

Letter From Baton Rouge

by John Patrick Zmirak

Old Love



My Downtown is dying. That is perhaps saying too little; Downtown is nearly dead. The neat, grid-patterned, well-paved streets of the old Baton Rouge, the white hot cement Huey Long pounded Florsheim heel and toe against, the small optimistic stores set up in the 30's and 40's and equipped with illuminated signs in the 50's and 60's with names like Lerner's Dress Shop and Grossman's Hats and Landry's Famous Po-Boys, the tree-lined pedestrian sidewalks with jeweler's standing clocks and newsstands, all this is nearly gone. Now parking lots gape where stores once stood, but few cars sit in them, and fewer by night. The old things are passing away—like streets with sidewalks, designed for gentlemen and ladies to walk up and down on and to speak to each other in passing, replaced by the vast distended nonplaces of steel and glass towering malls, their huge cooling units pumping nonair through the nonplace to hose down the nonpeople who spend their nontime and nonmoney there. Oh, yes, the cars and the money are real, especially the cars equipped with phones and German precision stereos that insulate one nonperson from the other imitation people who, in their real cars, speed by like smears of paint on the road that has no sidewalk or shoulder but only enormous billboards with giants flashing man-high teeth at the grey interchangeable facts passing by.

And Downtown is more beautiful because it is dying. If things biological are lovelier in the bloom of youth—the pert upstanding breast, straight back, clear eye, and thick hair—things of artifice are their negative. Their moment of greatness, of sheer poignant grace when they must be the more loved, is when they are dying, when the sun's light shines sickly on them from the cloudless jaundiced west, as the time-ruined lace of the wedding dress, the sepia-ancestor prints, the shreds of battle flags, and the fishbone-delicate spines of decaying books attest. There is something in the sensate soul that loves the emp-

tying lanes of the whiteless city (the pink faces fled to chop down the piney-woods and put up aluminum churches and aluminum siding in taxless subdivisions beyond the buslines where there are no blacks, no poor, no memory), the stores that the old white and new black owners cannot afford to remodel and so bear the traces of time, proving that indeed time has passed and that the past was a time, not the cold imperial machine, the endless ravaging Present that marches onward like a Terminator.

I am not speaking of nostalgia. The very things whose beauty I have learned to see in the yellowing light were once stark and cold and new themselves, burning at noon silver wounds into the memory of those who knew what they replaced. The streetcars whose passing I mourn and whose forlorn rails still show like stretch marks here and there, when they displaced the horse and carriage, must have seemed the very monstrous engines of Progress. I would have hated them then. So the Mass of Trent, whose melancholy, humble strains can be heard in most cities only in the oldest, poorest, least-renovated churches near the hollow old heart of town, must have jangled baroque and cacophonous in the late medieval ear, seduced by the sweetest old strains of text-mangling polyphony and the fervid Gallican excess of litany and gesture. That was four hundred years ago. Now sung by old forgotten priests in what tattered gold thread and stained silk escaped the bonfire of the 70's, with reluctant writs of permission, rebounding off unplastered walls to the ears of the poor, the old, the alienated, and the eccentric who clutch bone rosaries in anger-clenched knuckles, the Latin Mass breathes the very air of consolation to the soul. To the souls gathered kneeling about the marble altar rail, the very cracks in the rail are precious, scored by other nourished souls that now wait breathing the gray air of Purgation until our prayers for them accumulate, the Church Suffering and the Church Perduring.

Conservatives should love the poor; we love all old things that endure, and the poor we have always had with us. The poor preserve the past—they can't afford new ugly soulless acquisitions and must make do with what has become beautiful over time. While thin pale men in Bauhaus angular rooms in cool machine-tooled Germany invented atonalism and fascism, black cane-chop-

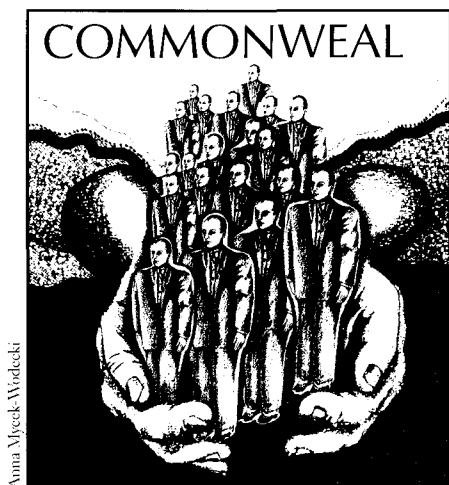
pers and sharecroppers dug through the compost of our tangled pasts to raise the Blues over the Ford-tossed dust of Southern roads, reaching deep into Africa our common rootbed to produce deep sad songs that as soon as sung once sounded venerable and sacred, so much of the past did they carry in their strains.

Civilization is not a private matter, nor is it subject to renovation, self-help, or utopian renewal. As delicate and ambiguous as its father the brain or its mother the body, its life is the public square. Any city that lacks a public place where men without paying or feeling shiftless may mingle and argue and feed the birds does not deserve the name. It is a giant hospital wing, with private rooms and only a common toilet. It deserves to be destroyed by fire. May the malediction of an angry God fall upon it; may its lawns wither and its kidney-shaped pools turn black with rotting fish of mysterious provenance; may its pets die of loneliness; may its garages be infested with raccoons and opossums; may its over-dressed close-coiffed planned Montessori children neglect their Japanese lessons and run off to join the circus or the Marines; may its Unitarians lose their faith; may its Republicans lose their jobs.



