen Luden, asked him where home was. "And where are you from, Mr. Finlay?"

John Finlay, the peanut and dairy farmer's son from Bellwood Road, smiled blithely for the national television audience and told the truth. "Enterprise, Alabama, sir." That year, Bear Bryant's football team won the national championship. The following year, George Wallace would unsuccessfully block the campus door to integration.

Later that year, Finlay published a short story entitled "The Up-There" in the Fall 1962 issue of *Comment*, the university's new undergraduate literary magazine. The story is narrated by a black

woman from the deep South whose son has recently been killed by a snakebite. She comes to realize the foolishness of her desire for vengeance, the weakness of humankind, and the mysterious will of God, the "Up-There". The story is quite touching, the concept mature, the writing altogether professional.

In the fall of 1964, Finlay joined the M.A. program in English with a full graduate assistantship, which required him to teach composition. His first two published poems appeared in *Comment* that season. Still worth reading for intrinsic merit and formal polish, their counter-romantic themes point to later achievements.

In 1965 Finlay became editor-in-chief of *Comment,* contributing to it new poems and a very advanced interview with novelist Eudora Welty, prefaced by a note on the "mystery" of things and the limits of literary biography. He also contributed considerable research to Strode's new three-volume biography of Jefferson Davis, while managing to win himself a $1000 writing award from the National Endowment for the Humanities. On the negative side, he recalled playing around enough as an undergraduate to fail a number of courses, including Chaucer, taking five tuition-costly years to earn his B.A. Worse than this, though, he had majored in English and minored in Creative Writing, both his parents' nightmare.

There were at this time other events that shaped Finlay's personal life. Ten years before, when Finlay's family converted from the Methodist to the Baptist Church, he flatly refused to follow. Now, he chose to join the Episcopal Church and was confirmed on Easter Sunday, 1962. In 1964 he settled into its campus residence, Murray House, where he stayed for the next two years. At Murray House he often stayed up until three or four in the morning to play with a new poem, even though he had an eight o'clock class to teach. He might struggle fanatically to rework a single line, with hundreds of crumpled drafts scattered by his feet. Was this not what Gerard Manley Hopkins called, in a different context, the "habit of perfection"? The habit of perfection was to be the defining quality of all of Finlay's written work.

Finlay engaged at this time in very private homosexual behavior. According to a lover, he described himself as "comfortable with it." Yet exactly how comfortable he really was is hard to know. There is strong evidence that, at times, he was not comfortable at all. In that "don't ask, don't tell" era in the deep South, this was a secret tightly sealed from students, teachers, friends, and family. Persons who had known Finlay intimately for decades, who had studied, traveled, literary-talked, and shared a half-gallon of whiskey with him past three o'clock in the morning, never suspected.

In the Tuscaloosa years, Finlay's appearance and his behavior suggested a moderate, diffident person. The idea of a Southern gentleman probably never drifted very far from his mind. He had perfect Southern manners and a cultivated Southern accent "like a young Shelby Foote." He inevitably dressed in a tweed coat for class. When a woman entered the room, he stood, and sober or not, remained standing until she was seated. His writing revealed comparably civilized virtues: sensitivity to language, command and dexterity of thought, deep reading, and a quiet, mature tone.

Photographs taken in this period show Finlay wearing a puckish, enigmatic grin. In March 1967, Finlay visited with novelist Andrew Lytle at his home outside of Sewanee, Tennessee, and recorded this amusing physiognomic anecdote: "Later Mr. L looked over at me and said that my face was old-fashioned. It was the first time he had noticed it and that I should have died in 1863."

In 1966, Finlay was photographed with Allen Tate, one in his pantheon of literary heroes. In the mid-1960s, Allen Tate was the leading poet-critic among Southerners. In the photograph, each of the two men holds his hands neatly crossed and folded. Dressed eerily alike in tight suits and narrow ties, their large crew-cut heads attached to similarly thin bodies make them look like grandfather and grandson. Tate was a brilliant literary mind and an exceptional poet, and throughout his life Finlay deeply admired him. He shared at least one social weekend with him at Andrew Lytle's home in Monteagle, Tennessee. In answer to a flattering letter from Finlay, Tate responded as follows:

February 18, 1966

Dear Mr. Finlay,

In the course of a year I get a number of letters from strangers about my poems; but never in any year since I began to appear in print (that's a long time ago) have I received a letter that pleased me as much as yours does. ... One's vanity is always with one. And my own rating of myself, I confess, is not low; but I have never before been told that my poems have become a part of anybody's life. I am moved and grateful.

Finlay framed this letter. For the next twenty-five years, whenever he moved into new lodgings, the first thing he did was to hang Tate's letter prominently on the wall.

A poem entitled "Out in the Country Late at Night" offers early evidence of Finlay's artistic growth. It appeared in the winter '65 issue of *Comment*. Its geography is probably Enterprise, its subject the unromantic terror of moonlight. The poem gives a clue to exactly how far Finlay had now removed himself from farmlands of his birth and at the same time how closely affianced he yet remained.

The moon out in the country late at night
Is light, and the cold pale fire of terror.

Possessing, not possessed, it perplexes
Metaphor-making man to a silence.

It is no Diana killing farmers,
Or chasing after the shy shepherd boy.

It is a light and thing of terror,
Defying explication, cold and pure.

As when we catch an unexpected glance
In the mirror and don't know who we are,

> Or wake up near dawn in someone else's house
> To hear slow footsteps outside the door,
>
> So then as now we are left in dark places
> Where what we know is what we don't, the light.
>
> The moon out in the country late at night
> Is light, and the cold pale fire of terror.

Here the fifth and sixth couplets, especially, make evident that, wherever Finlay's Tuscaloosa years may have failed, they educated a poet who at twenty-five was admired in Alabama literary circles for his poetic gift, his lively critical judgment, and his positive energy.

3. Salt: Montevallo, 1966-1969

The middle period of Finlay's comic-tragic literary ascent occurred during the salty political years of the late sixties. He arrived at (then) Alabama College in Montevallo in the fall of 1966 as an instructor of freshman and sophomore English and gave up his appointment in the spring of 1969. During his four years in Montevallo, Finlay held a full-time job for the only sustained period in his life. The late sixties and early seventies were times of growing personal and political liberation for him, but they were also a time of ever-greater efforts at artistic discipline.

It was in Montevallo that Finlay revealed for the first time his eccentric lifestyle. A small mountain of cigarette butts piled up on the floor of his VW bug as he drove some 40,000 miles without changing the oil. Suddenly, the engine just died. The hardened residue of engine oil had so tightly impacted the cap that his father's most powerful farmhands, using torque wrenches, could not pry it loose. The car could not be repaired.

In contrast, or perhaps to keep things in balance, Finlay committed himself at this very moment to the severe, classical aesthetic of Yvor Winters, his most powerful and lasting literary influence.

"What I owe Yvor Winters. Nearly everything," he wrote in a notebook at the time. This sort of emerging dualism was the very important stuff of Finlay's poetry, its centrifugal growth tensed by the strength of the poet's afferent, artistic mind.

Now, Finlay's great theme of mind and blood is emergent in the tension between his passionate will and the discipline of reason, in the forces of the liberating sixties vis-à-vis Winters' poetic morality. Must the forces of romantic freedom and classical restraint be antagonists? Or might they be made complementary somehow? This happened to be the period of the Vietnam War protests, the Hippie Revolution, the freedom marches on Montgomery, Martin Luther King's and Robert Kennedy's assassinations. Though Finlay was a political liberal not untouched by these political and moral events, he left behind only a single poem about them, a poem on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. While respecting the deep sacrifices of war efforts, Finlay was an anti-war poet. War was passionate will, without the discipline of reason.

In Montevallo, Finlay rented an apartment above Loretta and Bill Cobb's. Bill was a member of the English Department and a talented fiction writer whom Finlay had published in *Comment.* They became great friends. "He would appear at the door almost every evening at cocktail time to 'watch the news,'" Cobb wrote, "and he usually stayed for supper. He would stomp and rave about the news from Vietnam. He hated television, he said, and he refused to have a set, but many a night he would arrive back at our door in his pajamas and robe and announce that since we were watching anyway he might as well watch with us. Often we weren't, but that didn't deter him."

Cobb knew the complexity of Finlay's attitude toward teaching. "Though John mystified many of the dull freshman and sophomores he was forced to teach, those students who responded positively to him did so intensely. They adored him.... They would gather at his apartment and sit on the floor and listen to him talk about writing and poetry all night long. The Scotch would flow, and often John had trouble making his class the next morning. Once our department chair called me in and asked me if I thought John had a drinking problem. I told him no. I wanted to say that John had a teaching problem." His teaching "was only for those

who wanted to be taught, to whom he would give—to the point of exhaustion—everything he had."

"Only one time in the years we were together," Cobb remarked, "did John invite us to lunch, 'to pay us back,' he said. When we arrived, canned tomato soup was boiling volcanically on the stove, and as John poured soup at the table, he asked me to get us a beer from the refrigerator. His refrigerator contained only a six-pack of beer and a carton of cigarettes. Absolutely nothing else. We listened to music as we ate, an opera turned up to ear-splitting volume. The things he loved, John loved to excess."

"He loved Kris Kristofferson's version of 'Me and My Bobby McGee.' John would play it over and over again, singing—or shouting—along with it. [*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose!*] 'That's the greatest poem in American literature!' he would declaim, banging his fist on the table. 'It's so damn American!'"

By the fall of 1969, Finlay had become rather disillusioned with teaching freshman composition and sophomore survey courses. He put off grading papers, once staying up for two nights straight to mark five weeks' worth of papers, plus final exams, in order to get his grades in at semester's end. At times, he would dismiss class after ten minutes of instruction. A still wider dualism had split ambition from actuality, desire from discipline, the will to survive from the creative mind—a struggle overcome, according to Schoepenhauer, only by creative genius. Finlay could not spend the rest of his learned, poetic life among the redbrick buildings and Southern pine groves of Alabama College. Like Enterprise, Montevallo was "provincial."

At the age of twenty-nine, Finlay decided to return to the simpler life of a student. This meant earning a Ph.D. in American literature, like many of Winters' poetic disciples. When Finlay read an article by Donald E. Stanford called "Classicism and the Modern Poet" in the winter 1969 issue of the *Southern Review*, he decided to go to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Stanford was co-editor of the prestigious journal, a professor in the LSU English department, and a fine, if minor poet—-and he had actually been one of Yvor Winters' student poets at Stanford University during the thirties. According to Stanford, modern classical poetry

rejected both romantic thought *and* modernism's pure aesthetic freedom. It should be objective, not subjective; clear and intelligible, not ambiguous or obscure. He never denied that poetry was aesthetic, certainly. But poetry was moral, too, in style as well as content. This poetic morality located itself, in language, in the relationship of motive to emotion, or technique to subject. We are accountable for what we say and how we say it. Art, loosely speaking, meant judgment. For Finlay, classicism was always simply "the sanity of self-restraint." Self-restraint was a target whose bull's eye he struck in art, and missed in life.

At this time classicism was the least popular of literary aesthetics. In the liberated sixties, at the free verse movement's height, American poetry had fallen to bohemians and urban hepcats. The Beats and New York poets had won academic respectability. A poet traveled with the cool, city hipsters, "the dudes, the studs, the alleycats," or dropped out to write anti-war or nature poems. In contrast, Winters' poetry embodied the classical culture of European civilization that he clung to. His strenuous moral effort to return the modern poet to the center of humanity ironically turned out to be politically incorrect. When he died in 1968 following a brilliant, public literary career of nearly fifty years, his poetry and poetic theory had been painted into a cultural corner from which it has too rarely emerged.

In November 1969, Finlay sent a letter to Stanford in Baton Rouge, announcing that he had decided to attend LSU in the fall, "if you all will have me." Stanford asked to see some of Finlay's poetry. On March 3, Stanford wrote, "I like both the poems you sent." Inside a year, the poems were taken by the *Southern Review*. It was Finlay's first national publication. One of his small-town literary friends wrote with insouciance, "It's nice to see your name with the big boys." It was nice. The few poems that Finlay had composed in Montevallo were deeper and more serious than his Tuscaloosa efforts. The real growth spurt, however, was still in the future.

