

tion and not likely to correct us. She believes that we ought to be able to choose where we belong—to become a native of the place that best “enables” us. Her own experience, however, makes a different argument. If she belongs to New Orleans, she has lived there for three-and-a-half decades and more. If she loves Texas’ big sky because it offers “the widest arena for the widest thought”—a nice compliment to a state not universally credited with intellectual broadmindedness—the fact remains that she lived there as a girl, and her parents are buried there. We love the places where we have lived because we have beat our own heels so much into that particular ground. When our loved ones lie there as well, when among the West Texas dust is their dust, how can we not love a place that contains so much of our joy and grief that it is a part of us, as we are of it?

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Superior Fiction

by Thomas Fleming

Time Between Trains

by Anthony Bukoski

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One of the pleasures of fiction is the opportunity that novels, short stories, and epic poems give us to escape from our own everyday world into an alien world of gods and heroes (as in the *Iliad*) or knights and wizards (Tennyson’s *Idylls*), English villagers (in Hardy’s *Wessex*), or Mississippi rednecks and redskins (of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County). A large part of Tolkien’s popularity derives from his success in sustaining the fiction of the parallel world of Middle Earth. In a smaller, quieter way, more reminiscent of Hardy than of Faulkner or Tolkien, Anthony Bukoski has sustained the fiction of an equally fantastic place, the fictional city of Superior, Wisconsin, a derelict railhead at the head of Lake Superior.

In most of his stories, Bukoski has on-

ly hinted at the urban glamour of central Superior—the endless succession of bars on Tower Avenue and the mysteries of *Globe News*, and he never so much as peers into the stately homes of bankers and physicians. Bukoski’s village is the Polish section of the East End: the massive (though abandoned) ore docks and grain elevator; the Warsaw Tavern and the Polish Club. Bukoski laid the foundation for this imaginary world in his earlier collections, *Children of Strangers* and *Polonaise*, where the premise must have strained some readers’ imaginations. Can there really be a place this depressing, and, if there is, can the inhabitants actually find some reason to love it? On the face of it, despite Bukoski’s obvious ability to conjure the scene, the answer would seem to be doubly “no.” As wonderful as the stories have been—filled with the naive optimism of weeds sprouting up in the cracked pavement of an abandoned gas station—many readers might have been justified in concluding that no such place as Superior could have ever existed.

By the time I reached the end of *Time Between Trains*, however, I had begun to suspect that Mr. Bukoski, purportedly a native of Superior, was pulling a fast one. There may, indeed, be such a ghost town, and Bukoski is its spiritual mayor. In the last story of the volume, “President of the Past,” Rick Mrozek, who must be approximately Bukoski’s age, reflects on the thankless task he has undertaken as president of the moribund Polish Club. Rick is the son of Buck Mrozek, composer of the famous “East End Polka” and hero of “Closing Time” (also included in this volume). The club, in its heroic early days, sent handsomely dressed old-world Poles to march in parades down Tower Avenue. Their polka dancing was so frantic that they had literally shaken their first premises to pieces, but their new building, into which they moved in 1963, is dying of old age. The monthly meetings are scantily attended; there are no new members, and the club is \$20,000 in debt. Some enterprising businessmen want to buy the building and turn it into an “interactive sports bar.”

Well, what difference can such depressing details mean to the patrons of internet lounges and sports bars in post-American America? For Rick Mrozek and his creator, they are everything. Rick is the memory of a community that once revered Tadeusz Kosciuszko and venerated the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. Superior’s pinnacle of happiness was the

summer spent in Douglas County by Calvin Coolidge, who fished the Brule River and set up an office in Superior. Buck’s mother played the violin for Coolidge at the president’s summer White House.

Of this Polish America in Superior, little survives, and only Buck seems to care about preserving the memory:

Now I think of the club and of my family as I whisper prayers. I don’t want to let the club go to a German and a Finn, because the few active members who remain know our ancestors met during these very summer and winter hours as we do, read the same opening prayer at meetings, and followed the same order of business . . . How can we let this go? How can I myself let the club go? Almost everything is in storage. Yet in the faded map of Poland on the wall, and in the stale air of the Polish Club, I still have a place to come to where I can cherish my heritage.

Like Buck Mrozek, Anthony Bukoski is truly “president of the past, calling the ghosts to order,” and the other stories in this collection (two of which were published first in this magazine) chronicle the dreary but rich lives of Vietnam vets, grain-mill workers, and waiters, the priest who falls in love with Ewa Zukowski, the Jewish rail inspector who finds new life with a Polish widow, old Mrs. Pilsudski who is ridiculed for her incontinence but finds peace and forgiveness in imitating “Christ’s holy work on earth.”

When Anthony Bukoski was growing up in the (even then already dying) East End, I was spending an idyllic childhood on the other side of town, in the fields and woods of Billings Park that stretched all the way out to the shore of Lake Superior. For me, the place exists largely as a memory, but Memory is the mother of the Muses, and, in staying home (except for hitches in Vietnam and graduate school), Bukoski has rebuilt his native city, brick by sooty-and-crumbling brick, and gilded the ruins with a wise and compassionate understanding of his fellow man. If Samuel Johnson was right when he said that every man’s life is worth a biography, then every community of men is worth a chronicler, and the mythical East End of Superior has found its Homer.

