

With the deaths of Robert Penn Warren and Walker Percy the specter of the star system is loose again in the land. "Who will be their successors? Who will pick up their mantle?" It's a plaintive cry, predictable but genuine, largely journalistic and academic—a spume from the wave of canon-making—thinned by its basis in literary politics. It isn't cast up, usually, by writers, at least not those writing, since their attention is centered elsewhere. They do lament, of course, the passing of the likes of Percy and Warren, some grieving the loss of the men more than the art. The living, however, aren't meant to supplant the dead, but to fulfill their own destinies.

At a festival honoring his work in 1985, Fred Chappell was asked how it felt to be a Southern writer. "You've got to come from somewhere," he replied. "Not everyone can be born in the Museum of Modern Art." The breadth of reference in the apothegm, as well as the choices that Chappell has made as a writer that underlie it, make it hard to dismiss the answer as flippant. It suggests in part Chappell's refusal to play the star-system game, to kowtow to the power centers of publication (fortunately dispersing), to court reviewers. It also points to the substantial shift in Chappell's work over the past thirty years.

After trying on ill-fitting European costumes (Rimbaud, Mann), a Faustian sort of bargaining with interior devils that took derivative forms, he began facing and learning to be himself, developing his poems and stories and novels along lines laid out in his regional upbringing. This has involved a complex of emphases and engagements at a deep level of choice. Two of those seem pertinent here.

Chappell's erudition, his extensive reading, his sophistication about fiction and about what can be done in general with language, are meant not to replace storytelling and its illusions of character, but to serve them, to deepen and enrich. In the history of our literature we may be in the muddled midst of learning this again. No compelling novelist has written without a complex theoretical sense of what he or she is doing, but that theory becomes part of subject matter at the desiccation of the fiction. There are other major differences, of course, between Chappell's first four novels, and the work that begins with *Midquest*, but this one seems basic: he has chosen to be "unmodern" in his subordination of theoretical concerns to the immediate fabric of the work itself. We see the rug, not the weave in the rug.

Secondly, he has chosen to be a comic writer. It's not my place here to define "Southern," but Chappell's work has certain characteristics that have, over the centuries, come to be associated with the region. Humor, thank God, transcends geographical and national boundaries. Chappell's, however, is Southern in its pace—I don't mean timing, but rather the accretive, almost shy way good will hides itself behind slyness. Southerners have had to become used to living with poisonous snakes and excessive heat, and the adaptation that has required leads to the kind of humor I'm alluding to. Joe Robert Kirkman, the central figure in

Chappell's last two novels, is an embodiment of this, coming to accept his difficult, discommoded self through the warmth of laughter not at, but with, who he is. A single passage can't do justice to this because it builds; Joe Robert's colloquy with the goat on the schoolhouse roof, his interview with Dora Stoner, or his growing realization that no matter how hard he tries he can't tell a lie, are revealing instances in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*.

This involves tone as much as detail or behavior. A Southerner plays verbally as part of everyday life. I've always been leery of the glibness with which people present the South as distinctive because it's the only part of the country to have lost a war, to have endured an enemy's ravaging a land and degrading an entire heritage. But I have come to think that experience has contributed to a sense of the gentle undoing of solemnity that is sometimes part of a Southerner's tone of voice.

Blacks have contributed to this, too. There have been two slave races in the South, in the sense that the loss of the Civil War reduced white people of all classes to a similar humiliation. Being at the bottom can teach one to see daily existence from a wider perspective and to spread its intensity across that horizon.

Pace, heat, the experience of a beaten people, then, contribute to the humor of the South. They also, paradoxically, lead to focus and concentration, other qualities central to Chappell's work. Hunkerin' down some people call it, an expression that I've always liked for its inclusion of the body and the earth in the act of mental concentration. It's also an uncomfortable position to get into. Chappell's characters hunker; they pay attention, often out of the corners of their eyes. Here's a relevant passage from one of Chappell's stories, "Blue Dive." Stovebolt Johnson, a blues guitarist, has returned to rural North Carolina after a stretch in the slammer. He decides to wait on the porch of the house he has come to to ask for information. He sits down with his coffee, his guitar lying beside him in its case.

He had been reflecting that if he was a woman's husband driving up from work at noontime he might not be overcome with joy to find a strange man and a guitar in his house. He spat out his chew of tobacco and worked up all the juice he could and spat that out, too. The first sip of coffee he wallowed about in his mouth, rinsing, and then got rid of. He'd known any number of men who could chew and drink at the same time, but he'd never got the hang of it. He took a swallow. It was strong and sweet as molasses. "You mama makes a fine cup of coffee," he said to the boy. "What kind of music do you like to listen?" He took the guitar out and fingered a few aimless notes.

But the notes are no more aimless than the passage. This is almost ritual. It involves a third characteristic I see as especially Southern—courtesy. Tony Hillerman admires the practice of the Navajo in which a visitor to a hogan keeps a

distance until the person being visited has time to prepare. You don't go right up and ring the doorbell, as it were. Southern courtesy involves much the same honoring of privacy and individuality.

Vladimir Nabokov said of his fictions that it wasn't the parts that mattered, it was their combination. The same thing is true of the qualities I'm speaking of in Fred Chappell's work. Gentle slyness, reserve, attention, all matter inestimably, but it is their combination that, shall we say, reveals the soul. In Chappell's fiction especially this can take fantastic, fabulous turns, sometimes satirical, as if haunted at once by the ghosts of Mark Twain and H.P. Lovecraft.

By way of the negative here, I might say that some qualities often highlighted positively in reviews of fiction that don't apply to Southern work might give my perspective some relief: zany, brash, fast-moving, or abrasive. Southern humor, in fact, doesn't always make you laugh—though it often does. Its aim is more to comfort. It's an embedded attitude, a perspective from which life is lived, and it is in that dimension that the word humor slides toward comic, the kind of writer I've suggested Fred Chappell has chosen to

become. I mean this term, of course, in the old sense of its opposition to tragic.

Chappell's vision has shifted from the hermetic, sweaty, foreboding darkness of his first novels, to a hopeful, expansive opening toward light. *Midquest* is the fulcrum in this change. That tetralogy's use of the structures, assumptions, and even a section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, is the best indication of Chappell's new direction. *Midquest* closes with these lines:

The love that moves itself in light to loving
Flames up like dew
Here in the earliest morning of the world.

Out of context they lose the enormously complex and varied tapestry that precedes them, and through which Chappell earns the right to say them. But they are central to the essentially comic vision that informs his work since the late 70's. Acceptance and affirmation are the keys, seen into and through in this world of violence and loss and deprivation. If you want a star, here's one.

—Dabney Stuart

Ancestors

by Fred Chappell



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Harry and Lydie were enduring their third ancestor and finding it a rum go. Not that they were surprised—the first two ancestors had also proved to be enervating specimens—and now they regretted the hour they had joined the Ancestor Program of the Living History Series. Sitting at dinner, fed up with Wade Wordmore, Harry decided to return this curious creature to his congressman, Doy Collingwood, at his local office over in Raleigh, North Carolina.