4. Explorations: Baton Rouge, Corfu, Paris, Tuscaloosa, New Orleans, 1970-80

In the 1970s, Finlay had "one aim only: to become a good poet—period. He was solely and exclusively devoted to the art of poetry," Stanford wrote. Finlay had nothing of the drone's mentality. He understood clearly that if he was to make his poetry classical and modern, he could not permit himself the conservative mistake of either/or. The dilemma was exactly the one described by Walter Pater over a hundred years ago. In the modern world, "hard and fixed moralities are yielding to ... subtlety and complexity," Pater remarked. "What is lost in precision of form is gained in intricacy of expression." But how to overcome this dualism? How was Finlay to make his poetry not only hard and fixed, but also subtle and complex? Precise in form, *and* intricate in expression?

For him, the only possible artistic reply was to subordinate—not sacrifice—one to the other, the modern to the classical, for the sake of the greater good: the perfect poem. This was a traditional metrical poem in a contemporary voice. According to a list that Finlay compiled in Montevallo in 1969, "Notes For the Perfect Poem," the perfect poem was literal, yet symbolic; of the physical world, yet abstract; mature, muscular, whole, beautiful, intense, moral, critical, plain, truthful, and fully realized in language. His feeling for the aesthetic for its own sake, coupled with the Southern life of feeling, separated him a little from Winters' stoical, classical austerity. At the same time it connected him to his perfect modern poet, Edgar Bowers, Winters' most gifted protégé, whose poetry has so beautifully expressed the metaphysical tension between the sensuous, warm details of the South's Mediterranean climate and Southern Calvinism.

The time it took Finlay to achieve his literary goal is not surprising when we consider the goal itself: classical art in a modern voice. Classicism needs maturity and wisdom arrived at when knowledge joins experience, while modernity is the contemporary point-of-view of aware, urbane persons. Venturing during this decade beyond the limits of Alabama, Finlay consciously moved more deeply into the dark, mysterious gulf of the artist's mind.

In the fall 1970 and spring 1971, Finlay attended graduate courses at Louisiana State somewhat irregularly. In class, he was quiet. He wrote brilliant papers, which helped to offset the effect on his grades of his sparse attendance. In 1971, one year after having enrolled, Finlay "melodramatically" dropped out of the LSU Ph.D. program to spend a year on the Greek island of Corfu. His friend Sarah Moody, daughter of a wealthy Tuscaloosa family, was building a guest hotel there.

Corfu was purported to be the mythic island of Phaeacia where Odysseus visited King Alcinous. There he listened with high wonder while the rhapsode sang the hero's past adventures. This no doubt attracted Finlay strongly. A propos, he began the brief persona poem "Odysseus" (in honor of Yvor Winters) by saying: "I could not know the meaning of that time/... Until I heard the voyage beat out in words."

Half overrun with tourists, the olive-green island of Corfu rests in the Adriatic Sea in the northwest corner of Greece. On Corfu Finlay exercised the romantic dream of the expatriate artist. "Corfu continues to hold me," he wrote to Stanford. "As the seasons change it becomes beautiful in different ways. I'm living in a small village at the extreme northern end of the island. The only way to get to town is by caique! Think of it! To get up before dawn and ride across the Mediterranean in a small Homeric boat! Right around my bay is the house that Laurence Durrell lived in. ...Over is the Esplanade where everyone has drinks in the afternoon—usually ouzo....The melons and the figs are coming in now and the Mediterranean sun and sea answer deep longings (St. Yvor, pray for me!)."

He lived a typical expatriate existence on Corfu. He wrote; he drank the local wine. He had sex on leisurely afternoons. "Later we rolled around, the tactile conspiracy," as Finlay phrased it, describing an afternoon tryst with a female friend. With only money enough for a single night's hotel in Athens, Finlay located a room at the base of the Acropolis. Standing outside it, he kept awake until dawn broke, staring steadily at the ancient forms, assimilating their beauty.

Finlay wrote some five of his seventy-five or so collected poems directly from his Greek experience (four of them experimental,

while he was out of Stanford's sight), and four or five other poems appear to derive indirectly from it. "How he loved the Greeks! Everything had to be about the Greeks," his mother has remarked. Yet Finlay's writing is never narrowly neo-classical genre work or vaguely antiquarian. Its imaginative originality and its urbane, contemporary diction freshen Greek themes with a modern point of view. The classical feels modern, the modern classical.

In December 1973, Finlay removed to Paris, where he may have worked briefly at CBS as a janitor. Although no extant poetry has drawn directly on the Paris months, there Finlay's desire for a classical, European sensibility was fulfilled. His Paris notebook is replete with luminous artistic observations of the city's classical and contemporary life. One day, Finlay found himself observing Impressionist paintings; next, deeply moved by ecclesiastical art, or by a deracinated American who, at twenty, looked forty. His French improved, nudging him closer to the modern French poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Valery, whom he so loved and who so influenced his symbolist line. In his notebook, Finlay called Paris "my intellectual home." Paris, the apotheosis of the kitchen-table colloquies with Annie Laurie and Uncle Waldo of twenty years before!

The romantic bubble of the thirty-three-year-old expatriate artist broke in early 1974. Finlay telephoned his parents from icy Paris, announcing that he was fresh out of money and needed six hundred dollars to fly home. Money was tight, however, on Bellwood Road. On principle, Mr. Finlay refused his son's quixotic request. What was to be done? Mrs. Finlay's brother Walker, "fearing John would land in vagrants' prison," wired the money.

When he reached Enterprise, Finlay rested at home. He soon removed himself, however, to Tuscaloosa to work at Bryce Sanitarium, a home for the insane adjacent to the university campus. It impressed Finlay deeply. Although he was never able to keep a diary for any sustained time, his Bryce notebook nonetheless records in graphic, sharp detail the patients' macabre habits and foreign lives, evidently at once fascinating and repellent to Finlay. After several months there, his romance with madness ended. His poem "The Locked Wards" is a brutal, but not unsympathetic lyric about the solipsistic pain of these tortured minds.

Between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-three, Finlay had belatedly done his sixties thing. His European immersion in Corfu's sweet island life and Paris's antique urbanity had realized Ceci Carter's arts program at Interlocken to the nth power. Combined with graduate studies, his European travels completed his literary education. The great difference between minor Tuscaloosa or Montevallo poems and his later, major poems can likely be attributed to advanced knowledge gained from graduate work, and from literary friendships with LSU poets David Middleton and Lindon Stall, R.L. Barth, his first publisher, and the English poet, Dick Davis. This knowledge was complemented by Finlay's rendition of the European journey of Henry James' naïve and provincial American.

A poem entitled "The Bog Sacrifice" nicely illustrates Finlay's mature art. Written soon after his return from Europe, it is Finlay's first major success. Based on *The Bog People,* a popular study of northern European primitives that also inspired the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, it tells the tale of the exhumed, preserved body of an Iron Age boy sacrificed one spring to the chthonic goddess of the under earth. Its classical subject is the sacrifice of the boy to tribal needs, life to idea. The boy's experience is presented from the outside, objectively, yet fully felt inside, subjectively. Its modern voice freshens this classical concern as well as any poem that Finlay wrote. The poem is aesthetic *and* moral, repairing the nineteenth century's deep and vicious laceration between the two experiences.

The Bog Sacrifice

The iron and acid water of the bog,
Rising and falling with the winter rains,
Two thousand years, preserved him as he died,
Pinned naked to the floor by wooden crooks.
No fire had cut and cleaned the clotted soul.
Runic stakes, washed white as salt, were laid
Over his narrow breast, sunk in the peat.

The sacrificial rope they hanged him from,
Of woven skins, still cut into his throat,
Tight as when death came. His gentle face,
Forced upward by the torsion of the noose,
Bore with monstrous discipline his bane,
As loose ends, like serpents, meandered down
His naked flesh, pressed into his flesh.

A cap of wolfskin hived his shaven head.
Descended from a line of conscript priests,
He died in youth, still delicate and whole.
When he was lifted from the pit, the earth
Itself was sweating like an ancient beast,
He looked as if alive. Faint cries of snipes
Brought sunlight piercing to his closing eyes.

Before Christ reached this isolated north,
A chthonic goddess, holding iron breasts,
Each year in early spring exacted death.
In winter when the winds blew keen off ice,
Or summer with its rippling swarm of weeds,
The bog seemed never raised above the sea,
But underneath, out of whose depths she came.

The poem's sensuous, symbolic details ("hived his shaven head," "swarm of weeds") represent the norm of Finlay's post-symbolist style, characterizing roughly half of his mature poetry, the other half occurring in a plainer style.

After his three-year wandering hiatus, Finlay debated alternatives. He wrote a letter to Stanford admitting that, following his wanderlust, he was a sadder and saner man. He was easily readmitted into the Ph.D. program from which he had withdrawn in 1971. Excepting excursions to New Orleans, for the next six years he stayed mainly in Baton Rouge, completing requirements for the Ph.D., teaching composition and survey courses, reading widely and deeply, and writing.

In the last years of the 1970s, Finlay occupied himself mainly with writing his Ph.D. thesis on Winters' intellectual theism,

revealing there considerable and never before demonstrated philosophical and theological depth. He completed it in 1980. It had taken him ten years to earn his degree.

In the same months that he was writing about Winters, whose subject was "the morality of poetry," Finlay cruised the gay bars in New Orleans' French quarter.

> He feels compressed, erotic brotherhood
> And for the hardest criminal. But these
> Are freakish states and disappear,

he wrote of an alter-ego, Sherlock Holmes, in the inventive, quite brilliant "The Case of Holmes." A second poem, "To a Victim of AIDS," was more graphic. Written in the mid-eighties when Finlay well knew that he had been infected with the HIV virus, the poem holds the "victim" fully morally responsible for his careless actions, and especially for his scorn of judgment. Ragged with guilt, Finlay wrote about this kind of erotic impulse in his Baton Rouge notebook, calling it there a demon of the blood so potent it thwarted the mind's every attempt to overcome it. His pattern was to visit the backrooms of gay bars and baths, then return to Baton Rouge where he prayed to God for forgiveness and the strength to stop. This pattern repeated itself night after desperate night. In the last years of his life, he believed resignedly that death from AIDS was God's punishment for his sin.

It is perhaps clearer now why so few people, including friends who had known Finlay for a lifetime, believed that he was gay. How could they have suspected? For example, at LSU Finlay fell passionately and publicly in love with a married woman that he'd known during the Tuscaloosa years. They lived together only a few weeks, but when the relationship ended, he was publicly crushed.

On Easter Sunday, 1980, Finlay converted from the Episcopal to the Roman Catholic Church, despite its hard-line doctrine on homosexual behavior. The decision apparently had something to do with his reading of Aquinas, the liberalizing of the Episcopal liturgy, and the perceived sublimity of the Catholic liturgy, along with its high forms of art and mysterious signs, not to mention the sacrament of confession, an aesthetic reflected in his poetry.

At the age of thirty-nine, John Finlay had published a handful of fine lyrics and a small number of minor reviews, and completed an excellent, but brief, Ph.D. thesis, but he had very little else to show the world. In a tight academic job market, he lacked prospects of a "good" teaching job, and he refused to teach freshman composition. Several months after completing his thesis, under the increasing strain of mental exhaustion, Finlay telephoned his mother in Enterprise, asking if he could "come home."

During this bad time, Finlay beveled into that terrible, tragic god that the French call *le guignon,* "bad luck." Not very long after his return to Enterprise, the earliest reports of the HIV virus appeared, and Finlay guessed rightly that he was infected. At the last, it seemed that Enterprise, not Paris, was really home.

Finlay still had the very things that he had always been able to fall back on: mind and blood. Although he lacked money and a regular sense of community, he had his literary friends and correspondents, a good idea for a book on modernism, and notes for new poems. However, his brilliant mind alone could not be enough. The good, generous support of his father Tom, mother Jean, and sisters Betty and Patricia sustained John Finlay for the last ten years of his life, while he wrote as never before.

5. Mind and Blood: Enterprise, 1980-1990

The eighties were the decade of triumph and tragedy. Living and occasionally working on the family farm, in the next eight or nine years Finlay produced between eighty and ninety percent of his important work. In a critical and creative fury, he wrote a spate of profound essays and poems. According to Janet Lewis, the poems were wrought from "metaphysical thought, meta-physical nightmare, Greek thought, Christian, ...Pagan, images of the South, Southern families, a Southern boyhood, old people, ...dying people, ...the smell of salt, of fish, of rain, of pines and magnolias in the warm air, images of moonlight, and of waves falling on beaches of the Gulf or the Adriatic, Odysseus, Socrates, [and] Athena."