This process by which the new and appalling gains over time the luster of rarity and fragility—an act of sympathy, perhaps, of our mortal flesh for other fleeting things and not of the mind, which alone daydreams a terrestrial eternity—will continue. One hopes, though he cannot imagine, that a purple-plastic Circle K store will in time seduce the sympathy as the huge plaintive rusting root beer mug of Frost-Top currently does; one wishes, though he can hardly hope, that the telegraph English and gymnastics of the modern Mass will someday be gentle, soothing, and dignified; one imagines fondly that the countertop condom racks will someday make us laugh gently at human folly, as their iron-girded men's room ancestors do now in truckstops. It is the law of history. But O, it is hard to picture!

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The Great San Jose Finger Flap

by James P. Degnan

Remembering Jessica Mitford

I recently watched a television special about the life and times of Jessica Mitford, and the program took me back fifteen years or so to my first meeting with Jessica. It was mid-December, the beginning of the Christmas recess at San Jose State College, and Jessica had been informed that, at the close of the present semester, she would not be rehired as Distinguished Professor of Sociology. Because she had refused to comply with the California State College rule that all teachers in the system had to be fingerprinted, she had been fired, or, as the dean of social sciences, James Sawrey, put it—to Jessica's immense delight—"dehired."

Rather than fingerprints, Jessica had submitted to the college trustees a set of her toeprints, and on the San Jose State campus stickers and buttons proclaiming "Jessica Thumbs Her Toes" abounded.

To interview Jessica, I had arranged to drive her from San Jose to her home in Oakland, and during the drive, in high spirits, she discussed her upcoming dismissal. "From distinguished professor to extinguished professor in three

short weeks," she twitted. "Really, I haven't the faintest idea how I got to be a distinguished professor. I never even went to school. Mother insisted that I learn to read, though, and that's been jolly useful, learning to read, I mean."

She wore red pumps and a red and blue dress patterned like a stained glass window. Her hair was thin and of a peculiar filing cabinet gray. She wore thick, gray, gogglelike horn rims, behind which blinked the famous Mitford eyes—eyes a British novelist once described as "blue and cold and crazy."

During the fifty-mile drive, Jessica chattered on about many things. About her one-time membership in the Communist Party: "Oh certainly I was a member of the CP, but really, it was an awful bore—all that silly authoritarianism." About sociology: "I can't begin to say what a lot of bosh it is." About her late father, Lord Redesdale: "He hated blacks, foreigners, and divorcees. He called them all 'filthy Huns.' He also hated artists. Once he called Jacob Epstein a 'filthy Hun.'" About her fighting against Franco in the Spanish Civil War: "I kept getting concerned letters from my nanny in England. She kept worrying that I had no suitable clothes to fight in."

I remember stopping in heavy traffic and questioning her about her book *Kind and Usual Punishment*, about her suggestion in that book that prisons be abolished because only the poor, blacks, and other minorities ever get sent to prison. "People like Spiro Agnew never go to prison," she declared.

"Maybe so," I said, "but shouldn't they? Obviously, you believe people like Agnew should be sent to prison?" I looked toward her for an answer. A smile melted from her face, and she fixed me with the frosty Mitford eyes: "Yes, but they won't be," she declared, making clear that this line of our conversation was at an end.

With the exception of an ornate 18th-century French clock on the dining room mantelpiece, I was surprised to find the downstairs area of Jessica's two-story frame house on Regent Street in Oakland rather modest and staid. In a downstairs bathroom, though, things picked up a bit. Here the walls were cov-

ered with ads from Jessica's favorite periodicals—mortuary magazines like *Sunyside*, *National Casket*, and *Mortuary Management*. One ad described the advantages of the "Layaway Burial Plan," another proclaimed "Embalming Will Make You Look Younger." And above the toilet was a brightly colored poster of Salome holding aloft the severed head of John the Baptist and proudly declaring "Look What Daddy Gave Me Just For Dancing."

Chain-smoking unfiltered Chesterfields—"They're positively number one on the Surgeon General's list of cancer-causers," she assured me—Jessica wandered about the house in a rather distracted manner. We talked more about her family: about her father ("Farve"), her mother ("Muv"), and her sisters—Nancy, Diana, Pamela, Unity, and Deborah. About Muv's attitude toward the working classes. "I'm not an enemy of the working classes," Muv would insist in arguments with the young Jessica, "I think some of them are perfectly sweet." About Farve's reaction to the mention of Picasso's name: "Damned sewer. Stinks to merry hell!" About Nancy's admonition to Jessica, who could never learn to ride a horse because she kept falling off: "Now Jessica, *do* try to stay on. You know how cross Muv will be if you break your arm again."

We talked about Jessica's classic muckraking attack on the funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*, and about her article "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers"—a piece that appeared in the *Atlantic* and singlehandedly laid to rest Bennett Cerf's fraudulent Famous Writers School. "Oh I've made a small fortune on the death book," she said, "but when I wrote it, I hadn't the faintest idea anyone would be interested. I remember asking Bob [her husband, Oakland attorney Robert Treuhaft], 'Whoever would want such a book?'" Asked if she planned on one of the plain pine-box funerals she champions in *The American Way*, she chirped: "Oh heavens no. I expect a five-horse affair."

We were interrupted by Jessica's maid, Sally, a young English woman wearing a gold ring through one of her nostrils. Sally reminded Jessica that dinner guests would soon be arriving, and