*Fred Chappell, a prolific poet and novelist, is the author most recently of *The World Between the Eyes* (LSU). Dabney Stuart is a poet and the editor of *Shenandoah*. He lives in Lexington, Virginia.*

They were goaded into joining the program by that most destructive of all human urges: the desire for self-improvement. When, as part of the celebration of the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, the U.S. Archives and History Division called Harry Beacham and told him that the records showed he had no less than three ancestral relatives who had fought in the great conflict and asked if he'd be interested in meeting these personages, he replied that Yes, of course, he would love to meet them.

What Southerner wouldn't say that?

It is also in the Southern manner to take the marvels of modern technology for granted. The crisp impersonal female voice in the telephone receiver explained that from the merest microscopic section of bone computers could

dredge out of the past not only the physical lineaments of the person whom that bone once held perpendicular but the personality traits too, down to the last little tic and stammer. In their own house Harry and Lydie could engage with three flesh-and-blood examples of history come to life. Of course, it really wasn't flesh, only a sort of protein putty, but it was real blood, right enough. It was pig blood: that was a biochemical necessity.



"Can they talk?" Harry asked and was assured that they spoke, remembered their former lives in sharp detail, and even told jokes—rather faded ones, of course. They also ate, slept, and shaved, were human in every way. "That is the Departmental motto," the voice said. "Engineering Humanity for Historic Purpose."

He asked casually about the cost, and she stated it and he was pleased, but still desired to think just a few days about whether to subscribe to the program.

"That will not be necessary," said the woman's voice. "The arrangements have already been taken care of and your first ancestor is on his way to you. The Archives and History Division of the United States Department of Reality is certain that you will find real satisfaction in your encounters with Living History. Good day, Mr. Butcher."

"Wait a minute," Harry said. "My name is Beacham." But the connection was cut and when he tried to call back he was shunted from one office to another and put on hold so often and so long that he gave up in disgust.

So then as far as Harry was concerned all bets were off. He was a Beacham and no Butcher and proud of it and if some artificial entity from the Archives Division showed up at his door he would send the fellow packing.

But he didn't have to do that. Lieutenant Aldershot's papers were in apple-pie order when he presented them with a sharp salute to Lydie. She met him at the front door and was immediately taken with this swarthy brown-eyed man in his butternut uniform and broadbrimmed hat. A battered leatherbound trunk sat on the walk behind him.

"Oh, you must be the ancestor they sent," she said.

"Lieutenant Edward Aldershot of the Northern Virginia reporting as ordered, ma'am."

Confused, Lydie colored prettily and looked up and down the lane to see if any of her neighbors here in the Shining Acres development were observing her resplendent visitor. She took the papers he proffered, started to open them, but paused with her fingers on the knotted ribbon and said, "Oh, do come in," and stepped back into the foyer.

The lieutenant moved forward briskly, removing his hat just before he stepped over the threshold. "Honey," she called, "Harry, honey. Our ancestor is here."

He came downstairs in no pleasant frame of mind, but then stood silent and wide-eyed before Aldershot who snapped him a classy respectful salute and declared his name and the name of his army. "I believe the lady will be kind enough to present my papers, sir."

But Harry and Lydie only stood gaping until the lieutenant gestured toward the packet in Lydie's hands. She gave it to Harry, blushing again, and Harry said in a rather stiff tone, trying to hide his astonishment, "Ah yes. Of course . . . Your papers. . . . Of course."

And for a wonder they were all correct. Here was the letter from History identifying Aldershot and congratulating the Beachams on the opportunity of enjoying his company for three weeks and telling them what a valuable experience they were in for. Then there was Aldershot's birth certificate and a very sketchy outline of his military career and then a family tree in which Harry was relieved to discover not a single Butcher. It was all Beachams and Lawsons and Hollinses and Bredvolds and Aldershots and Harpers as far as the eye could see, all the way to the beginning of the 19th century.

"This looks fine," Harry said. "We're glad to have you as one of us."

"I'm proud to hear you say so, sir," the lieutenant said and tore off another healthy salute.

"You don't need to be so formal," Harry told him. "You don't have to salute me or call me sir. We're just friends here."

"That's very kind of you. I'm afraid it may take a little time for me to adjust, sir."

"You'll fit right in," Lydie said. "I'm sure you will."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Aldershot. "I do take tobacco and a little whiskey now and then. I hope you won't mind."

"Oh no. If that's what you did—I mean, if that's what you're used to. Please feel free." A bashful woman, she blushed once more. She had almost said: *If that's what you did when you were alive.* "Harry, you can bring in the lieutenant's trunk, if you don't mind."

The Confederate officer had too modestly described his pleasures. He did not merely take tobacco, he engorged it, sawing off with his case knife black tarry knuckles of the stuff from a twist he carried in his trousers pocket and chewing belligerently, like a man marching against an opposing brigade. He was a veritable wellpump of tobacco juice, spitting inaccurately not only at the champagne bucket and other utensils the Beachams supplied him as spittoons but at any handy vessel that offered a concavity. The sofa suffered and the rugs, the tablecloths, the lieutenant's bedding and his clothing—his clothing most of all.

In fact, his whole appearance deteriorated rapidly and ruinously. In three days he no longer wore his handsome butternut but had changed into the more familiar uniform of Confederate gray, a uniform which seemed to grow shabbier even as the Beachams gazed upon it. His sprightly black moustache, which Lydie had fancied as complementing his dark eyes perfectly, became first ragged, then shaggy. He would neglect to shave for four days running and he began

to smell of sweat and stale underwear and whiskey.

For he had also understated the power of his thirst. On the first night and always afterward he never strayed far from the jug and when not actually pouring from it would cast amorous glances in its direction. He drank George Dickel neat or sometimes with sugar water and praised the quality of the bourbon in ardent terms, saying, for example, "If we'd a-had a little more of this at Chancellorsville it would've been a different story." Liquor seemed to affect him little, however; he never lost control of his motor reflexes or slurred his speech.

Yet the quality of his address had changed since that sunny first moment with the Beachams. It was no more *Yes sir* and *No sir* to Harry, but *our friend Harry here* and *Old Buddy* and *Old Hoss*. He still spoke to Lydie as *Ma'am*, but when talking indirectly would refer to her as *our mighty fine little female of the house*. He was never rude or impolite, but his formal manner slipped into an easy camaraderie and then sagged into a careless intimacy. His social graces frayed at about the same rate as his gray uniform, which by the end of the second week was positively tattered.

The lieutenant, though, had not been ordered to the Beacham residence as a dancing master, but as a representative of History which, as the largest division of the Department of Reality, shared much of its parent organization's proud autonomy. And of Living History Lieutenant Aldershot offered a spectacular cornucopia. The outline of his career that came with him from the government agency barely hinted at the range and length of his fighting experience. He had fought at Vicksburg, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg; he had survived Shiloh, Antietam, and Richmond; he had been brave at Bull Run, Rich Mountain, Williamsburg, and Cedar Mountain; he had won commendations from Zollicoffer, Beauregard, Johnston, Kirby-Smith, Jackson, and Robert E. Lee. The latter commander he referred to as "General Bobby" and described him as "the finest Southern gentleman who ever whupped his enemy."