Finlay could not procrastinate now. He saw his first chapbook of fifteen poems, *The Wide Porch*, published in 1984. *Between the*

Gulfs, equally strong, appeared in 1986; and he finished a third, *The Salt of Exposure,* in 1988 with undiminished creative powers. These amount to fifty, or three-fourths, of his collected poems, *Mind and Blood.* Finlay, like a Voltaire of the deep South, also managed to spend two or three hours a day keeping up a friendly, technical correspondence with literary friends.

During this decade, Finlay published a number of significant literary reviews and completed *Hermetic Light,* six speculative essays on the Gnostic spirit in modern European and American literature, publishing four of them in major journals. In these essays, Finlay argued that like the world of the third-century Gnostics, the mind of the modern writer was a disturbing world from which the living God was absent. These essays followed his conversion to Catholicism in 1980, and criticized, from a neo-Thomistic view, modern, otherwise admired literary giants including Winters himself, Flaubert and Valery, the English Jesuits Newman and Hopkins, and finally Freud, Nietszche, and Kafka. Models of classical prose style, these essays share something of the dense, distilled brevity of a lyric poem; the essence of a 200-page Ph.D. thesis, for instance, distilled into fifteen polished pages of tight argument.

His writing was beginning to win serious critical acclaim, first in friends' letters, then in reviews. With excellent publications in prestigious journals out of California, New York, England, and the South, Finlay really was one of the big boys now. He had successfully synthesized the European sensibility of his vast reading into the pastoral blood of his Alabama birth. His agile, creative mind was stronger than it had ever been. But he was dying. He felt it strongly.

In the fall of 1980, when Finlay returned to Enterprise, he appeared close to a nervous breakdown. Yet within months he had regained strength. He studied Plato, and taught himself Italian grammar, in order to read Dante in the original. In the small ranch house, he wrote like a nineteenth-century gentleman of the leisure class, while his farm family supported him. Typically, he wrote ten and twelve hours at a stretch, staying up all night, sleeping during the day. Except for occasional teaching stints at Enterprise Junior College, he wrote independent of worldly concerns, laboring like a monkish devout in an artistic, contemplative routine natural to

his gifts. He seldom had money, and sex was out of the question. In this state of ascetic privation, for the first time in his life he found a steady and consistent "intensity of engagement and the detachment of judgment" that he demanded of a perfect poet.

On the other hand, he wrote against abysmal, artistic loneliness in a very unaristocratic, pine-paneled back bedroom that was within whispering distance of the rest of his family. His father, Tom Finlay, who had built the house in the fifties with his own strong hands, was now crippled by arthritis. In 1983, he died of lung cancer.

In 1984, Finlay flew to Washington, D.C., to be best man at a friend's wedding. His mother saved him thirty dollars by angling his formal dress from the P.X. at nearby Fort Rucker. In the mid-eighties, complaining repeatedly of severe headaches, Finlay came down with a severe case of the shingles. "I often feel like burying my head in the dirt," he said. In 1985, while attending a writer's conference at Nicholls State in Thibodoux, Louisiana, he had a falling out with his close literary friend, David Middleton. Their friendship was silenced until 1989, when Middleton learned that Finlay had contracted AIDS and offered himself as Finlay's literary executor.

In these final years, Finlay conducted scholarly research for his essays at the junior college through inter-library loan. In the mornings, dressed in a pair of muddy blue jeans, he visited with the librarian, chain-smoking over coffee and talking with her about his essays on Nietszche and the Enlightenment. At night, he occasionally paid an unannounced visit to Scott Smith, the English Department head. There, he drank whiskey until the half-gallon bottle had been drained, talking of the ancient Gnostics or reciting parts of Edgar Bowers' poem "The Stoic."

In 1988, Bowers and poet Dick Davis honored Finlay with an invitation to read his poetry at the University of Santa Barbara, California. On this occasion, he exhibited advanced stages of the HIV virus. He appeared pale and was dizzy and nauseated. He apologized for his condition, but never revealed the truth. He wore a pair of his nephew Lee's broken-down penny loafers, having asking for them after seeing Lee about to toss them in the trash. He wore this pair of shoes unselfconsciously for the rest of his life.

Finlay was not willing to see a doctor until late 1985 or '86. Increasingly less able to care for himself, during the last years of his life he was removed from the back bedroom to the living room where his mother, sister, or a family friend nursed him. The teenager who had called himself "skinny Finlay" was now a ghostly skeleton of the considerable man he had become. He remained witty, good-humored, and, to the world, unafraid of death. He joked with doctors and made the nurses laugh. A passion for the mind's life stimulated John Finlay even at death's door. Moreover, he clung with his whole mind and heart to his religious faith, taking consolation from regular, intimate talks with several priests to whom he had grown close. Finlay's last letters date from late 1989. By then he was blind and had lost muscular control of his hands. He dictated his last poems to his sisters, Betty and Patricia.

On February 17, 1991, John Finlay raised his head from his hospital bed one last time. Then, in a tone of voice that suggested a strange presence in the room, he uttered his last word. "Plato?" he patiently inquired. According to Patricia, who had witnessed it, it was as if he were asking "Are you here with me, Plato? Is that really you?" Over the years, Finlay had on more than one occasion professed his belief in the reality of ghosts.

To conclude: what are we to make of a high-school friend's remark that Finlay had no "structure"? A professional colleague concurs: no "inner structure." This was the same man who composed some of the most perfectly structured poems and essays of our time. Which was the real John Finlay? He was, no doubt, a complex man. Morally speaking, was he too bad, or (to quote a third friend, Bill Cobb) "too good for this world"?

But some part of the interior, surely, is the exterior life. "John lived the life of a poet," remarked the teenage daughter of a close friend at his death. A poet is first and foremost an artist; and an artist, as Joyce's Stephen Daedelus remarked, is "the antennae of the race." The fifties' social solidity and tight morality, the sixties' sexual and political revolt, the seventies' indulgences, and the eighties' reconciliations are all artistically revealed in John Finlay's poetry. As Allen Tate remarked, the poet is just like the rest of us, except in this: he is more intensely aware of reality and he can express it more absolutely.

As for Finlay's literary place: he was certainly not among the very highest rank of literary geniuses with Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, or Racine. Nor does he stand in the very first rank of American poets. His poetry was just peaking when he died. Yet Finlay's poetry contains here and there lines and passages at that high level. Because he wrote five or six major poems and twenty or more others close to this level, he ranks certainly among the first five or six poets of the American South, and likewise of the post-World War II generation. At the same time, he was one of the most brilliant literary essayists of the last decades of his century. He has indeed earned a place in American letters.

The slight events of John Finlay's life are, therefore, worth knowing both for the events and for the light they cast on his written work, the poems especially:

> By which our brains, recovering their youth,
> Will heat themselves in happiness once more.

Selected Poems by John Finlay

Audubon at Oakley

My Gallic cunning poured sweet wine into
The calyxes of trumpet-vines and caught
Small drunken birds a bullet blows apart.
Others I shot, pined then drunken to a board
To draw the fresh-killed life. Elusively,
The *is* that quickens in the living eye
Escaped the sweat of art, drying ink.
I tore blind pages till I reached the one
That pleased my avid mind. The wilderness
There teems with birds I never saw before:
White and wood ibises, the sparrow hawk,
The red-cock woodpecker, and painted finch.
I hunted them for days and nights until
I throve in timelessness. One day stood out.
I heard below all things the river sough;

The fall was blazing in the silent trees.
I saw my book, taut wings of mockingbirds
In combat with the snake knotted beneath
The nest, its open mouth close to the eggs,
Now held forever in the lean, hard line.
And underneath, defining them, combined:
The clean abstraction of their Latin names,
The vulgate richness of this Saxon salt.

A Few Things in Themselves

Along the bay live-oaks and magnolias
Gather massively the warm blackness
As birds dart and cry in their hard leaves.

At their base the narrow strip of beach
Is yellow and African in the late sun.
We hold off and let the boat drift. ...

The string of fish in the bottom
Lies in spilled oil, blood and bay-water.
Their white underbellies gleam in the dusk.

A black watersnake is moving into
The closed, muscle-like bloom of lilies,
The darker swamp weeds along the shore.

Slowly we follow it, back to the dock.
And walk in the early night through crickets,
The low wind in the rusty screen.

A Room in Hell

In this tinted half-light
The snake scar of error
Is blurred; careful insight
Intoxicates itself.

The surf of phantasies,
Drenching deathless mind,
Dissolves rigidities,
The little we had been.

Outside, the soul's sleet
Whispers the warp of ice.
Further out, waves beat
Themselves apart and cry.

Flaubert in Egypt

He was awaked, for no cause he knew,
To face the brutal moonlight in the room,
Burning the veinless marble of the floor,
Flooding the nameless whore who slept on it.

As if he dreamed, he saw her open mouth,
The *painted coins, strung around her throat*,
Turned colorless as chalk in the strong light,
The gleaming black skin of her milkless breasts.

He thought of the pearl-fishers diving down
To layered tons of pressure on the skull,
With only shells to answer for the pain –
They surface, bleeding from the eyes and ears.

He dreamed the poem, freed of human act,
A smooth blank thing that turns in nothingness.

Paul Allen

"All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth..."

One of the few teeth that stuck it out all his life
sometimes gets away from him.
Trapezoidal, chalk-white, bright, and out of line,
it overlaps its little yellow brothers,
looms there like a monument,
like a cliff face in his face.

This is no tooth for a choir—some "Living Tree" in a church.
It is a tooth that has written little more than a name or two
maybe 50 times in its life; that accepts driving tickets
without looking back as though to see the infraction
taking place, says *sir, mam* to people half its age,
minds its business, stares at floors in waiting rooms;
a tooth that shuts doors to stores lightly, easily;
that keeps the light off with women;
that finds women who have downcast eyes.

He is not a fool. He sees in the populace
how they take it into themselves, or on themselves,
and knows from their eyes: Once seen, it's in their lives
and in their children's lives. They may wake
to it themselves, as he has always done,
or use it to make their children eat their fruit,
I saw a man once with this big, white tooth in front. . . .

When they were young, and he was young,
they laid him on a turd near the flag at Byrd Elementary.
And when he cut out for good as a man,
a man gave him a ride, gave him 50 bucks
to let him do this or that. Then something changed
the man. He backed out, apologized for even saying it,
then begged him to keep the money just the same.

It was the tooth. He has always known it
whenever luck (or no luck) slapped him in the face.
When people notice it, they get that helpless look
of one more time not knowing what to say.

So mostly now he tries to keep his lip zipped
to spare them, spare himself, let everyone off the hook.
Except in seasons like this, when he feels called,
compelled by the time of day or the air, to walk
among them with a weird feeling in his heart
and gut and groin. He moves along familiar streets,
the sky an angel blue, and all down-town busy,
though hushed—despite the tinny carols
hissing on every corner. He passes
through the shadows under the snaggled awnings,
pauses between them in the warm shapes of sunlight,
and smiles at perfect strangers
in the spirit of the season. And for spite.

Paul Allen

Last Words Looking Back

I may have my foot looked at,
the diabetic next door says, then lets
the VA prune him back to infancy,
shows the people he knows
toes gone, papaya ankle, weekly blood receipts.
Then one day the leg.
Then everything follows.

I may have my foot looked at.
It happens. One day, for one thing or another, we say
our own words for what they really are—or will be
years from now: *Well now this shit's tied down*
we can move on up, says our divorced aunt
who never climbed with us again
and then moved in with Linda.
What did she know—did she know?—
behind the words, looking up,
brushing the thighs of her jeans?
What did she truly say when she said,
From here on out it won't be bad at all?

It's not last words that matter much—
et tu, Brute; light, more light;
I owe a cock to Aesclepius,
will you see that the debt is paid?—
It's last words looking back,
announcements in a tongue
you only come to hear or understand
years later as years ago, finally clear.

Say, you're in your 40s on your way
to the hardware store: You say:
I won't be gone long and you blink
in the flash of your past at the pond
Philip drowned in, shallow pond,

laced to the land like a make-do patch
through the grommets of bream beds
where you and Philip would meet, fish,
and your thirst (or lack of luck) would draw you up
to the old couple's trailer and shed.
They'd let you drink from their well.
You'd sack the hall closet to fondle their guns
with the taped grips or shortened stock,
animal calls dry with white salts from their lips.
You were 17, a virgin, and while you were there
you didn't care. The day you were swimming
and you moved the bow of the boat, you lost him.
Among the storm clouds of the bottom,
arms out, legs reaching for a foot, for something familiar,
you couldn't scream or cry. Your hands touched
your own leg in a turn
and despite what you wanted to know,
you came up, came out naked without him,
dripping in algae and mud.
The old couple met you, wrapped you
in their matching jackets—
I won't be long, this is the wrong damn size and you close the door.
Which means—for some odd reason,
after all your life of diving under—really means
it's over. You don't have to find Philip any more.