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The GOP's Secret Weapon

If the war with Iraq was largely the work of the Likudnik faction that has commandeered the Bush administration's Middle East policies, the liberation of Liberia on which the President suddenly embarked the nation last summer seems to have originated at least in part with yet another lobby of questionable loyalties. On July 7, as Mr. Bush was trying to explain (so to speak) why American troops had to be sent yet again into an overseas combat theater, the *Washington Post* suggested what were perhaps more compelling reasons than the President and his speechwriters could invent, let alone express.

Not only the ill-conceived Liberian adventure but also the President's summer vacation in Africa, his denunciations in Senegal of his own country for its role in the slave trade, his support for \$15 billion in public funds to combat AIDS in Africa, and his transparent mollicoddlng of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, the most brutal (perhaps) and offensive despot on the African continent today were evidence of an unexpected interest in Africa from an administration that had hitherto seemed preoccupied with the Middle East. As the *Post* explained, the President's

willingness to focus attention on Africa reflects the growing influence of an eclectic lobbying coalition that includes aid groups, religious organizations, entrepreneurs and the Congressional Black Caucus,

and, indeed, the No-Whites-Allowed Club on Capitol Hill that had opposed the Iraq war was eager for the White House to send troops to Liberia.

Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice were also instrumental in influencing the President's Liberia policy, the *Post* reported, and the paper was careful to describe the one as "the first African American to serve as the top U.S. diplomat" and the other as "another African-American." Miss Rice herself took credit for influencing Mr. Bush's views of "the peculiar ties between America and Africa, dating back to the slave trade." The President, she told the *Post*, "felt an obligation to 'bring

about reconciliation.'"

It is also notable that Mr. Bush's trip to Africa, his anti-American speech on slavery, his aid for AIDS, and his Liberian policy all were unbosomed just before the national conventions of the NAACP and the Urban League, a coincidence that was unlikely to have been coincidental and which brings us to the point. As inexplicable as the sudden decision to send troops to Liberia seems in terms of national interests and the administration's general foreign-policy agenda, it is easily decipherable, given the domestic political delusions that continue to envelop the minds of the President and his main political advisors (principally Karl Rove). The simple and unvarnished truth is that we are sending American troops into serious danger in Liberia because Mr. Bush has been led to believe he can win black votes in next year's election.

Winning black votes—or, as various Republicans have rather indelicately put it in years past, "luring blacks into the Republican Party," much as one might lure squirrels into a trap—has been a goal of what pass for grand strategists in the GOP for decades, and, like most of the other goals of such strategists, it has been embarrassingly unfulfilled. In the 2000 election, the Republicans sprinkled various blacks around their national convention to show everyone who paid attention how tolerant they were, and Mr. Powell and Miss Rice were prominently exhibited. As black columnist Armstrong Williams wrote the day after the election, "Gov. Bush pursued African-American connections with more avidity than any Republican candidate of recent memory" and "studded his campaign trail with stops at inner-city schools, churches, welfare offices, and black communities."

All to no avail, of course. In 2000, Mr. Bush received a pathetic eight percent of the black vote, the lowest percentage won by a Republican candidate since Barry Goldwater's six percent in 1964. And to judge from the loud denunciations of the President and his party by such eminences as Julian Bond and Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP only a few days after his African trip, President Bush will be lucky to get even that much next year.



Almost nothing the President has done to win black favor has pleased the implacable lords of the NAACP. Last summer, the *Boston Globe* reported that "Bush has appointed more minorities to top-level government positions than President Clinton did when he put his first administration together." Mr. Mfume, interviewed by the *Globe*, quickly dismissed Mr. Bush's approaches to blacks as a "ploy," while Mr. Bond, at the NAACP convention, was positively vicious in denouncing the Republicans as a whole for appealing to the "dark underside of American culture" and aligning themselves with those "who reject democracy and equality" and whose "idea of equal rights is the American flag and Confederate swastika [sic] flying side by side."

One would think that, by now, it would be obvious to the Republicans that they are not going to get any appreciable number of black votes, that pursuing them will only distract the party and its resources from making approaches to constituencies that they either already have or could realistically hope to win, and that they do not need black votes anyway. The Republican Party today is, as it always has been, a white party, and its future lies in enhancing its share of the white vote, not in trying to construct a mosaic. In 2000, Mr. Bush won 54 percent of the white vote; had he spent less time pandering to nonwhites and more time wooing white voters whose turnout has been dwindling, he might even have won a majority of the national popular vote. In no presidential election since 1972 has a victorious Republican candidate failed to win a majority of whites. Only in 1992 and 1996 did the weak candidacies of George Bush I and Robert Dole garner 40 and 46 percent of the white vote, respectively.

Moreover, it should be equally obvious that the Democratic Party is now almost