Harry's knowledge of history was by no means as profound as his enthusiasm for it and he had not found time before Aldershot's arrival to bone up on the battles and campaigns that occurred a century and a half past. Even so, the exploits of the ambeer-spattered and strongly watered lieutenant began to overstretch his credulity. In order to be on all the battlefields he remembered Aldershot must have spent most of the War on the backs of two dozen swift horses and to survive the carnage he had witnessed must have kept busy a fretting cohort of guardian angels. Any soldier of such courage, coolness, intelligence, and resourcefulness must have left his name in letters of red blaze in the history books, but Harry could not recall hearing of Aldershot. Of course, it had been some seven years since he had looked at the histories; perhaps he had only forgotten.

For in many ways it was hard to disbelieve the soldier's accounts, he was so particular in detail and so vivid in expression. When telling of some incident that displayed one man's valor or another's timidity, he became brightly animated, and then heated, and would squirm in his chair at the table, sputtering tobacco and gulping bourbon, his eyes wild and bloodshot. He rocked back and forth in the chair as if he were in the saddle, leaping the brushy hurdles at the

Battle of Fallen Timber. He broke two chairs that way, and his host supplied him a steel-frame lawn chair brought in from the garage.

He was vivid and particular most of all in his accounts of bloodshed. Although he spoke only plain language, as he averred a soldier should, he so impressed Harry's imagination and Lydie's trepidation that they felt extremely close to the great conflict. In Aldershot's bourbonish sentences they heard the bugles at daybreak, the creak of munitions wagons, the crack of rifles and bellow of canon, the horses screaming in pain and terror. They saw the fields clouded over with gunsmoke and the hilltop campfires at night and the restless shuffle of pickets on the sunset perimeters. They could smell corn parching and mud waist deep and the stink of latrines and the worse stink of gangrene in the hospital tents.

The lieutenant's accounts of battle went from bloody to chilling to gruesome, and the closeness with which he detailed blows and wounds and killings made the *Iliad* seem vague and pallid. He appeared to take a certain relish in demonstrating on his own body where a minnie ball had gone into a comrade and where it came out and what raw mischief it had caused during its journey. He spoke of shattered teeth and splintered bone and eyes gouged out. When he began to describe the surgeries and amputations, dwelling at great length on the mound of removed body parts at the Fredericksburg field hospital, Lydie pleaded with him to spare her.

"Please," she said. "Perhaps we needn't hear all this part." Her eyes were large and teary in her whitened face and her voice trembled.

"Uh, yes," Harry said. "I think Lydie has a point. Maybe we can skip a few of the gorier details now and then." He too was obviously shaken by what he had heard.

"Well now," Aldershot said, "of course I didn't mean to alarm our mighty fine little female of the house. I hope you'll forgive a plainspoken soldier, ma'am, one who never learned the orator's art. You're a brave un in my book, for there's many a refined Southern lady who will faint when she hears the true story of things. Especially when I tell how it is to be gutshot."

"Please, Lieutenant," Lydie said. She took three sips of her chardonnay, recovering her composure pretty quickly, but looking with dismay at her plate of stewed pork.

"How about you?" Harry asked. "Were you ever wounded?"

"Me?" Aldershot snorted. "No, not me. I was always one too many for them bluebellies, not that they didn't try plenty hard."

This discussion took place at the end of the second week. At first Aldershot had referred to his ancient opponents as *the enemy* and then changed his term to *the Northern invader*. In the second week, though, it was *bluebellies* every time, and in the third week it was *them goddam treacherous Yankee bastards*, to which epithet he always appended a parenthetical apology to Lydie:—*saving your presence, ma'am*.

Even that small gesture toward the observance of chivalry seemed to cost him some effort. In the third week the weary Confederate appeared to have aged a decade; his clothes were now only threads and patches, his moustache a

scraggly bristle, his eyes discolored and dispirited, and his speech disjointed, exhausted, and crumbling. It was clear that remembering had taken too much out of him, that he had tired himself almost past endurance. He had cut down on his tobacco intake, as if the exercise of a chaw drew off too much strength, and had increased his frequency of whiskey, although this spiritous surplus did not enliven his demeanor.

On the eve of his departure, Lieutenant Aldershot begged off telling of the destruction of Atlanta and gave only the most cursory sketch of the surrender at Appomattox. For the first time in three weeks, he retired early to bed.

Next morning he came down late and took only coffee for his breakfast. He had dragged his leatherbound trunk to the front door and stood with his foot propped on it as he bade the Beachams farewell. Gravely they shook hands. When he spoke to Lydie Aldershot held his hat over his heart. "Ma'am, your hospitality has been most generous and not something a plain soldier will forget."

Lydie took his hand; she blushed, feeling that she ought to curtsy but not knowing how.

He looked straight into Harry's eyes. "So long, Old Hoss," he said. "It's been mighty fine for me here."

"We've been honored," Harry said. "Believe me."

Then the government van arrived and the driver came to load Aldershot's trunk and they shook hands once more and the lieutenant departed. As they watched him trudging down the front walk Harry and Lydie were struck silent by the mournful figure he presented, his shoulders slumped, his head thrust forward, and his step a defeated shuffle. When he mounted to the van cab and rode away without waving or looking back, a feeling of deep sadness descended upon them, so that they stood for a minute or two holding each other for comfort and looking into the bright empty morning.

Finally Harry closed the door and turned away. "I don't know about you," he said, "but I feel tired. Tired in my bones."

"Me too," Lydie said. "And I've got to get this house cleaned up. There's tobacco spit everywhere. Everything in the house is splattered."

"I feel like we just lost the war."

"Well, honey, that's exactly what happened."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do—if you don't mind, I mean. I'm going to call these government History people and tell them not to send the other ancestors. I'm utterly exhausted. I can't imagine how I'd feel after two more visitors like the lieutenant."

"I think you're right," she said. "Do it now."

Harry got on the telephone and dialed a list of bureaucratic numbers, only to find that each and every one gave off a busy signal for hours on end.

So that on Monday morning, at ten-thirty on the dot, Private William Harper presented himself at the front door and handed his papers to Lydie with a shy bow. His was a diffident gray uniform that had seen better days, but it was clean and tidy. He was accompanied by no trunk; only a modest neatly turned bedroll lay at his feet. "Ma'am, I believe you are expecting me?" he said.

Her first impulse was to send him away immediately, but the van must have departed already since it was nowhere in

sight, and, anyway, her second stronger impulse was to invite him into the house and feed him. Lieutenant Aldershot must have been in his early forties—though he had looked to be sixty years old when he departed—but Private Harper could hardly have been out of his teens.

He offered her his papers and gave her what he obviously hoped was a winning smile, but he was so young and clear-eyed and shy and apprehensive that his expression was more frightened than cordial.

Lydie's heart went out to him entirely; she took the packet without looking at it, staring almost tenderly upon Harper with his big bright blue eyes and rosy complexion in which the light fuzz was evidence of an infrequent acquaintance with a razor. He was a slight young man, slender and well-formed and with hands as long-fingered and delicate as a pianist's. He seemed troubled by her stare and shifted restlessly in his boots.

"Ma'am," he asked, "have I come to the right house? Maybe I'm supposed to be somewhere else."

"No," Lydie said. "You come right in. This is the place for you."

"I wouldn't want to be a burden," the private said. "Those government people said that you had invited me to come here. I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"We're glad to have you. Don't worry about a thing."