Daniel Anderson

Reading History

When the president is overthrown and the parliament dissolved,
When cabinet ministers are jailed, it will occur to them,
Though briefly so, to gather their assets in a great haste
And leave. When fool and laureate are hanged, the daughters raped,
When all that was forbidden once, the carnage and the lust,
Becomes the order of the day, they will adjust.
How strangely, then, their happiness will seem remote;
They will relinquish livestock, the lands and the good view,
Those mild pastures, the forests and the clear trout streams.
They will no longer calculate the rate of their returns,
Summer by the lake, or stroke the dog's soft jaw at dusk.
Nor will they take their drinks at six—the cools tonics with lime.
They will remember how one sunny day in June
The constable addressed a crowded briefing room
To reassure the press the bloody crackdown would resume.
That all belongs to a different time, a different dream,
For the royalist supporters of the previous regime.

Daniel Anderson

On Having Said Something Cruel

There stood Helen on the sun-bright bow
While she was being spirited away.
There were filaments of rainbow in the spray,
Fresh counterpanes of foam. As the ship's prow
Cut through the warm, blue sparkle on the sea
The mainsail popped and billowed on its mast.
She might have guessed the thrill could never last,
Or that her suitor would not always be
A suntanned, handsome version of a boy,
But who among those mortals could foresee
The bloody, long unpleasantness at Troy?
Ecstasy if brief and unrehearsed,
She may have thought this too, though probably
It seemed to be a good idea at first.

Jack Stewart

Green Lessons

When you taught me to prune,
kneeling in front of a bank of junipers,
lifting each feathered layer,
tracing the browning limb to the bole,
in the shadow the pale green flare
of the sliced stick oozed with a bitter smell.

For an hour we gathered refuse
and space. When we finally stood,
the imprints on our knees
looked permanent. We carried the dead
clippings to the compost heap, the future
garnered from an hour's hard prayer.

Today I've brought a trash bag for the weeds,
the leaves from a neighbor's dogwood
littered about my roots.
I've brought a knife to edge the border
at each headstone. This is the kingdom I inherit,
the land I set in order.

Jeanie Thompson

Elizabeth's Song

And how has it happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Luke 1:43

It was in the morning, just over
the swell of hills spread out before me,
you came walking, a small, steady figure

brightening the landscape. *See!*
you cried, your breath
coming steady, *Do you see?*

In that moment, belief
was a small foot knocking hard
at my ribs, the earth

made her slow circle, the wide world
brought sharply to relief, a voice
welling from the child

inside me: *I am with you,*
wonder no more. I took your hand.
Grace lit you

and the fire no man
has felt leapt
through us, forming breath

through flesh to speak
one to the other.
Men wrote later that the babe leapt

in me for joy, but it was
power, mercy
at the source, the error

forever made straight,
steady as one pulse tuning
itself to another: *heart of God:*

heart of man:
heart of God:
heart of man.

Jeanie Thompson

December Hawk Flight

North Alabama

In this moment
hard with rapture
the pair of hawks
wheels from the winter tree,
parting above us, crying
to one another
as they circle,
their reconnaissance of power
dwarfing the northern field
where a mouse
throbs in the stubble—
its fear freezing
to a brushstroke.

From treetop to treetop
across the fields
they signal one another—

You want to taste
that tongue of air
lifting her as she
wheels free of him.
I want to descend as he falls
to earth, rising again
with him, the heartblood
cooling in his talons.

I want the clarity
of her wingpull
as she inverts air,
willing it to take her
into the red wash
of feather and prey.

Jeanie Thompson

You want to glide
in his shadow,
covered, and covering
his strength
in your plummet.

They wheel
from the bare tree
above us
signaling danger.
We turn toward
one another—
alive in their clarity,
their blood,
our ascending hearts!

Jim Murphy

Elmore James Steps Out of a Stalled Car

Careful not to curse the steaming pile of rust, himself,
or the whole snow-blurred city of Detroit, Elmore James,
true king of the bottleneck guitar, whispers something calm
and noncommittal as he jams the floor brake down
with style and force. He has time to shove back
the sleeve of his long London Fog and look at his Timex
before the real mess starts. This rearview vision of her
body fidgeting—always too hard to please—
at the moment about to break on cue into tears,
soon as his arm comes over back of the bench
and he slowly cranes his neck around to see.

*

And none-other-than Elmore James runs a hand along the rim
of his torn-up porkpie hat, wiping this winter scene
all the way back to the fissured roads north of Mobile—
shells and bright ceramic shards, flints and stray coins always
catching eyes along every unmanned stretch of blacktop in the
South.

Flat foot, flat top, rag top—evolution of the phony contract,
trucking state to state. Always some blank face to look into,
tapping fingertips barely in from the grasshopping glare.
You play that thing, hanh? What bad news next?
Must not know how to work, I guess.

*

Steps past corrugated, flung-off roofs, rust-and rainwater-mottled
ribs of some foundation, charcoaled apse of a burned church
blown through as it struck by siege cannon, hiss of the grub worms
working in the framework of a thousand family homes.

Light that comes stealing up behind a rise, night and day
all rolled over—one morning like a boot in the back, some other
dawn when all the cool that simmers off by noon stays close
and straightens the thousand roads out with its blue kisses.

Opened the door on backseats stocked with stacks of zip guns,
baseball gloves and boxes of cigars—everything for sale
from new 45s up to works of Shakespeare, pocket-size, some nudie
playing cards, even dresses with a horse sewn on the pocket.

*

And this was all he brought back to the city for his only girl.
Brought back in the icebound Buick from Alabama to Detroit
one horsey dress, white leggings and a pair of buckle shoes,
the reason why Elmore James steps out of a stalled car to the
sound of screaming almost happy, with no tricks to figure out but
what to say about the hour, and location of the nearest phone.

Michael Anthony Robinson

Time Spent in Motion

I'll begin with the trip I went on a few days ago. I took it earlier this season—things don't die here in the winter the way they do in other places—and afterwards I was coming home in my car, driving on the highway. But it doesn't matter what my car looks like, or what I had been doing on the coast, or whether I hadn't reached Greenville, or had just passed it, the place doesn't matter at all, just that I was wherever I was in that small piece of time. That's the kind of thing I try to explain to my husband, but the kind of thing he doesn't understand.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" he says. "It matters to me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm curious about what you do during the week."

"I'm trying to tell you about what I did."

"But you always leave out the details."

"It just seems that way to you because you aren't paying attention."

"What does that mean?"

The day was in mid-winter, but looked and acted and felt like spring; the kind of day where you broil in the afternoon if you wear a sweater or jacket and freeze in the morning and evening if you don't. I used to catch cold in that kind of weather when I was a little girl. My mother used to tell us it was because of our pores; they would open up in the heat, she said, and when the day cooled, the cold air would get into our pores and give us a chill. She said that if we weren't careful, we would get pneumonia, and I used to imagine the bits of cold air hovering around my pores, waiting to swoop *in. I used to try to close them by the force of my will, but I always* caught a cold.

This day in my car was like that; because I was in the car I could take my jacket off and sit with the window lowered a crack while the sun and the sky and the smell of pine slipped in and washed over me. I remember reading once of experiments they did on people's brains about memory, and how they discovered that the sight or scent or texture of something could bring out feelings

that were buried in you; even if you can't remember what caused them, you feel the emotions all over again, with the same force. And that started to happen to me, as I looked down the highway: flat, winding, and slate-gray, dirt roads snaking off of it like dusty brown limbs, squirming their way over empty fields and among the skinny, distant pines. I suddenly felt an aimlessness that was piercing and strangely remote, like the pencil that I once accidentally stuck into my hand and hurt at first, but then became only a curiosity; it was as if I had come from nowhere and had no home at the end of my journey, as if no time was passing, as if I were part of some moment captured in a painting with percussive brush strokes.

"What does that mean?"

"I guess it means I felt very happy for no reason."

"Well," my husband offers, "it is really pretty out there."

A painting, one that you really enjoy, as you see it from the perfect distance: standing close enough to see the strokes, but far enough away that you can see this complete, whole thing that the strokes are small pieces of. Then you feel that you're one of the pieces and that you're part of the whole thing, just by watching. But I probably would have forgotten it all if I hadn't seen then something at once ordinary and startling, startling because it was so clear. I must have been going about 60 miles an hour, so that everything was floating past me, like waves or clouds, and I couldn't have seen the little girl for more than a few seconds. I know that, because by the time it occurred to me to consciously look, I would have had to turn all the way around in my seat to see her again, or even to get a glimpse of the house. She was a black girl, maybe seven or eight years old, and she had on a white dress, white stockings, white shoes that buckled across the top, and a pink sweater that buttoned down the front but had been left unbuttoned. Her skin was dark, or at least the white of her clothes made it seem so. She was moving across the porch of a white, one-story frame house, and at the moment I saw her, she had cradled in her right arm three books, and with her left hand had flung open the screen door and was about to turn the knob to go in. Something in the picture that my mind captured was so arresting, so pregnant with motion, that I remember it as if it were the last

thing that happened that day, as if I didn't drive another two hours before I arrived home.

"It's too bad you didn't have your camera," my husband says. "You might have been able to take a photo of the girl, or at least of the house."

I'm mean to my husband and really very unfair. He loves me from a distance that I'm not sure he is aware of. He is not extremely good looking, but dresses well and tastefully; and cries sincerely and without shame at sad movies, more than me; and does well in a good and demanding job; and would never hit me the way his father used to hit his mother. But something about me troubles him, and I don't think he yet knows what it is. If he did, he would speak to me less, or more, or differently. As it is, he tells me things I have no place for.

But maybe it's me; maybe I'm not making myself clear. Nothing about the girl made me want to capture the moment on film; it was how quickly the thing came and was gone that affected me. But it wasn't her movement that made me feel and remember, it was mine. All of a sudden, I was the little black girl on the porch instead of the grown black woman in the five-speed Chevette, even though I couldn't remember having had clothes like hers, and I never lived in a house on anything that resembled a farm. You see, my father was a burly, pitch-black man, who used to like to spend his Saturday afternoon in knee-length plaid shorts and plain white T-shirts, sitting on the fire escape plucking absently at the hairs on his legs and listening to KCMO in Kansas City on the radio in his bedroom. Every summer, he would take his wife — my patient, yellow mother—and his four children, and we would climb into the white stationwagon that was beat up even when he bought it, and wander around two or three or four states before going home, while the children squabbled over who got to lie in the back and who had to sit on the hump over the drive train. My father is long dead now, but he came back to me in the white Chevette on one side or the other of Greenville a few days ago. I saw him with the sunglasses and the plaid, porkpie hat that blew off his head in the mountains and rolled into a distant speck down a steep hillside as he watched it go and his laugh rumbled. I remember his swerving to avoid an oncoming car in Death Valley, and then leaning out of

the window, waving his fist and cursing; and the four children laughed with their hands over their mouths. But most of all, I remembered staring out the stationwagon's windows at the cars that passed us going the other direction, and expecting to see someone I knew. And when I didn't, the thought would seep into my head, uninvited and unwelcome, that maybe I was the only one in the world who really existed after all, and that the people in the passing cars were manufactured and run by for my sake, and ceased to be as soon as they vanished from sight. The thought terrified me because it wasn't hard to imagine that I didn't really exist either, and I would become acutely aware of my body and how it felt to be alive. Where were my eyes looking from, and how could they see? It all seems very silly now. It's silly to say and even to think about. What does the little girl think about? What was I to her as I passed in the car? How many sweaters will she leave unbuttoned? And how many men will she have loved when she is close to 30 and married?

"How many men have you loved?" my husband says quietly. And what the hell difference will it make? To anyone?

Meg Larson

All Monkeys, All the Time

for John Hart

There's a dead guy in the trauma room and no one knows his name. I'm at the head of the stretcher with Macon the cop. It's twelve minutes into my shift in the Emergency Room. We stare into the face, two purple black mounds where eyes should be.

"Nailed by a pickup on the access road," Macon says to me. "Serious biker. Bike was carbon fiber. Shoes clipped to the pedals." Macon makes a pedaling motion with his fat fists. Already he grates on my nerves, throwing his hands around and dropping words like bricks from his lips. Cops generally annoy me, especially loud ones. They remind me of my ex, who was both a cop and obnoxious.

I keep quiet, wait for Macon to leave or get another call while I feign extraordinary interest in the blood-encrusted scalp. Macon takes my silence as encouragement, pulls the sheet up to the dead guy's knees, points to the shoe still on the foot. Across the velcro strap the logo reads LOOK LOOK.

"Shoes clipped into the pedals," he repeats, in case I missed it the first time. He shakes his head, dejected. "No wallet. No money. No picture ID. But Power Bars galore." He swings his arm, like he is backhanding the world: "Fucking Power Bars all over the road."

#

After Macon leaves, I dump saline on the dead guy's hair, rub at it with a towel. I need a few hours sleep or some caffeine, intravenous. Day shift is not my thing, although I occasionally fill in. I usually work the suicide shift, 3 p.m. to 3 a.m., the twelve busiest hours of the ER day. I can do this because I have no kids, no pets, and at the moment, no significant other. I do have an ex who fancies himself a stalker, but he is no more effective at that than he was at being a faithful husband.

So the beauty of this oddball shift is that I get to choose my room assignment. No one wants to work the trauma room as often as I do. Even die-hard adrenalin junkies have a limit. Because

trauma patients are all I want, because I prefer blood and guts over sick people any day, because I've done this for eight years now without burning out, management considers me a godsend. At least they used to. Now they watch me, like I'm a gorilla at the zoo. Who knows when the gorilla will get pissed and pound on the glass? Maybe I don't look so mean, but they're scared all the same.

Fitz, my partner in the Trauma Hall, comes in to watch me work. He has wild hair that belies his lazy nature.

"Who's the stiff?" he asks as he drops to a stool on wheels, uses his legs to pull himself around the room. He can be quite active when there's no real work involved.

"Name him and claim him." I douse another towel with saline and grind it against the skull.

"Oh, one of those." Fitz plays the counter like a drum, then slides across the room to peer at the dead guy. He clicks his tongue a few times and skitters back to the counter, saying, "That's a face only Mama could love."

"Fitz, that's not a face. It's a freaking mess. Here." I toss him a clean towel. "Make yourself useful and help me get the blood off him before Mama shows up and wants a look at her Sonny Boy."

"No way. Not me." He throws the towel back and gives a body-long shiver. "I can't stand the sight of blood."

#

In the usual course of events I don't have time to clean up dead bodies; I send them dripping to the morgue. It's uncommonly quiet for a Sunday in general and Race Week in particular when every redneck with a sixpack and a folding chair winds up at the nearby Motor Speedway.

I barely get the blood out of the dead guy's hair before the charge nurse sends me to help out Wickley, who's assigned to the Pit, the horseshoe shaped area full of sick people. Wickley is positively gothic with her purple lips and powdered white face. She claims blue-black is her natural hair color.

"Migraine, belly pain, nutcase, addict," she says.

"Which one should I start with?"

"That is one patient. The Quiet Room. All yours."

In the Quiet Room, the usual repository for psych patients, a skinny boy with a stud in his nose crouches on his pillow. He looks all of fourteen with hair dyed banana yellow and two mismatched earrings hanging from one ear. He peers at me through fingers covered in homemade tattoos.

"I know you," he says. "You're my monkey's uncle."

"Right-o."

"You don't have to lie to me," he pouts.

"I don't have to. I choose to."

"Okay then." He stands on the bed and kicks a foot in my general direction, follows it up with a long armed slapping motion.

I call for security.

Wickley hoots.

#

Wickley has been on her pious high horse since she wrote me up after she caught me pocketing a Vistaril from the med room. I tried to explain that it was only an antihistamine, and I even showed her the rash on my neck. Naturally there were things I had to endure: the on-the-spot piss test, the week-long suspension followed by a day full of interviews where I sat trying not to sweat in my grey wool slacks and long-sleeved white blouse, which were entirely too hot but very professional looking. I tried to look appropriately apologetic, not pissed or hell bent on revenge, which was what I was at the moment. I knew for a fact that Wickley confiscated every half empty bottle of penicillin in the department to take home for her mangey-ass barn cats.

Lucky for me, my family physician sent a letter to the board of investigators stating that he'd prescribed the Vistaril after I developed a rash on a weekend trek in the woods and the only thing he felt I was guilty of was poor judgment in not calling him for a refill when my prescription ran out. Privately the panel said they realized ER employees helped themselves to more than just antihistamines, and while I wasn't caught stealing controlled substances, like narcotics, I was stealing, all the same, and, therefore, I was to be an example.

Rather than ruin my career, they graciously allowed me to retain my position, albeit restricted for a month, thou shalt give no medications, and officially wrote me up for Inappropriate Administration of Medication, rather than the dreaded Inappropriate Allocation of Medication, which is synonymous with Nurse, Feed Thy Drug Habit. My manager went to great lengths to explain all this at the monthly department meeting while I sat in the back of the conference room and pretended not to notice that no one would look me in the eye, except Fitz, who gave a lazy grin, and Wickley, who smirked with purple lips and bone-white teeth. After that I zoned out, replaying the last screaming match with my ex, slowing down the action so the entire ten-second trot of his naked girlfriend across my bedroom into the bathroom lasted nearly an hour.

I babysit young Monkey Boy, wait for the psych reps to show up. He is tied to the bed and occasionally belches. He doesn't say a word until it's time to go. "I got a banana for you." He chatters like a chimp until one hippie-looking escort squeezes his arm. He cries when they cart him off.

The dead guy is still in my trauma room, still ugly and bloody. No one's called to claim him. No one's called to ask about accidents, not one panicked wife, not one fearful mother. He could be from some dinky burg thirty miles away. They may not miss him for hours. How does that work, I wonder, if nobody knows you're gone, are you really dead?

I drag out the saline and start scrubbing. Generally I don't like to be around dead bodies. Sometimes when people die I can feel their spirits flitting around the room. Sometimes I think those spirits can read my mind, and they know dead bodies upset me with all the spitting and dripping and the mottled skin no horror movie can ever reproduce. Call me spooky but it's true.

To my relief the cyclist seems peaceful enough. I don't detect any frantic behavior from his spirit, in spite of the fact that I think his broken teeth look ghastly, in spite of the fact I don't know who the hell he is. Somewhere right now some girl who loves him may be sipping seltzer water as she drives home from her aerobics class. She may be checking their mailbox, inspecting the phone bill, and admiring the sight of his name.

#

Macon the cop is back. He eats a Power Bar while I shove the dead guy off to the side and slide a wheeled partition into place. I should've sent him to the morgue. Nobody's told me to do that yet but I could have. Macon watches me work then tells me of a pending arrival, my first drunken Bubba from the Race Track.

Bubbas One and Two, he says, showing me two fat fingers as he launches into his story: Bubba One sits on top of his truck with Bubba Two. They are on lawn chairs on the roof of the cab, half-dressed and mostly drunk, an empty Styrofoam cooler between them. Bubba One decides to go on a beer run, neglects to inform Bubba Two. By third gear, Bubba Two has rolled off the cab onto his pointy little head.

When Bubba Two gets to my trauma room, he is strapped on a backboard, his head immobilized by velcro and a few hard plastic blocks. He has a cervical collar around his neck and his arms tucked tight at his side. He is nearly naked and as hairy as an ape. His sneakers are scruffy.

A couple of medics hold the backboard so he can puke to the side without choking to death. They are discussing their last patient who had stuffed a banana, unpeeled, up his butt. I want to hear that story, but Bubba Two is trying to ask me questions amidst all the retching.

"Why does my head hurt?"

"You were in an accident," I tell him. He looks quite shocked.

"Was I driving?"

"Nope."

He barfs into a trash can at my feet. The room smells like a brewery. The medics look bored. The conversation about the banana is over and I missed it.

"Was anyone else hurt?" Bubba Two asks.

"No. Just you."

I tell Bubba Two we need to get his stomach settled but I don't give details on what I need to do. Namely, shove a tube up his nose, down the back of his throat, and into his stomach. I intend to suck out all that beer so he'll quit puking and stinking up my trauma room.

He chokes and groans and gags around the tube. He tries to kick his legs free then gives a good long yell that sounds like "Quit."

When the suction is on full blast and his mouth cleared of vomit, he asks a question.

"Why does my head hurt?"

"You were in an accident."

He gasps as if he didn't just hear this information two minutes ago.

The medics drop his backboard flat onto the stretcher. They walk out, leaving Bubba Two staring up at the ceiling. I hang another bag of IV fluid and search for the source of all the dried blood on his ankle. I take off his shoe and change falls out. He has a ten dollar bill stuffed up in the toe.

"Was I driving?"

"No."

"Was anybody else hurt?"

"No. And guess what. You get to stay in this fine establishment for at least one night which means you'll miss the big race tomorrow. Your guy might win but you won't be there." I'm enjoying this now. NASCAR has never impressed me.

Bubba Two stares into the light over his head.

"You still with me?" I ask because you never know. His eyes are the color of lager. He blinks.

"Why does my head hurt?" he asks again.

That's how I know he has a head injury and is not just stupid drunk. Aside from asking the same questions repeatedly, if he were only drunk, he'd be irate about missing the race. The cheap seats go for over a hundred bucks. Not to mention his share of the glory should his team win. And don't forget the wrecks. Dodging flying parts can be fun.

"Whatever happened to Bubba One?" I ask Macon who is happy for the attention and swings his arms. I see a Power Bar sticking out of his pocket.

"Picked up outside the FoodLion. Had a case of Bud." He makes a tipping motion with his hand, as if he's drinking. "Glug. Glug."

#

Dad calls the charge nurse looking for me. He thinks this is like Wal-mart and all I have to do is pick up a courtesy phone.

When Bubba Two goes for a CAT scan, I call Dad back from the phone in the trauma room.

Wickley waltzes by with her big pale ears open. "Better not be personal business."

"You on break?" I ask to let her know that I know she has no business in my trauma hall. She should be out in the Pit, wiping the spit from the lips of the gagging masses.

"You busy?" my father says right off and I can tell he's in a good mood. Usually if I call him, he's cranked because I tore him away from the boob tube. "You busy?" he asks again.

"Kinda. Sorta. What's wrong?"

"Oh, you know." He chuckles, talks inaudibly to my mother. "Your mama's pressure is up and we hope you can stop by and check it tonight." He snickers, puts a hand over the receiver.

"Sure. No problem. Is Mama sick?" No doubt she ate shrimp again or country-fried steak. She refuses to stick to her diet then comes crying to me when she feels bad. I tell her to skip the fast-food meals but she is deaf on that subject.

"Oh, you know. On the couch. Got an ice pack on the head."

Dad laughs, more muffled conversation.

"Is everything okay? Is someone there?" I'm ready to hang up and be done with him. He laughs some more.

"There's this monkey. And it's riding a bike. And it's got a ball cap on and it's toting flowers." He consults my mother again. "This here other monkey's wearing this foo-foo frock and making kissy lips. Big fat lips. You should see it."

"What are you talking about, Dad?"

"Oh, you know. The monkey channel. All monkeys, all the time." He snickers.

"You're talking about TV?" No surprise there.

"Well, yeah. You should see it. It'll be on tonight when you come by. Wait, wait. Now they're getting married. This monkey bride, she's all dressed up and strutting down the aisle. It's funny." He pauses.

I don't know what to say. I fail to see the wonder of it.
"You gotta see this. All night and day. It's all monkeys. Monkeys doing people things."
He says this like it is a miracle.
"Why are you so worked up about a monkey channel on TV?" I ask, just as Wickley goes by in the opposite direction. She smacks her lilly white fist on the open door.
"Sounds like a personal phone call to me."
I think if the dead guy were alive, he'd be rolling his eyes, too.