He looked all about him, wonderstruck. "You belong to a mighty grand place. It's hard for me to get used to the houses and everything that people have."

"We feel lucky," Lydie said. "Lots of people are not so well-off." Then, seeing that he could formulate no reply, she stooped and picked up his bedroll. "Please come in. I was just getting ready to make some fresh coffee. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

In the kitchen Private Harper sat at the table and watched moonily every step and gesture Lydie made. His nervousness was subsiding, but he seemed a long way from being at ease. She took care to smile warmly and speak softly, but it was apparent to her from Harper's worshipful gaze that she had already conquered the young man's heart. When she set the coffee before him with the cream pitcher and sugar bowl alongside he didn't glance down, looking instead into her face. "Now, Private Harper," she said, "drink your coffee. And would you like something to eat? I can make a sandwich or maybe there's a piece of chocolate cake left. You like chocolate cake, don't you?"

"No ma'am. Just the coffee is all I want to wake me up. I was feeling a little bit tired."

"Of course you are," she said. "You finish your coffee and I'll show you to your room and you can get some sleep."

"You're awful kind, ma'am. I won't say No to that."

When the private was tucked away, Lydie telephoned her spouse at his place of business, Harry's Hot-Hit Vidents, to tell him the news.

He was not happy. "Oh Lydie," he said. "You were supposed to send him back where he came from. That was our plan."

"I just couldn't," she said. "He's so young. And he was tired out. He's already asleep."

"But we agreed. Don't you remember? We agreed to send him packing."

"Wait till you meet him. Then send him packing. If you can do it, it will be all right with me."

And having met the young man, Harry no more than Lydie could order him away. Harper was so innocent and willing and openfaced that Harry could only feel sympathy for him when he saw what puppy eyes the young man made at his wife. He offered the lad a drink—Aldershot had overlooked a half bottle of Dickel in a lower cabinet—and was not surprised when he refused. "I promised my mother, sir, before I went off to war."

"I see," Harry said, and reflected gravely on the difference between the lieutenant and the private. "But in the army that must have been a hard promise to keep."

"Oh no, sir. Not when I promised my mother. And to tell the truth, I don't have much taste for liquor."

He did accept a cup of tea, spooning into it as much sugar as would dissolve, and was profusely grateful.

Harry then readied himself with a gin and tonic for another stiff dose of History. "I suppose you must have fought in lots of battles," he said.

Private Harper shook his head sadly. "Only two battles, sir."

"Which were those?"

"Well, I fought at Bethel, sir, and then we were sent down toward Richmond."

"You were at Manassas?" These were place-names that Aldershot had deeply imprinted on the Beacham memory.

"Yes sir."

"And what was that like?"

"Well, sir . . ." For the first time Private Harper lifted his eyes and looked directly into Harry's face. His boyish countenance was a study in apologetic confusion as he steadied his teacup on his knee and said, "Well, sir, if you don't mind, I'd rather not talk 'bout that."

"You don't want to talk about Manassas?" Harry asked. Then his surprise disappeared with the force of his realization: Manassas would have been where Private Harper had died.

"I don't like to talk about the war at all, sir."

"I see."

"I know I'm supposed to, but I just can't seem to make myself do it. It opens up old wounds."

"That's all right. I understand."

"No, sir, I don't believe that you do understand. It is too hard for me right now. It opens old wounds."

"That's quite all right. Where are you from originally?"

"Salem, Virginia," Private Harper said. "We had a farm right outside town. I miss that place a great deal."

"I'm sure you do."

"I miss my folks too, sir. Something terrible." And he went on to talk about his life before the war and his story was so idyllic and engaging that Harry called Lydie from the kitchen to hear it.

The private spoke rhapsodically of such ordinary tasks as planting corn, shoeing horses, repairing wagons, cutting hay, milking cows and so forth; his bright face glowed even friendlier as he spoke of these matters, and as he warmed to his stories his shyness melted and his language became

almost lyrical.

He was the only male in a female family, his father having died when Billy was only eleven. He allowed that his mother and three sisters had rather doted on him, but it was obvious to the Beachams that he had no real idea how much they doted. He had not been required to join the army; he had done so only out of a sense of duty and from a fear of the shame he might feel later if he did not join. He had supposed that the colored men attached to the family, Jupiter and Peter—who were not thought of as being slaves—would look after the ladies and take care of the farm. But shortly after Billy went away to war, those two had slipped off and were not heard of again. He had been in the process of applying for permission to return home when the Battle of Manassas befell him.

He seemed to remember mornings fondly, and summer mornings most fondly of all. To wake up to the smell of ham and coffee and biscuits and grits, to look off the front porch into the dew-shiny fields and to see the little creek in the bottom winking with gleam through the bushes—well, these sights made him feel that Paradise might be something of a letdown when finally at last he disembarked upon that lucent shore. The haze-blue mountains offered deer and partridge, possum and quail, and Billy loved to take his bay mare, Cleopatra, and his father's old long-barreled rifle and hunt on those slopes from morn till midnight.



About that mare he was rapturous. "If I told you how smart Cleo was, and some of the things I've known her to do, you'd think I was straying from the truth," he said. "But I'm not. She really is the best horse in the world, the smartest and the gentlest. Not that she doesn't have a lot of spirit. Why, I believe she has more courage than a bear, but she's as gentle with children as a mammy. And she's the best hunter I know of, bar none."

The Beachams smiled, trying vainly to imagine that Private Harper would deliberately stray from the truth; but it was clear that in regard to his horse his infatuation might fetch him out of the strait path of accuracy without his ever being aware. It seemed that Cleopatra knew where game was to be found up there in the hills and when given her head would unerringly seek out the best cover to shoot deer and fowl of every sort. There never was a horse like her for woodlore. Harry felt his credulity strained when Harper mentioned that she could also sniff out trout in the river and would carry her master to the sweetest fishing holes. And Lydie left unspoken her reservations about Billy's account of Cleo's stamping out a fire and thus saving the Harper farmhouse and barn and the lives of the four of them.

A skeptical expression must have crossed her face, though, because Billy looked at her imploringly and said in the most earnest tone: "Oh, it's true, I assure you it is. You can ask Julie or Annie or my mother. They'll tell you it's gospel truth." Lydie realized then that she must keep her emotions out of her face, that Billy Harper always forgot that his family was sealed away in time past and that he was an orphan in a world of strangers.

He forgot himself so thoroughly when he spoke that his unhappy situation appeared to escape his memory. Yet something was troubling him. As the day went by he grew restless and his soft volubility began to lapse. Toward the end of the second week not even questions about Cleopatra could alleviate his distractedness.

On Monday of the third week he spoke his mind. "I know you-all want to hear about the war," he said glumly. "And I know that's what I'm supposed to be telling you. It's just that I can't bear to open up those wounds again. I guess I'd better try, though, since that's what I'm sent here to do."

"You're not supposed to do anything that you don't want to do," Harry said. "We haven't been notified that you are required to talk about the war. In fact, we haven't been notified of anything much. I wish I could get a phone call through to those History folks."

"That's right," Lydie said. "I'm tired of hearing about that ugly old war. I'd much rather hear about your mother and sisters and the farm."

Looking at the people who were obviously not sims, he saw written on their faces weariness, exasperation, sorrow, horror, guilt, and cruel determination—all the feelings he and Lydie had experienced for the past weeks.

All their reassurances could not lighten Billy's darkened spirits. The more they spoke soothing words, the gloomier he became, and they could see that he was steeling himself to broach the subject and they became anxious about him, for his nervousness increased as his determination grew.

When he began to talk, after supper on his third Wednesday, he was obviously desperate. His hands trembled and he kept his eyes trained on the beige patch of living room carpet in front of his armchair and he spoke in a low mutter. His sentences were jumbled and hard to understand. He was sweating.

"There were onlookers up on the ridges," he said. "We were down in the bottom fields there at Manassas when McDowell brought his troops around. We could see them up there, the spectators, I mean, and I borrowed Jed's glass and took a look and they were drinking wine and laughing and there were ladies in their carriages, and younguns too, setting off firecrackers. So when I handed him his glass back I said, 'I don't believe it's going to be a fight, not with the high society people looking on; I expect that McDowell and

General Bee will parley.' And he said, 'No, it'll be a fight, Billy. Can't neither side back off now, we're in too close to each other. McDowell will have to fight here right outside of Washington because Lincoln hisself might be up there on a hilltop watching.' But I didn't believe him. I never thought we'd fight that day."

He paused and licked his lips and asked for a glass of water. Lydie brought it from the kitchen, ice cubes tinkling, and told the private with meaningful tenderness that he did not need to continue his story.

Harper took the glass and sipped, appearing not to hear her words. He kept his eyes downcast and began again. "At nine in the morning it was already warm and we knew we'd be feeling the heat and then with no warning it started up. Sergeant Roper hadn't no more than told us to brace ourselves because there appeared to be more Yankees here than ants in an anthill when we saw gunsmoke off to our left, a little decline there, and heard the shots and in that very first volley Jed fell down with a ball in the middle of his chest, but before he hit the ground took another one in his shoulder that near about tore his left arm off. I didn't have a least idea any of them was close enough to get a shot at us. I laid down by Jed and took him in my arms but couldn't do nothing and they made me let him lay and start fighting."

His face had been flushed and sweaty but now was sugar-white and drenched. His eyes wore dark circles and when he raised them for the first time, caught up as he was in his memories, he seemed not to see Lydie or Harry or anything around him. He was sweating so profusely his uniform was darkening—that was what Lydie thought at first, but then she rose to clutch Harry's arm. Blood was dripping from Harper's sleeve over his wrist and onto the rug.

"So I got on one knee to see what I could and brought my rifle up, but I didn't know what to do. I could tell they were all around us because my comrades were firing at them in every direction but I couldn't spot anything, so much smoke and dust. I saw some muzzle blazes on my right and thought I might shoot, but then maybe that was one of our lines over there. I was a pretty good marksman to go a-hunting, but in a battle I couldn't figure where to aim."

His voice had sunk almost to a whisper and his tunic and the chair he sat in were soaking with blood. Harry remembered that it would be pig blood and not human, but he was horrified all the same—more disturbed, perhaps, than if it had been Harper's own blood. He looked quickly at Lydie and then rushed to her aid. He knew now what Billy Harper had meant when he said that to talk about the war opened old wounds.

He took his wife by the arm and drew her toward the bedroom. She went along without a murmur, her face drawn and blanched. He could feel her whole body trembling. He helped her to lie down and told her to keep still, not to move; he would take care of everything, he said. It was going to be all right.

But when he returned to the living room Harper was lying face down on the floor. He had tumbled out of his chair and lay motionless in a thick smelly puddle of brownish blood. Harry knelt to examine him, and it was obvious that he was gone, literally drained of life.

Harry telephoned for an ambulance and sat down to

think about what to tell the medics when they came. Perhaps they wouldn't accept Private Harper; perhaps they wouldn't regard him as a real human being. To whom could he turn for assistance in that case? He knew better than to call Archives and History; the last time he had called those numbers a recorded voice informed him that they had all been disconnected. Now he was trying to reach, by mail and telephone and fax machine, his congressman, Representative Doy Collingwood, but so far had received no reply.

When the ambulance came, though, the young paramedics understood the situation immediately and seemed to find it routine. The fellow with the blond-red mustache—he looked like a teenager, Harry thought ruefully—only glanced at the inert figure on the rug before asking, "Civil War?"

"Yes," Harry said. "My God, it was awful. My wife is almost hysterical. This is just terrible."

The fellow nodded. "We get them like this all the time. Faulty parts and sloppy workmanship. Sometimes we'll get four calls a week like this."

"Can't something be done?"

"Have you tried to get in touch with Ark & Hist?"

"With whom?"

"The Archives and History Division . . . in Washington," he asked, then saw Harry's expression. "Never mind, I know. Tell you what, though. I'd better have a look to see if your wife is okay. Where is she?"

Harry showed him the bedroom and stood by while he ministered to Lydie. She murmured her gratitude, but kept her eyes closed. The young medic gave her some pills to take and went with Harry back to the living room. "She'll be all right," he said. "Probably have a couple of rough nights."

The driver had already put down a stretcher and rolled Harper's body over onto it. His eyes were open and a dreadful change had come to his face, a change that was more than death and worse, a change that made Private Harper look as if he'd never been human—in this life or any other.

Harry had to look away. "My God," he said.

"Pretty awful, isn't it?" The medic's response was cheerful, matter-of-fact. "Shoddy stuff, these Ark & Hist sims. But there's some good salvage there, more than you'd think by looking at it."

"What did you call him? Harry asked. "Simms?"

"Sim. It's a nickname. A simulacrum from the Division of Archives and History. Your tax dollars at work, know what I mean? Sign here," he said, handing Harry a clipboard and a pen. "And here," he said, turning a page. "And here. And here. And here. And here. And here. And here. And here."

The medic had predicted rough nights for Lydie, but she suffered bad days as well and took to her bed. She kept the shades drawn and the lights down and watched chamber music on the vidcube. Harry gave his shop over to the attentions of two assistants and stayed home with his wife, preparing her scanty meals and consoling her and monitoring the installation of the new carpet and choosing a new chair for the living room. Lydie would probably hate the chocolate-colored wingback he'd bought, but that was all right. She could exchange it when she was up and around.

He planned to stay home with her for a week or two—for

as long as it took to make certain that the government was sending to the Beacham household no more sims. Harry pronounced the word with an ugly angry hiss: *sssimsss*. He put as much disgust into the sibilants as his teeth could produce, but there was no satisfaction for him.

He was so infuriated and felt so impotent that he began to wish a new specimen would turn up, just so that he could send it away with a message for the people who had dispatched it. He prepared several speeches in his mind, each more savage than the last, each more heartfelt and more eloquent.

He never got to deliver any of them, even though the expected third visitor did after all show, a week later than had been stipulated. But he didn't announce himself, didn't knock at the door and present his papers as Aldershot and Harper had done. He just stood in the front yard with his back turned toward the house and gazed at the houses opposite and at the children riding bicycles and chasing balls along the asphalt lanes of Shining Acres. Often he would look at the sky, at the puffy cloud masses scooting overhead, and he would take off his big gray hat with the floppy brim and shade his eyes with his hand.