#

"He's still here?" Fitz sighs when I recruit him for clean-up duty.
"Quit whining and help me scrub him up so I can send him to the morgue."
"So send him already. He was DOA. We're not responsible for graveyard detail." Fitz rolls a few strands of his hair between two fingers. He stares at the nostril filled with old blood, the cracked and crusted lips that I can't bear to touch.
"Well, show a little courtesy." I say. Fitz is not as stupid as he looks. Or as carefree as he pretends. "If he were your husband, would you like to see him looking like that?"
Fitz sticks his lip out. "He's too young to be my husband."
"Look. Help me out. I was married to a cop. He could've been killed by any nutcase with a gun. I had good reason to think about what it would be to identify his body. This guy was riding a bike. Do you think his wife or his girlfriend or whoever actually thought that would kill him? Do you think they'll actually be able to recognize him now? He's a mangled mess. He should at least be a clean mangled mess."
"All right. Just shut up. You're breaking my heart." He grabs a jug of saline and a fresh towel. "I'll do his face since that upsets you so much. You work on his legs. Then he's out of here and I don't want to hear anymore about it."
We work quietly for a bit.
"What do you think his name is?" Fitz asks.

"Greg. Maybe Randy." The blood flakes stubbornly in the hair of his legs. I scrub until I hit white skin, make the patch grow.

"Blonde wife, you think? Skinny?"

"Probably. But short, petite. She'll sit there in a chair and talk to him and hold his hand but she won't cry until she gets outside in the ladies room. And she'll spend the next six months beating herself up because she wasn't there when he died."

"Christ, you sound like some cheesy show on TV. I'm gonna start snotting if you don't hush now." He gives a few fake sniffles. "Hurry up with them legs. And take those goofy shoes off. You're supposed to die with your boots on, not some elf shoes."

"Clips into the pedals," I say with a gruff voice and make a pedaling motion with my hands.

Fitz gives me a black look.

My face goes pink. "Never mind. That's just my Macon the cop imitation."

I grab the velcro strip that says LOOK LOOK and loosen the shoe then peel off the sock. Inside his sock, stuck to the bottom of his foot, is a driver's license and a hand-written scrap titled Emergency Info.

"Bingo. We have a winner," I tell Fitz before trotting off to the nurses' station where Macon sits skinning the label from another Power Bar. I don't know who to hand the license to first, Macon or the charge nurse. I grab an envelope, drop in the license and emergency sheet. I haven't read either one. I don't want to be around when they say his name. I don't want to see Macon dash off to break the news to the wife or mother or whomever he had listed. I don't want to escort grieving family members to and fro, call preachers and taxis. That's what will happen. Now that we have a name, the dead guy won't be sent to the morgue at all. He'll stay in my trauma room, and drunken Bubba Two will go to Fitz when he gets back from Radiology.

"Hey, Macon, I got a love note for you."

"Really?" he asks with a fat hopeful face. He would look like that for any female who called him by name.

For a moment I almost tell the truth. Then I drop the envelope into his greedy paws.

"Yeah, just don't read it now. Wait five minutes. I'm shy." I feel positively evil as I walk away.

In the Quiet Room, the same psych kid is back, once again in four-point restraints. I poke my head in the room. He sees me and starts screeching "baboon, baboon, baboon." He's so loud it's embarrassing.

"Looks like somebody's been watching too much of the monkey channel." I say as I wander off toward the Pit, looking for Wickley, hoping for a chance to harass her.

Joy Ross

My Crush on Tony Blair
(And How I Overcame It)

If I had to be really, really honest, I would say it started on C-SPAN, one weekend when the U.S. government was caught up in another scandal, and allegations and misdeeds and spin guys were all over TV. I mean, on networks, CNN, Fox News *and* MSNBC. So all I could find was sport fishing on the Outdoor Network and a prison movie on the sci-fi channel and it was late on a Sunday night, I remember, because I had a meeting at work the next day for which I was maybe a little bit unprepared.

I work at Estee Lauder Corporate. In lipsticks. We were deciding the colors for the year 2004. It's pretty technical, although not really, if you know what I mean. But there are a lot of meetings, and in some of them, you might have to make a presentation. So it's stressful.

Anyway, I was clicking past "Crocodile Hunter", "Jewelry Under $40," and "Emeril Live", and there on C-SPAN, on an apparently weekly program called the "Prime Minister's Questions," was Tony Blair.

He's incredibly sexy. I mean, he just stopped my channel-surfing cold.

Okay, yes, I'd seen him before; I think I first noticed him in an Annie Leibovitz photo of European Union heads of state, outside some castle. All the old guys like Mitterrand were wearing suits and had big barrel chests, and then there was Tony, in shirt-sleeves, and wearing a pink button-down cotton shirt. With his hands on his hips, like "Let's get to work and save Europe," and a really cute smile. He wasn't as tall as Helmut Kohl, but as that actress Emma Thompson once said, comparing Arnold Schwarzenegger to her then-husband Kenneth Branagh, "We're a small, pink, island people." Anyway, he looked plenty tall enough for me. His eyes were really blue.

After that, it almost seemed as though I couldn't flip through an issue of *Vanity Fair* without having him stare back at me from the pages. I'd be relaxing at work by reading about Brad Pitt or some-

thing and there he'd be, in a multi-page spread by Annie Liebovitz again, only this time in black and white, with all his Cabinet ministers, photographed in a "working" session, running Britain. I'd have to say that, even though I knew he was a leader of the free world, I was looking at him more like a man, a very attractive man, and so loose and easygoing in the photo, not like those straight-laced Oxford guys sitting upright in their chairs. I remember that Tony was leaning forward, gesturing, making some sort of point, seeming oblivious to the camera, and you could really see he has a passion for his work. I love that in a man.

What was with Annie Liebovitz, I wondered, that she had this fantastic job where she was always getting to photograph great-looking men?

So anyway, back to me with the remote control: there I was, staring right into the man's eyes, or actually, a little down, given the angle of the camera in the House of Commons, at his attractively balding head. He has the most interesting hair, sort of wavy and brown and thinning. He had a sort of non-blow-dried insouciance, as he gripped the podium and answered questions from the extremely nasty members of the opposition Conservative party—I think it was something really hostile about postal rates—and I couldn't help noticing that his tie was just an ordinary tie. It wasn't a power tie, not like Trent Lott's giant red compensatory ties, you know what I mean?

But mostly it just struck me how *real* he seemed; sometimes you can tell that sort of thing. Okay, yes, I knew he had a wife; *Vanity Fair* had run a picture of them with the Clintons, taken when the Prime Minister was visiting Washington. But his wife, like Hillary Clinton, was said to be a lawyer, and I mean, really, how often are they home? I noticed he didn't wear a wedding ring. And anyway, it was just a crush, I thought, that would eventually subside.

At the end of the C-SPAN program, it said: if you have any questions, write the Prime Minister, and then they gave his address. Just like that, Number 10 Downing Street, the whole address. I thought about that a long time. I hadn't written down the zip code so when I watched the next week, I make sure I had a pencil and piece of paper handy, just in case—in case I thought of a

question he hadn't answered about pension increases in Sussex, for instance. I wanted our relationship to be professional, or at least, I mean, one between equals. I mean, I would have wanted him to know that I had a college degree and could discuss, you know, poll taxes and domestic policy and the situation with Iraq. It wasn't a cheap kind of thing. Our "encounters," I guess you could call them, were on a higher plane than just your average crush; they were an intellectual kind of thing. You might even say I began to feel he was my intellectual soulmate.

So I watched his show, oh, for several weeks, listening to all the ways in which we really connected. Daycare, education, and even the need to be very, very demanding in our relationship with the Russians on Chechnya. He was really expanding my mind; he got me thinking about the need for Scotland to have self-rule and about the necessary reform of the House of Lords; I've *always* thought that guys inheriting all the houses and the money and stuff, not to mention a seat in Parliament, is stupid. I mean, look what that kind of thinking did to Eleanor in *Sense & Sensibility*.

In fact, I began to tape the show, so that I could go over it again and again and make sure I was getting to know all the players. There's a really cute guy who represents Oxford, and also one from Knightsbridge, but he's a Conservative, and you can tell he's for the rich because he always wears very expensive suits. They're pretty attractive though—I guess if you have the money, you might as well spend it. I used to think about that guy's suits sometimes on the way to work, and wonder what sort of dress you'd wear if you were going out to dinner with a guy in that sort of suit.

And then I'd naturally begin to think about colors for the Year 2004 and have to take some deep breaths and come back down to earth and find my center. It's sort of stressful to get up to speed on an entirely different government, especially when all the guys have accents, *different* accents. Some of the guys are from Yorkshire and some are from Cornwall and places like that. And meanwhile, all my British friends, both of them, were *horrified*, like, Ami! are you utterly mad! They'd talk about how Blair was the Anti-Christ as far as the liberal wing of his party was concerned and that he was a sellout centrist like Bill Clinton and that

he'd even been in a band, and had been a big womanizer like Clinton was at Cambridge.

But I mean, really, what man doesn't have a past? Everyone grows.

And even though sometimes it seemed as though, on rewind, he might not be answering the whole, entire, question, I still thought he was a better choice, by far, than the Conservative opposition leader, William Hague, who was sort of attack-Chihuahua for the right-wing. Now *there's* a guy who would get you into a war—you can tell by the red tie. With polka-dots even! Who wears that?! Plus, then I read in *People* that Tony actually stood in line at a PTA meeting to meet his children's teacher, and only asked to cut in front when he was about to be late for his weekly meeting with the Queen. Incredible. I had that clipping over my desk for a couple of weeks to remind me: don't settle for less in a man! look for manners! you're worth it!

I read that the Queen was really fond of him, and so was Princess Di—before her death; I think that was in *USA Today*. So I started to go down to a little store in the Village that sold British imports, and pick up Stilton cheese and different ales to have in my fridge for when I watched tapes. Pretty soon I was spending, like, most of the soccer season hanging out in a British-theme pub next door to the import store, watching Chelsea kick Nottingham Forest's ass—that's what the guy I played darts with said—and drinking Guinness.

I have to say that the fans in a British-theme pub are pretty rowdy.

But I liked to listen to the way the guys talked; it reminded me so much of Tony, and you can only listen to any one tape so many times. My friend Hildi went to London and brought me back a Tony Blair mug, which I didn't take to work, but kept on my desk in my home office. It's sort of a corner in my apartment where I sometimes do my work if I have to bring it home.

You know, Elizabeth Hurley is our spokesperson for Estee Lauder; *she's* English and so is her boyfriend, Hugh.

Anyway, I sharpened all the pencils, and then arranged them in the mug, and then I turned the face so that it was like Tony was watching the show with me. I thought that was hilarious. I was still

thinking about something I could write and ask him about, and I had started a letter that I thought was pretty good but still needed revising. If I was going to write, I wanted it to be serious, you know; I didn't want him to think I was some sort of nut.

I guess the turning point came one morning when I was just sort of lying in bed, listening to the rain, and thinking how *English*, how really *English* rain is—when you think about it—when I heard on the "Today" show that Tony had been named the Moral and Spiritual Leader of the World. No kidding, in a worldwide poll, of people all over the world, he was the No. 1 person they said they looked up to. Which was sort of validating, on the face of it. It was kind of like when Sam Waterston was chosen to take over the lead in "Law & Order" and I had loved him ever since I'd seen the video of *The Great Gatsby* where he's *so much* better than Robert Redford.

That's something you should rent sometime, if you never have.

But this was my dilemma: I'm a woman, and I get a crush—which I never, never wanted to have happen—on this really attractive guy, and he turns out to be the Moral and Spiritual Leader of the World. You know what I mean? I mean, admired by millions of people the world over. And suddenly, it all started to seem kind of wrong; here was someone like that, with those kinds of responsibilities. And here was me. And I'm not a selfish person.

So the future was clear; I knew what I had to do. I mean, it's not like I had planned any of this—it just happened. But now I had to be responsible and do the responsible thing, and take responsibility for this. You know what I mean? Plus, when I proposed "English Roses" as a new campaign at work, everyone thought I was weird because the trend was clearly Asia. It's possible that my crush had sort of, you know, clouded my thinking and was affecting my career, not just taking up a lot of nights and weekends.

And my career is *very* important to me.

So I was talking to this woman on the bus one morning about things, about Tony, and how I needed to be over him, and she said she thought it was a good idea—I mean, totally supportive!—and she told me to read this book, *Finding Your Inner Path: How to Get Over Your Obsessions with a Person*. She said someone had given it to her daughter when her daughter was really in love with

a guy who turned out to be a big drug dealer, but who treated her really well. I thought that was a good recommendation.

The program is simple; it can work for anyone, as long as you really, really want to end it. One thing you do is repeat a set of 50 aphorisms to yourself, which start like this: 1) Be true to the true path within yourself and 2) be open to the realities of the path you are headed down. I could see right away that these were right. I mean, cheese and ale are really pretty fattening, and then even if you love the guy, the bi-continental part would be hard to make work, even if you had actually met and spent time together and everything. This way, it was even harder.