This hat was not of Confederate gray but of a lighter mineral color, nearly the same gray color as the man's clothing. Nor was his attire military; he wore cotton trousers held up by a broad leather belt and a soft woolen shirt with an open collar. When he removed his hat shining gray locks fell past his ears and the sunlight imparted to this mass of silver a whitish halo effect. He turned around to look at the Beacham house and Harry saw that he wore a glorious gray beard, clean and bright and patriarchal, and that his eyes were clear and warm.

Even from where Harry stood inside the man's gaze was remarkable: calm and trusting and unworried and soothing. When he replaced his hat Harry recognized his gesture as easy and graceful, neither sweeping nor constrained. There was a natural ease about his figure that put Harry's mind at rest. He would still send him away, of course he would, but Harry began to soften the speech he had planned to make, to modify its ferocity and to sweeten a little bit its bitterness.

But when had this fellow arrived? How long had he been standing there, observing the world from his casual viewing point, with his little gray knapsack lying carelessly on the lawn? He might have been there for hours; nothing in his manner would ever betray impatience.

Harry opened the door and called to the man. "Hey you," he said. "Hey you, standing in my yard."

The man turned slowly, presenting his whole figure as if he wished to be taken in from crown to shoesole, to be examined and measured for what he was as a physical being. "I am Wade Wordmore," he said and his voice was full of gentle strength. "I have come a great distance, overstepping time and space; I am the visitor who has been sent."

"Yeah, that's right," Harry said. "The government sent you, right? The History people? They sent you to the Beacham residence, right?"

"That is correct in some measure," said Wade Wordmore. "But I believe there is more to it than that."

"Well, go away," Harry said. "We don't want you. We've had enough—" He didn't finish the sentence he had planned to say; he found that he could not look into

Wordmore's gaze and say, *We've had enough of you goddam sims to last us a lifetime.*

Ssssimssss.

"Gladly I go where I am wanted and unwanted," Wordmore said. "The world is my home, in it I am free to loaf and meditate, every particle is as interesting to me as every other particle, the faces of men and women gladden me as I journey."

"I don't mean for you to wander around like a stray dog," Harry said. "I mean, Go back where you came from. Go back to the government."

"But what to me are governments?" the gray man replied. "I, Wade Wordmore, American, untrammled by boundaries, unfixed as to station, and at my ease in all climes and latitudes, answer to no laws save those my perfect nature (for I know I am perfect, how can a man tall and in pure health be not perfect?), and am powerful to overstep any border."

Here was a stumper. Harry had foreseen that Ark & Hist would send another defective simulacrum, but he had not imagined being put in charge of a bona fide grade-A blue ribbon lunatic. It was clear from Wordmore's manner as he stooped to take up his knapsack and sling it on his shoulder that he was willing to stroll out into a century he knew nothing about, utterly careless about what would happen to him for good or ill. And beyond this privileged residential suburb Wordmore's adventures would be mostly ill; his strange aspect and wild mode of speech would mark him as an easy victim to chicanery and violence alike.

"Oh, for God's sake," Harry said. There was no help for it. "For God's sake, come in the house."

As Wordmore stepped over the threshold he removed his floppy hat. But this gesture of deference only served to underscore a casual royalty of presence; he entered Harry's house as if he belonged there not as a guest but by right of ownership. "I am most grateful to you, sir, and to everyone else in the house. White or black, Chinaman or Lascar or Hottentot, they are all equal to me and I bid them good day."

"We're fresh out of those. There's no one here but me and my wife Lydie. She's not feeling well and she's not going to be pleased that I let you come in. I'll have some tall explaining to do."

But Lydie stood already in the hall doorway. She had drawn a bright floral wrapper over her nightgown, yet the cheerful colors only caused her face to look paler and her eyes more darkly encircled. She appeared feverish. "Oh Harry," she said softly, wearily.

"Honey—"

"Among the strong I am strongest," Wordmore said in a resonant steady voice that then quietened almost to a whisper: "Among the weak I am gentlest." He tucked his knapsack under his left arm and went to Lydie and took her hand and drew her forward as if he were leading her onto a ballroom floor. He placed her in the new chocolate-colored wingback chair and smiled upon her benevolently and gave her the full benefit of that gray-eyed gaze so enormous with sympathy.

She responded with a tremulous smile and then leaned back and closed her eyes. "I hope you will be nice to us," she said in a voice as small as the throbbing of a far-away

cricket. "We've never harmed anybody, Harry and I. We just wanted to know about his ancestors who fought in the Civil War. I guess that wasn't such a good idea."

"You know," Harry said. "I don't recall hearing about any Wordmores in my family. Are you sure you're related to me?"

"Each man is my brother, every woman my sister," Wordmore stated. "To all I belong equally, disregarding none. In every household I am welcome, being full of health and good will and bearing peaceful tidings for all gathered there."

At these words Lydie opened her eyes, then blinked them rapidly several times. Then she gave Harry one of the most reproachful glances one spouse ever turned upon another.

In a moment, though, she closed her eyes again and nestled into the wingback. Harry could see that she was relaxing, her breathing slowed now and regular. Wordmore emitted a powerful physical aura, an almost visible emanation of peaceful healthful ease. Harry wondered if the man might have served as a physician in the War. Certainly his presence was having a salubrious effect upon Lydie and Harry decided it would be all right to have Wordmore around for a few hours longer. If he was a madman he was harmless.

"Can I offer you a drink?" Harry asked. "We still have some bourbon left over from an earlier ancestor."

"I drink only pure water from the spring gushing forth," Wordmore replied. "My food is ever of the plainest and most wholesome."

"Tap water is all we've got," Harry said.

"I will take what you offer, I am pleased at every hospitality." He turned his attention to Lydie, placing his delicate freckled hand on her forehead. "You will soon be strong again," he told her. "Rest now and remember the summer days of your youth, the cows lowing at the pasture gate and the thrush singing in the thicket and the haywain rolling over the pebbled road with the boys lying in the hay, their arms in friendship disposed around one another."

Lydie smiled ruefully. "I can't remember anything like that," she said. "I grew up in Chicago. It was mostly traffic and street gangs fighting with knives."

"Remember then your mother," Wordmore said. "Remember her loving smile as over your bed she leant, stroking your hair and murmuring a melody sweet and ancient. Remember her in the kitchen as the steam rose around her and the smell of bread baking and the fruits of the season stewed and sugared, their thick juices oozing."

Lydie opened her eyes and sat forward. "Well, actually," she explained, "my parents divorced when I was five and I didn't see much of either of them after that. Only on holidays when one of them might visit at my convent school."

He was not to be discouraged. "Remember the days of Christmas then, when you and your comrade girls, tender and loving, waited for the gladsome step in the foyer—"

"It's all right," Lydie said firmly. "Really. I don't need to remember anything. I feel much better. I really do."

Harry returned with the ice water and looked curiously at the duo. "What's been going on?" he asked, "What are you two talking about?"

"Mr. Wordmore has been curing me of my ills," Lydie

said.

The gray man nodded placidly, even a little smugly. "It is a gift that I have, allotted me graciously at my birth, as it was given to you and you, freely offered to all." He sipped his water.

"To me?" Harry asked. "I don't think I've got any healing powers. Business is my line; I own a little video rental shop."

"Business too is good," Wordmore said. "The accountant weary, arranging his figures at end of day, his eyeshade pulled over his furrowed brow and the lamplight golden on the clean-ruled page, and the manager of stores, the keeper of inventories, his bunched iron keys jangling on his manly thigh—"

"Well, it's not quite like that," Harry said. "I can see what you're getting at, though. You think business is okay, the free enterprise system and all."

"All trades and occupations are equal and worthy, the fisherman gathering in his nets fold on fold, and the hog drover with his long staff and his boots caked with fine delicious muck, and the finder of broken sewer pipes and the emptier of privies—"

"Yes, yes," Harry interrupted. "You mean that it's a good thing everybody has a job to do."

Wordmore smiled warmly and took another sip of water, gently shaking the glass to enjoy the jingle of the ice cubes.

"Maybe it's time we thought about making dinner," Harry said. "I'm not a bad cook. I'm sure Lydie would rather stay and talk to you while I rustle up something to eat."

"Oh no!" she exclaimed. "That would never do. I feel fine. I'll go right in and start on it."

"I wish you wouldn't," Harry said. "You ought to be resting."

"Honey," said Lydie with unmistakable determination, "you're going to be the one to stay here and talk to Mr. Wordmore. I don't care how much I have to cook."

"My food is ever of the plainest," Wordmore intoned. "The brown loaf hearty from the oven, its aromas arising, and the cool water from the mountain spring gushed forth—"

"Right," Lydie said. "I think I understand."

They knew pretty well what to expect at dinner and Wordmore didn't surprise them, drinking sparingly and nibbling vegetables and discoursing in voluminous rolling periods upon any subject that was brought up—except that he never managed to light precisely upon the topic at hand, only somewhere in the scattered vicinity. Yet it was soothing to listen to him: his sentences which at first were so warm and sympathetic and filled with humane feeling and calm loving-kindness lost their intimacy after a while. They seemed to become as impersonal and distant as some large sound of nature: the muffled roar of a far-off waterfall or wind in the mountaintop balsams or sea waves lapping at a pebbled beach. His unpausing talk was not irritating because his good will was unmistakable; neither was it boring because the Beachams soon learned not to listen to it for content and took an absentminded pleasure in the mere sound of it. Harry thought of it as a kind of verbal Muzak and wondered how Wordmore had been perceived by his contemporaries. They must have found him as strange an

example of humankind as Harry and Lydie did.

On the other hand they must have got on well with him. He'd make a good neighbor, surely, because he never had a bad word for anyone. He had no bad words at all, not a smidgen of disapproval for anything, as far as they could discern. If potatoes were mentioned Wordmore would go a long way in praise of potatoes; if it was bunions they too were champion elements of the universe, indispensable. Housefly or horsefly, rhododendron or rattlesnake, Messiah or mosquito—they all seemed to hold a high place in the gray man's esteem; to him the world was a better place for containing any and all of them.

He went on so placidly in this vein that Harry couldn't resist testing the limits of his benignity. "Tell me, Mr. Wordmore—"

"Among each and every I am familiar, the old and the young call me by my First-Name," Wordmore said. "The children climb on my lap and push their hands into my beard, laughing."

"Sure, all right. Wade. Tell me, Wade, what was the worst thing you ever saw? The most terrible?"

"Equally terrible and awesome in every part is the world, the lightnings that jag the antipodes, the pismire in its—"

"I mean, personally," Harry explained. "What's the worst thing that ever happened to you?"

He fell silent and meditated. His voice when he spoke was heavy and sorrowful. "It was the Great Conflict," he said, "where I ministered to the spirits of the beautiful young men who lay wounded and sick and dying, their chests all bloody-broken and—"

"Harry!" Lydie cried. "I won't listen to this."

"That's all right," Harry said quickly. "We don't need to hear that part, Wade. I was just wondering what kinds of things you might think were wrong. Bad, I mean."

"Bad I will not say, though it was terrible, the young men so fair and handsome that I wished them hale again and whole that we might walk to the meadows together and there show our love, the Divine Nimbus around our bodies



playing—"

"Whoa," Harry said. "Wait a minute now."

"Are you gay?" Lydie asked. She leaned forward, her interest warmly aroused. "I didn't think there used to be gay people. In Civil War times, I mean."

"My spirits are buoyant always, with the breeze lifting, my mind happy and at ease, a deep gaiety overtakes my soul when I behold a bullfrog or termite—"

"No, now. She means — well, *gay*," Harry said. "Are you homosexual?"

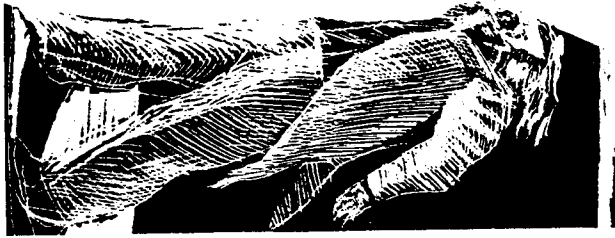
"To me sex, the Divine Nimbus, every creature exhales and I partake willingly, my soul gladly joining, my body locked in embrace with All, my —"

"All?" Henry and Lydie spoke in unison.

Wordmore nodded. "All, yes, All, sportively I tender my —"

"Does this include the bullfrog and the termite?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Wordmore said without hesitation. "Why should every creature not enjoy my manliness? Whole and hearty I am Wade Wordmore, American, liking the termite equally with the —"



"Wade, my friend," Harry said. "You old-time fellows sure do give us modern people something to think about. I'd like you to meet my congressman and give him the benefit of some of your ideas. Tomorrow I'm going to drive you over to the state capital and introduce you. How would you like that?" He slipped Lydie a happy wink.

"The orators and statesmen are ever my camaradoes," Wordmore said. "I descry them on the high platform, the pennons of America in the wind around them flying, their lungs in-taking the air, and the words outpouring."

"It's a date then," Harry said. "Pack your knapsack for a long stay. I intend for you and him to become fast friends."

But when they arrived in Raleigh the next day and Harry drove around toward Representative Collingwood's headquarters, he found the streets blocked with cars honking and banging fenders and redfaced policemen trying to create some sort of order and pattern. The sidewalks too were jammed with pedestrians, most of them dressed in the uniform of the Army of the Confederate States of America.

Ssssimssss.

"My God," Harry said. He could not have imagined that so many people had subscribed to the Ancestor Program, that so many simulacra had been produced. Looking at the people who were obviously not sims, he saw written on their faces weariness, exasperation, sorrow, horror, guilt, and cruel determination—all the feelings he and Lydie had experienced for the past weeks, the feelings he now felt piercingly with Wordmore sitting beside him, babbling on about the Beautiful Traffic Tangles of America.

Finally a channel opened and he rolled forward, to be stopped by a tired-looking policeman.

Harry thumbed his window down and the officer leaned in.

"May I see who is with you, sir?" he asked.

"This is Wade Wordmore," Harry said. "You'd find it hard to understand how glad he is to meet you."

"I am Wade Wordmore," said the graybeard, "and glad of your company, admiring much the constable as he goes his rounds —"

"Well, I'm glad you like company," the policeman said. "You're going to have plenty of it." He turned his bleared gaze on Harry. "We're shifting all the traffic to the football stadium parking lot, sir, and we're asking everyone to escort their ancestors onto the field."