The book also said that you should repeat to yourself things like: 11) sometimes love hits a speed bump and sometimes it hits a wall. I thought that one was funny and it was also true: I only get two weeks vacation a year, and I wasn't due for one until August. Two weeks is hardly enought time to see London, let alone to work on a relationship. When Hildi was in London, she barely had time to shop.

And then there was 23) some loves make you betray who you truly, deeply are—is that the direction you want to walk? I mean, no, I never, never wanted that. I had just been channel-surfing, and maybe reading *Vanity Fair*, and watching some Merchant & Ivory videos and had fallen for a guy. I didn't want to 32) stand still on the path when 35) I could be realizing that the way was open before me because I was a whole and uniquely special person.

Like Annie Leibovitz—she seems like a whole and uniquely special person. She always has a camera in her hand, and she wears a lot of black, like she's not all that worried about colors for the Year 2004.

So that spring weekend, I decided to do it: I gave away all my videotapes, or at least the one on which I had taped Tony's state visit to the White House, where he'd stood in line for hours, greeting people, only about three feet from the camera. He seemed really genuine and he looks great in a tux. That was maybe the most painful one to watch for the last time. I gave it to Hildi and told her, Don't give it back to me! tape over it, please! Then I spent the weekend changing tapes and taping off the E! channel

so that I had the "Golden Globes Post-Show Fashion Review," the "Gossip Show," and a bunch of "Fashion Emergencies" on tape, and also a couple of movies off of Bravo! Foreign movies, I haven't watched them yet.

And then I got rid of the cheese, and the biscuits in those little cartons with the red plaid on the side, and all the British teas, like Earl Grey, which I bought as an experiment. I only kept the cinnamon, which is the one I thought I would have liked even if I'd never developed my crush. I gave the last two lagers to the guy downstairs; I was going to give him the mug, and then I was afraid he'd think that was weird, giving a mug with a guy on it to a guy.

So I just turned the mug to the wall, so that you could only see the plain white side of the cup, and I went out to see a movie. I think I saw *Message in a Bottle*, at the dollar theatre, which was terrible, because it had a stupid ending. Then I was in a funk, and had to review my aphorisms: 37) if you feel yourself faltering, recommit yourself to the path and 38) no obsession goes away by itself; you have to thank it for all its work and tell it you are strong without it—or you may be obsessed forever. Which, of course, to be really, really honest, I didn't want. And also 40) there are better things in store along the path, which, duh, I knew. I knew there were a lot of guys in New York, maybe some of them at work. Maybe some of them were even English.

Or not.

I just remember that it was raining, because I decided to sit there on the couch, drinking cinnamon tea, and sort of flipping channels, and repeating 41) the path is open before you if you will put on your shoes, 42) you are a whole and uniquely special person, 43) he is only an obsession and you can decide to make it stop.

Meg Larson

Something Like That

for Dave

Later he would remember sun-dried tomatoes in a sour vinaigrette, and the cozy way she laid her fingers on his arm as she told him she was having an affair.

"He's so spiritual," Leslie said with a heavenly light in her eyes. "Unlike you, Jeff. You—" her green eyes narrowed, "—you eat your breakfast cereal with a serving spoon."

What could he possibly say to that? It was an old complaint, the thing about the size of his spoon. How she linked that with spirituality was beyond him. Lately she had developed a divine sense of herself after spending a month of Saturdays serving in the downtown soup kitchen, along with the other touchie-feelie types in her church.

She stretched her arm across the tiny restaurant table, stabbed a slick tomato on his plate, stuffed it in her mouth, and swallowed. She prattled on about an upcoming church retreat.

He managed to drink his way though the meal, filled his mouth with blood red wine every time a question—who, where, how long—threatened to slip through his lips. He hoped she'd keep the details to herself. He wasn't ready to think of her naked and sweating with someone else.

For dessert she ordered a vanilla bean gelato and decaf coffee.

"God is love. It's that simple," she said in her best breathless hippie-chick voice. "When you open your heart and spread love, you're doing God's work."

What do you spread when you open your legs, he wanted to ask but forced his tongue tight against the back of his teeth. First words, then tears. He had never had trouble crying. He could see how it would go and fought against the unraveling. He breathed hard through his nose.

In the car, on the drive home, he finally sputtered: "I had no clue."

"I know." She said cheerily. "I've been discreet."

In front of the bathroom mirror she fussed with her hair for a full ten minutes while he sat on the trunk at the foot of their bed and watched as she repeatedly tucked and untucked the same two

strands of streaked blond hair. Behind the ear, in front of the ear, behind again. She pulled the cinnamon silk shirt from her dress slacks and patted her belly.

"I ate too much." She made a bloated face, stuck out her tongue, then reached for the dental floss.

He studied her stockinged feet.

He wondered, was it his turn to talk? What was he supposed to say? Is this the time to start the crying and the begging? He could feel the blood thumping through the vessels in his neck the back of his skull, above his right brow. He pressed a thumb against the bony edge of his eye socket and tried to come up with an ending. Any ending. He didn't have the imagination to make up something that would either cheer or comfort him. He feared he was caught in this pose forever, couldn't see beyond it, couldn't see his way through it. There was only this one long shuddering moment and the quake under his breastbone.

"So..." an elongated sigh. It was the best he could do. His disappointment with himself continued to grow.

In the mirror she cut her eyes at him, then flicked a simpering smile in his direction.

"Whatever you want is okay, Jeff. You're the one who's hurting right now," she said between tug of floss.

"I want you out." He didn't know it until he said it and then it felt right so he said it again, rising up on two feet, catching her eye in the mirror. Louder: "I want you out of this house. Tonight."

"All right," she said and flashed him a look he was sure she meant to be sweet and accommodating, but somehow it didn't ring true. She didn't seem the least bit surprised at his request. He had the sudden feeling he had played right into her hand.

She yanked the floss, sliced the gum between two molars, and cursed. She spat loudly into the sink.

He plopped down on the trunk. His chest burned with wine and vinegar. Two fingers trembled. He couldn't feel his heart any more.

#

She gathered her essentials: deodorant, shampoo, lipstick in a shade called pink grapefruit. She shoved a pair of jeans, two tee

shirts, and several pink panties into her backpack, and loaded a tote with paperback romances. She pulled a stuffed frog from her bedside stand and made its legs clap together.

"Ribit," she said, holding the frog in front of his face. "Ribit, ribit." The frog's legs kicked.

"Quit." He had the urge to push her away, could see himself grabbing the frog by its feet and smacking her with it, right on the top of her dyed blond head.

She dropped the frog onto the bed and took his hand between both of hers and drew it to her collarbone.

He yanked his arm away, nearly clipping her chin with his knuckles. She stepped closer, put herself in his line of vision, gave him a bubble-eyed look better suited to cartoon characters.

"I know you'll be fine. You're such a nice guy." She solemnly bobbed her head up and down.

"Right." He resented the condescending statements, the way she vacillated between teenager and adult. When had she become so silly, so inconstant? He couldn't reconcile the two: the girl playing footsy with a frog, and a thirty-six year old conducting an illicit affair.

"You will be fine. I just know it." She nodded dumbly as she said it.

"Go," he said and herded her to the front door, careful not to touch her. He slid the bolt in place before she backed out of the driveway.

In the kitchen, the microwave clock glowed nearly midnight. He noted she hadn't phoned ahead to find a place to stay. Apparently she had known all along where she was going.

#

On the end table in the living room, the photographs lined up like tombstones, the frames silver and sloping. Wedding photos. The bride's flushed face, the country girl dress, the bouquet she later dried and stuffed into vases in every corner of the house. She looked like a bumpkin in her frilly get-up. The maid of honor, her sister, younger with curves, wore a similar outfit and managed to

look quite sweet. At the wedding, he danced with his new sister-in-law once, a fast dance, until Leslie broke it up. With one toss of her faux farm-girl hair, she had sucked the joy right out of the day. What was it she had said, something that made him feel like a bad kid, a horny bad kid at that. Her sister was nearly thirty, just a few years younger than Leslie. There had been nothing indecent about that dance.

He studied the row of pictures. The wedding, their banner moment as a couple, yet the photos centered on her. Whenever he was in a picture, he stood out like a sore thumb, just another useless appendage. Weddings were for brides, he decided as he pushed the frames face down, one at a time. He remembered how she fussed over the cakes (white, lemon, and a velvety chocolate), spent a solid month planning the presentation of an entire table devoted to cake. When she proudly trotted him over to the cake table, he was perplexed that she had cried big fat tears over that display. Several stiff white cakes surrounded the hulking centerpiece which was topped with an insipid bride and groom on a hay wagon. The smaller satellite cakes were connected by beige plastic bridges peopled with hokey farm figures. One plaid-wearing farmer leaned over the bridge rail, making Jeff think of suicide. Not his suicide, just suicide in general.

He opened the wedding album to see a smirking Leslie presenting her diamond studded ring finger. He shut the book and perched on the edge of the couch. He could cry now, and took a deep breath, prepared to cut loose, but somewhere between his heart and his eyes, the tears were lodged. He ran a hand from collarbone to jaw, trying to force the tears up his neck and out his eyes. He had missed the chance to cry at the restaurant. Now he wished he'd smacked her with the frog. Then she would've berated him, and he would've cried while apologizing. That's when he could talk, and think, and make sense of things. When he cried. Right now he couldn't cry so nothing made sense. Like thinking about suicide on his wedding day.

He had done that twice, in fact. The first being when the minister explained the origin of the phrase "tying the knot" and his mind had gone straight to "noose around the neck." Was that a premonition, foreshadowing, an omen? He hadn't thought of suicide since

then, hadn't remembered even thinking those things until now. They had a good marriage. They worked for the same company, had offices on the same floor. Everyday they carpooled. Everyday they ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. How many married couples could stand such togetherness?

It was a good marriage, he was sure of it. Only the last six months had been lousy.

At two a.m. the refrigerator startled him out of his funk with its noisy cycle of humming. He stared into the open fridge as if he could see the source of the noise. He saw the fat free milk vibrate before he grabbed a bag of peeled baby carrots from the crisper. His favorite snack. Of course he was hungry now. He'd had no dinner.

He slouched at the table and stared at the wall. A long low shelf of stuffed animals, mostly rabbits in bonnets and suspenders, caught his eye. He threw a carrot and nicked a bunny in the head. The carrot hit the floor and rolled away.

Six months ago she'd joined a church, St Francis Something Or Other. He called it the Church of the Sanctified Dipshits, and it was full of skulking rich guys on the make. He had seen that for himself and when he'd commented on it to a co-worker, the guy had given a wicked chortle and said, "Oh, you're talking about Saint Francis of Adultery. I've heard about that place. Keep an eye on your wife." And his co-worker had smacked him on the arm and winked.

At home he had repeated his friend's comment to Leslie and she'd given her typical giggle before saying, "Oh, I couldn't have an affair with anyone there. Most of those guys smoke." And she had laughed and tweaked his nipple. And then he had laughed. He had laughed it off.

Now, as he pelted rabbits with carrots, he realized for the first time, that was the wrong answer. What she'd said. She wouldn't screw around because they smoke. What she should have said, what he would have said in the same situation, was something else entirely. Because we're married and I love you. Something like that.

Yuk. He ran a fist over his forehead. What a clod.

#

They had True Love. That was what she'd said, in her ready-to-get-laid voice. In the beginning. They had met on a dinner cruise while putting around the harbor. His date was battling in the bathroom from the combination of sea sickness and narcotics, (she'd had a tooth pulled the day before) while her date was the dj for the dance portion of the cruise. After eating dinner, he'd gone to work.

They were both half pissed. Together they got toasted on raunchy tequila. She fiddled with his fingers and sang along with the songs. He said he liked a woman who wasn't too proud to sing off key. She said she liked a man who wasn't covered in hair like a rug. This, with a nod over her shoulder. During the fast dances, she rubbed her butt against his crotch, and blew kisses to the hairy dj who looked grumpy and unattractive.

He had never been so blatantly bad. He had never been the one to win the girl. Somehow he had always ended up with the shy, reticent types, usually chunky girls with bad perms and solid uninteresting lives. They were like pound puppies, so damn glad for the attention but skittish, forcing him to play the gentleman. These relationships had been perfectly adequate but not memorable. In fact it seemed he only ever dated one girl; she just changed names occasionally.