"Is everybody bringing them in?" Harry asked.

"Yes sir, almost everyone. It seems like everybody ran out of patience at the same time. They've been coming in like this for three days now."

"I can believe it," Harry said. "What is the History Division going to do with them all?"

"There is no longer a History Division," the policeman said. "In fact, we just got word a while ago that the government has shut down the whole Reality Department."

"They shut down Reality? Why did they do that?"

"They took a poll," the policeman replied. "Nobody wanted it."

"Good Lord," Harry said. "What is going to happen?"

"I don't know, sir, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to move along."

"Okay, all right," Harry said. He drove on a few feet, then stopped and called back: "I've got an idea. Why don't we ship all these sims north to the Union states? After all, they're the ones who killed them in the first place."

"I'm afraid that those states have the same problem we do," the policeman said. "Please, sir, do move along. There will be someone at the stadium to give you instructions."

"Okay. Thanks." He rolled the window up and edged the car forward.


Wordmore had fallen silent, looking in openmouthed wonder at all the cars and the Confederate soldiers streaming by and mothers and children white-faced and weeping and dogs barking and policemen signaling and blowing whistles.

"You know," Harry said, "I just never thought about the Yankees wanting to meet *their* ancestors, but of course they would. It's a natural curiosity. I guess it must have seemed like a good idea to bring all this history back to life, but now look. What are we going to do now?" The station wagon in front of him moved and Harry inched forward.

"The history of the nation I see instantly before me, as on a plain rolling to the mountains majestic, like a river rolling, the beautiful young men in their uniforms with faces scarce fuzzed with beard —"

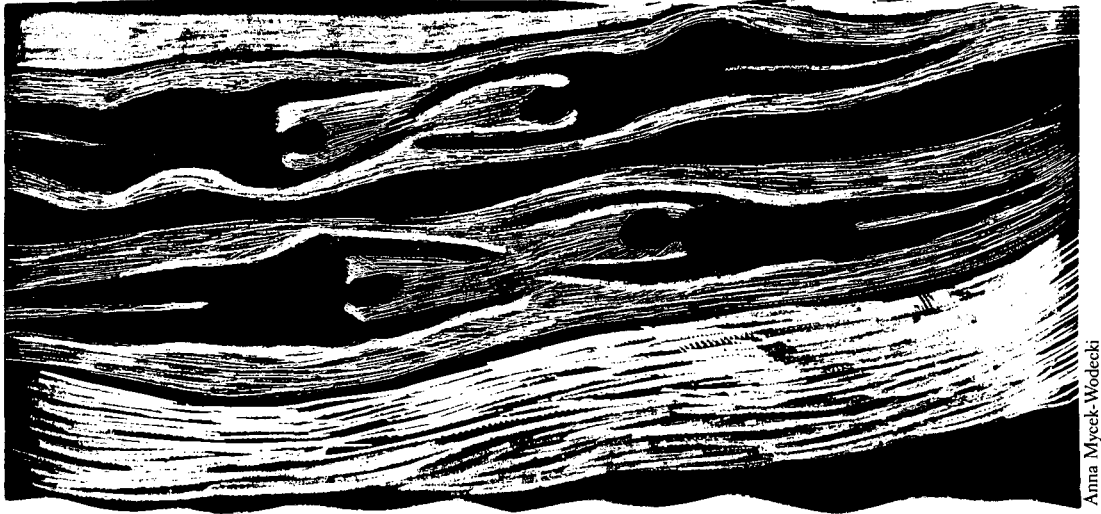
But Harry was not listening. His hands tightened on the steering wheel till the knuckles went purple and white. "My God," he said. "We've got all our soldiers back again and the Yankees have got theirs back. War is inevitable. I believe we're going to fight the whole Civil War over again. I'll be damned if I don't."

"—the beautiful young men falling in battle amid smoke of cannon and the sky louring over, the mothers weeping at night and the sweethearts weeping —"

"Oh, shut up, Wordmore. I know how terrible it is. It's too horrible to think about." He remembered Lieutenant Aldershot and Private Harper and a gritty tight wry little smile crossed his face. "Bluebellies," Harry said. "This time we'll show them." 

Time and the Tide in the Southern Short Story

by Madison Smartt Bell



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Perhaps since the War Between the States itself, and certainly since the literary Southern Renaissance became conscious of itself in the 30's and 40's, educated Southerners, and Southern writers especially, have taken their sense of history as a point of pride. Now, as the end of the century approaches, one may be tempted to wonder whether this pride has degenerated into mere vanity—declining from the deadliest of sins to a mere venal one. That special Southern historical sense may have become no more than a conventional piety of a style of Southern literary criticism, which, as the novelist Madison Jones was heard to mutter in the audience of a critical panel five years ago, has long since passed “beyond refinement.”

In any event, the deep sense of history is less likely to be associated with short Southern stories than with big Southern novels: Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha opus, Robert Penn Warren's excursion to the regional past, *Roots* even, or George Garrett's Elizabethan trilogy; those last two works carry a sharpened awareness of history into other regions altogether. Short stories, on the other hand, are not expected to express the long continuum from past into present, although they very well can, and sometimes still do.

The two surviving elder statesmen of the Southern short story, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor, have moved in quite drastically different directions in their use of time in their work. In this narrow sense, Miss Welty's stories appear to be more conventional, by contemporary standards. The span of time they typically seek to portray is brief: the day, the hour, the moment. Their effect is an immediate effect. Although there are powerful historical currents running through many of Miss Welty's stories, their channels are mostly subterranean.

Madison Smartt Bell, a Tennessean, is the author of The Washington Square Ensemble and Soldier's Joy, among other books. His most recent novel, Doctor Sleep (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), was published in January.

So it is with “The Hitch-Hikers,” one of her best (each of her stories is one of her best). The traveling salesman Harris is a desperately dislocated man who can only recognize his condition by contrast to the two tramps he picks up in his car, whose language itself reflects a certainty of identity that Harris can in no way match: “I come down from the hills. . . . We had us owls for chickens and fox for yard dogs but we sung true.” After Harris stops for the night in a hotel, the two tramps quarrel over a scheme to make off with his car, and one of them kills the other by clubbing him with a bottle. What could it mean to a man like Harris?

In his room, Harris lay down on the bed without undressing or turning out the light. He was too tired to sleep. Half blinded by the unshaded bulb he stared at the bare plaster walls and the equally white surface of the mirror above the empty dresser. Presently he got up and turned on the ceiling fan, to create some motion and sound in the room. It was a defective fan which clicked with each revolution, on and on. He lay perfectly still beneath it, with his clothes on, unconsciously breathing in a rhythm related to the beat of the fan.

One would hardly wish to be any nearer a moment than this. Of course it is a distinctly null moment. It is frozen, except for the clocklike sound and movement of the fan, which insists on the story's oppressive proximity to real time.

He could forgive nothing in this evening. But it was too like other evenings, this town was too like other towns, for him to move out of this lying still clothed on the bed, even into comfort or despair. Even the rain: there was often rain, there was often a party, and there had been other violence not of his doing—other fights, not quite so pointless, but fights in his car; fights, unheralded confessions, sudden lovemaking—none of any of this his, not