During one raucous fast dance, he kissed her neck and they headed out to the open deck where his date eventually caught him sucking on her ear.

"Nice one, Jeff," she'd said and puked over the side before staggering off in her fat black dress and matchstick heels.

Later, after he'd ditched his date, they met up in a parking lot and rented a waterfront room. From the first fingerful of pubic hair, he was hooked. She was bristly and sharp, the way he imagined pigs' tails if he were to hold them in his hand.

In the morning, he heard her voice stripped of alcohol and the background noise. It was like the best kind of come-on, delicate with just a hint of bawdiness. She could do amazing things with her voice.

Over his breakfast of apple pancakes he shyly confessed his lack of guilt at abandoning his sick date, then explained how they'd never been exclusive, commitment had never been mentioned, they had never even been in the sack. The justification left him glowing.

She spread peanut butter on her banana pancakes and said she forgot to mention that she lived with that guy, but she was mostly moved out.

He broke it off right then and there, left cash on the table and walked out the door. He was secretly proud that he had enough of a moral skeleton to pull off such a dramatic gesture. He would not sneak around or become a third party in any relationship.

When she completely moved out, she showed up on his doorstep in a cape with a plastic rose between her pointy little teeth.

#

At four in the morning he went for a walk being sure to take the most canine-infested route. He wanted some noise even if it was just dogs. Sometimes he tried to guess the breed by the bark. All he saw with his penlight was the reflective lining of their eyes. Topetum, he thought as he named the glowing membrane. Something like that.

Somehow he was getting through the hours. They were slipping by while he was in la-la land, trying not to think about his skinny wife sitting on the lap of some golden guru. His thoughts were loud but unformed, the irritating drone of static, like the sound of an off-the-air television station. He remembered that from childhood, that scratchy hiss, Now cable kept people entertained twenty-four seven. Is that what happened in his marriage? Did he fail to keep her entertained? They had love, didn't they, or something like it?

At a convenience store he considered chatting up the clerk, a ripe thirty-something with sloping hips and a stained smock, She didn't look any happier than he felt so he bought the cashews without saying a word. On the walk back, he threw the nuts at the dogs, a treat for keeping his miserable company.

At home he showered, scrubbed his hair twice with strawberry shampoo, and trimmed his toenails. He stood naked in the kitchen as he steeped two cups of highly caffeinated Ceylon tea. He added copious amounts of sugar and a modest bit of milk. He chased the tea with a hefty swig of Kaluha.

He sat on his side of the bed and waited for the jitters to begin.

An hour later his heart knocked around in his chest and a light skin of sweat covered his back. His head ached. When he closed his eyes he could see a white branching of trees against the darkness. Somewhere he'd read this was the shadow of the network of vessels inside the eye. Everything was working. Heart, brain, kidneys. Right then he had to piss.

"My wife is screwing another man," he said aloud, just to say it. Just to hear it. Why couldn't he feel it, he wondered. Why didn't his body know that something in his life had just been crushed, had possibly died? Where were the tears that belonged to this grief?

He stretched out on the bed and dared God to stop his skipping heart.

He dared himself to go to work.

He counted forty-two rotations of the sluggish ceiling fan.

He hopped back in the shower.

#

He drove the old Mazda into work two hours early. He had a key to the building, a key to his office, a key to the lounge. The perks of a programmer's job. It was a cushy position and he knew it. He could come and go, as long as the work got done.

In his office, he fidgeted, nervous and bereft. From the corkboard by his desk, he removed the single photo of her, taken on the day they demolished the little shed behind their house in order to build the gazebo. There she was in hiking boots and jean shorts with a faded pink tank top that laid bare her belly. She stood on her toes, a hammer on the downswing toward the side of the shed. The shed was metal, they hadn't really knocked it over with hammers, but she had thought it would make a good picture.

He liked the way he could see a line of her lower ribs and the bone of her knee cap. Before, he had admired that picture in the way he admired shots of supermodels, pretty enough to look at but no thought of the touch-ups involved. Now he saw pictures could be as deceitful as people.

He remembered the rest of that day when they tore down the shed. After the click of the camera, she had trotted off into the house. She had not offered one beer to any of his friends who'd been helping him out. He had to ask twice to get her to call in an order for pizza and she refused to answer the door when the delivery boy arrived. Then she said she wasn't hungry but took a paper plate and a slice of double cheese to the den and shut the door. All afternoon, he heard her in there, plunking around on the piano, playing silly seventies love songs.

He dropped the snapshot into a blank envelope, drew a jolly roger on the front, then stuffed it in a drawer. He felt his heartbeat in his neck, turned his head to get rid of the throbbing. No doubt she would show up at work. She could have the plague and she would still drag her sick self into work and spread it around. Her office was halfway down the hall. People were milling around now. He heard little clicking noises, the irritating slide of keys in locks, the sucking sound of doors being opened and closed.

He got his computers going then logged on to check his mail. He scrolled through the messages, found one from Leslie. His head gave a thump and he saw silver streaks. He closed his eyes until the flickering passed, but his stomach continued to cramp. Too much caffeine had a laxative effect on him.

Her mail had nothing in the subject line. She always omitted that and it annoyed him. How hard was it to come up with a two-word title to an email?

His fingers seemed too clumsy for the keyboard. The thudding of blood behind his eyes made reading difficult. The note was dated the day before. Probably she'd written it after the dinner, after he'd sent her packing.

He sucked in twice, tried to pull the air into his cramping gut.

This was it. This was where she said it was all a joke, a mistake, a symptom of a bigger problem. She'd had second thoughts. She'd end the thing with the other guy. She'd suggest counseling. He

would agree. Next year for their anniversary they'd take a cruise to the Bahamas and drink banana rum. She'd prance around in a pink bikini. He'd admire the view.

Hi Jeff!
Remember that little Italian place we sometimes go to? the one where the old guy plays the accordion? I can't remember the name (Guido's, Guiseppe's, Giovanni's???) but I think there's a coupon in the entertainment book for that place. Could you bring that to work tomorrow? If you don't want to look for it, just bring the whole book and I'll find it myself. Thanks a million!
Leslie

He could not quite laugh. He wanted to cry but he couldn't manage that either. He should be seething, irate, throwing a fit, having a conniption. He should be broken and bawling. All he felt was the disconsolate rumble of his gut and the annoying tick of a strobe light inside his head. Since last night's dinner, when she had dumped the news of her infidelity into his lap like a bowl of thick cold soup, he'd had a feeling of being in someone else's dream, a disconnected quality he found vaguely disturbing. The numbness was poor protection. Initially he'd be okay. Without it he'd feel worse. But sooner or later he'd end up miserable.

Last night, after she left, he had expected her to call, to talk things out, or just set up a time to get together. Maybe he just hoped she would call to see how he was doing. Maybe he wanted her to care a little bit. He wondered when she had last cared for him.

A few months into the marriage, she had said she didn't feel It. Love. She went to him crying big fat tears and whining about how the love was gone. He tried to explain that while love was constant, the adrenalin rush that accompanied new relationships wasn't. Love evolved over the course of a marriage. All that giddy hormone-driven desperation was not love but just a precursor to get the people together. To expect that to continue perpetually was adolescent bullshit. He said this without rancor or judgment.

It became a pattern. Every few months he sat her down and found different words, as if he hadn't just said the same thing, as if he hadn't heard the same complaint from her over and over. Each time she ceased her sniveling and stared at him with wet, vacuous eyes. Then her face—her pointy little hangdog face, he could see it now, not then—would mope around for weeks until, in an effort to break her morose mood, he would plan some romantic thing—Sunday brunch, a midnight drive, a weekend at some quaint B and B. Or he would buy her a gift, a journal with delicate stars across the bottom of each page, a tiny watercolor in a rosewood frame, a cashmere sweater. Only then she would perk up and say the love had returned.

#

He couldn't got his stomach to settle. There were wet rings under his arms, his shirt collar stuck to his neck. He found a desk fan on the bookshelf and turned it on full blast into his face. He closed his eyes.

It occurred to him that he couldn't describe one good time. Sure, she did some nice things. She took her nephew to the science museum. She ordered flowers for his parents' anniversary. And she arranged his flight to Dallas when his brother had that accident. But she didn't go along. She hadn't been there for him.

In all those years there had been no secret looks, no midnight chats, no private jokes. So they had some good sex. She had thought love was a rush, a rapture. She wanted to sustain the romantic fervor. A feat he considered impossible, a notion he thought immature. He had always thought they had an ordinary love. He had felt secure in something. What exactly he couldn't say. How many times had he dismissed the changeable nature of her affection for him.

He remembered the bad things, the irritations, the aggravations of two years of marriage. The way they behaved when they met was almost shameful. He had stopped telling the story long ago. What had there been between them? What had sustained him? Her song, that was it, although right now it hardly seemed enough. She could really sing although she pretended otherwise, only let loose her

voice when she thought no one was listening. Or whenever she sensed the end of his patience with her. When he was pitching in the wake of her swaying moods, she would start up a song, a husky blues that lifted his spirits or the purest lullaby to cradle him. It was a surprising thing that kept him guessing, made her seem mysterious, full of promising secrets, as if a better more harmonious person was hidden within her out-of-tune self.

Perhaps he had only been in love with her potential. Once at an estate auction, she had pointed out a garish piece of furniture and made up a comic, convoluted tale of acquisition to go with it. She encouraged him to do the same with the next monstrous item. Eventually they had created three generations of a fictitious family. At the end of the afternoon, he had the satisfying sense of having built something with her.

There must be other moments like that somewhere in his memory. He just couldn't get to them right now. He couldn't figure it out. He couldn't keep it straight. He needed to cry. Tears had never healed his heart, but they had certainly cleared his head.

For now he would bumble along until he could cry and figure out the whole mess. He would stop looking for answers, stop trying to induce the tears the way he had always tried to induce her love.

He moved the box of tissues from the desk to his bookshelf.

#

He pleaded a migraine to explain his grievous appearance. No one in the lounge bothered him with chit chat. They left him to steep his tea in peace. He flipped through a *Business Week*. Leslie's squeal made him jump.

"Hey, there you are, Jeff. I sent you an email. Did you get it?" She had on slacks and a sweater with tiny pink flowers embroidered around the cuffs. Her hair was pulled back in a hot pink scrunchie, making her face seem perfectly triangular. She looked like a college girl on co-op.

His watch beeped and he removed the Earl Grey tea bag from his mug. His shaking hands sent tiny splatters over the counter. He looked for a sponge to wipe it up.

"Did you get my email? Did you find the coupon? Did you bring the entertainment book?" She sounded so childish. When had she begun to use that baby-girl voice? Why hadn't he noticed it before? He remained mute, ran the sponge under the water at the sink, squeezed it several times.

She followed him from sink to counter as he wiped up the dots of tea and rinsed the sponge.

"Can I have it? Will you bring it tomorrow?" She went to touch his arm with her slim pink nails, but he twisted out of her reach. The movement set off sparks inside his head.

"Go," he said as he leaned against the counter, his voice run-down and weary. The conversation was as disappointing as the email. He wanted something from her, but he didn't know what. I can't talk to you."

She put on a pout. "But I want—."

"When you have something to say about our marriage, I'll listen. Until then, stay away from me." He pointed to the door. He could walk away, but it was more important that she leave, that he make her leave as he had the night before.

She looked at his face, then the door. She crossed her arms over her chest, shoved her fists into her armpits, and pushed out her lips. She burst into big fat tears. "This is important to me," she sobbed and her face looked ugly and mean.

"A coupon?" he said. "You'll cry over a coupon but you'll eat four courses and a fucking dessert after you tell me you've been screwing around."

She cried harder, the lines around her nose pinched and unattractive.

There were times, he thought, that tears were meaningless.

He handed her a paper towel to wipe her face.

Contributors

Born and reared in Selma, **Paul Allen** attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery, where a reading by James Dickey inspired him to become serious about writing poems. Allen's first book, *American Crawl* received the Vassar Miller Poetry Prize and was selected as one of the top ten small press books of 1997 by amazon.com. His second collection is forthcoming in 2001 from Salmon Publishing Ltd. (Ireland). He teaches at the College of Charleston.

Daniel Anderson's poems have previously appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Southern Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Kenyon Review* among other places. In 1997, his first book of poems, *January Rain*, was awarded the Nicholas Roerich poetry prize, and published by Story Line Press. He is currently a visiting assistant professor of English at Sewanee.

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